

Mining Reflections for the Disposition to Teach in Special Education

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Candidates preparing to become special education teachers are asked reflect on their field experiences in journals. Eight participants were randomly selected from special education methods classes. Their 10 weeks of field experience reflections were qualitatively analyzed for the disposition to teach in special education. Construct codes emerged: Ethical Behavior, Empathy, Classroom Behavior Management, Reflective Analysis, and Collaboration. Comparisons were made between the reflections of traditional undergraduate students and candidates in a graduate alternative route to certification. Results suggest that field reflections can be used to assess the development of the disposition to teach in special education.

INTRODUCTION

Field reflections are sources of information for understanding pre-service teachers' thinking, decision making, and dispositions. Villegas (2007) viewed dispositions as, "tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs" (p. 373). This definition focuses on actions and tendencies that indicate a pattern of behavior that may predict future actions. Schön (1983) noted that when professionals reflect on their practices or actions, they develop context-specific theories that enhance their current knowledge and actions, and inform their future practices. These context-specific theories then evolve and inform teacher dispositions, which are internally directed learning. Teacher dispositions received national attention when the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) *Standards 2000* began to require Schools of Education to assess not only candidates' knowledge and skills, but also their professional disposition to teach all children.

Several studies have used student reflections as data sources. Gilar, de Los Angeles Martinez Ruiz, and Costa (2007) found the qualitative analysis of teacher candidates' diaries more valuable than the use of traditional inventories in determining strategy use by teachers. Stoughton (2007) used student reflections to assess how pre-service teachers think about teaching, their university coursework, and behavior management practices. Pavlovich (2007) used student narratives from their reflective journals to assess self-awareness. Teacher candidates' field reflections have the potential to reveal candidates' knowledge, beliefs, thought processes, problem solving, and the rationales they use for their actions. They may also reveal information about how a candidate is developing in the dispositions of a professional educator.

The disposition to teach in special education is considered even more important than in general education because students with disabilities struggle to learn and are more susceptible to specific teacher dispositions, such as empathy (Hong, Ivy, & Schulte, 2009). Hong, Ivy, and Schulte summarized special education teacher dispositions into three areas (a) dispositions of empathetic teachers, (b) dispositions for teaching students with disabilities, and (c) dispositions in interpersonal and intrapersonal competence. They illustrated each area with lists of examples of behaviors that would be unacceptable (novice), expected (practitioner), and exemplary (expert) dispositions for special educators. To effectively teach students who struggle to learn, special educators need knowledge and skills, but also the disposition to teach students with disabilities. Unfortunately, due to shortages, special educators are often the least prepared teachers in the schools.

Ninety eight percent of the nation's school districts have reported and continue to report shortages in the number of special education teachers (Fideler, Foster, & Schwartz, 2000). For example, in 2001–2002, more than 53,000 special educators were needed in the U.S. and territories and approximately 32% of all entering special education teachers and 7.8% of continuing special educators were not fully prepared or certified (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005).

Responding to this chronic, long-term shortage, several states and higher education institutions developed alternative certification programs to offer initial licensure in special education to graduate students from non-education backgrounds. Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, and Misra (2007) identified a prolific 235 alternative routes to certification (ARC) programs in special education in the U. S.

Alternative certification programs or alternative routes to certification (ARCs) are characterized by several key qualities (Muller, 2005). ARCs typically recruit individuals with bachelor's degrees who go through a rigorous screening process including interviews and standardized tests of basic skills. ARC programs often provide their candidates with field-based and classroom learning experiences based on professional standards. Candidates are observed frequently and in some cases receive mentors in collaboration with higher education agencies. Geiger, Crutchfield, and Mainzer (2003) found that traditional and ARC programs meet standards through different procedures. Candidates are oftentimes on emergency licenses and enrolled in an ARC while they are teaching; their coursework is completed during evenings and summers. Programs in remote areas sometimes involve online or distance education courses through the internet. Unlike traditional programs that culminate with full-time student teaching, many ARC candidates are employed as teachers during their student teaching semester.

The participants of ARC programs represent a more diverse group than those in traditional programs (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007); nearly 25% were male and more than 26% were African American or Hispanic. The prior experiences of participants varied but the largest subgroup, representing 45.9%, were midcareer changers. Rosenberg et al. cautioned Schools of Education to screen potential candidates for ARC programs carefully because midcareer changers can be risky, running back to jobs with higher salaries when they become aware of the realities of teaching in special education. Therefore, the disposition to teach in special education is crucial in a field where high attrition rates also contribute to the shortage of teachers (Billingsley, 2004).

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if reflective field journals can provide insight into candidates' dispositions to teach in special education. LePage, Nielsen, and Fearn (2008) analyzed vision statements students had written as part of an application to a special education teaching program. These initial dispositions to teach students with disabilities showed that even prior to preparation, students understood the importance of persisting with children and developing relationships. In the present study, we analyzed student field reflections toward the end of their preparation programs to assess their actions and dispositions toward teaching in special education.

A secondary question addressed by this study was related to differences, if any, in the dispositions of traditional and ARC teacher candidates. It is important that the candidates we recruit into and prepare in special education ARC programs possess the dispositions to effectively teach students with disabilities and remain in the teaching profession.

METHOD

This study was conducted at a regional campus of a large mid-western university with NCATE accredited programs leading to licensure in special education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The mission of both of these initial programs in this School of Education was to provide pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become reflective professionals, who critically examine their teaching practices by reflecting to make informed decisions and to solve problems (Conceptual Framework, March, 2008). The special education coursework in these two programs reflected the INTASC Principles, state standards, and the professional standards for teacher preparation of the Council for Exceptional Children.

Participants for this study were drawn from two versions (undergraduate and graduate) of the same 3-credit hour Special Education Methods course and 3-credit hour Field Experience. Both the undergraduate and graduate courses were taught by the same professor, used the same text book, and required the same assignments including a reading assessment, behavioral assessment, construction of an IEP, and lesson plans. Field Experience included a 10-week (50-hour) placement in a local public school with a licensed special education teacher of students with mild disabilities. Candidates were observed in the field by a university supervisor and were asked to electronically submit 10 weekly reflections based on a template. The template asked candidates to reflect on what they did in the field that day, methods, technology, assessment, and classroom management they observed or used, what they learned about students with disabilities and teaching in special education, how they felt about their experience. The candidate was also asked to generate three questions based on that day's experience. The course instructor responded to each reflection electronically with comments designed to help candidates make links between their experiences and the lecture/text content of the course.

Candidates in the Traditional undergraduate program were enrolled in a four-year baccalaureate program that resulted in dual certification (i.e., teaching licenses in both Elementary Education and Special Education, mild disabilities). This program required 129 credit hours (67 in the School of Education) and included four consecutive semesters of field experience in the local schools prior to a semester-long student teaching. Participants were in their fourth block of methods and field experience, just prior to student teaching. Field experiences and student teaching were completed under the supervision of a host licensed special education teacher and a university supervisor.

The ARC graduate program was designed for candidates with earned bachelor's degrees (typically in areas other than education) and resulted in a P-12 teaching license in Special Education, mild disabilities. This program required 36 graduate credit hours in the School of Education with a two-semester sequence of Methods and Field Experience prior to student teaching. Most of the candidates in the ARC program were employed on Emergency Permits as special education teachers. In Indiana, if no licensed candidates apply, districts can hire unlicensed people to teach on an Emergency Permit. To be eligible for the permit, an applicant must be enrolled in a program leading to licensure. The permit can be renewed twice (3 years total) if the teacher is taking courses toward licensure. If employed on an Emergency Permit or as a paraprofessional, candidates' field assignments and student teaching were completed in their own classrooms with university supervision but without the assistance of a licensed host teacher.

Both the undergraduate and graduate programs were aligned with state and professional organization (CEC) standards; one difference between them was the length and type of preparation. Undergraduates completed more credit hours in Education but more than half of them were in General Education courses. Many of the ARC graduate candidates were already teaching full time on Emergency Permits.

Participants

Eight teacher education candidates, four undergraduates and four graduate students, participated in this study. Participants were selected randomly from all teacher candidates who had completed the Special Education Methods course and Field Experience between spring 2006 and spring 2008 and had submitted all 10 field reflections electronically. To maintain anonymity, participants were assigned letter

codes, A through E, and codes for their undergraduate or graduate status (e.g., U-A for undergraduate candidate A, G-E for graduate candidate E).

Both the Traditional and ARC groups included students from a range of ages from 24 to 39. Demographics of participants and groups are provided in Table 1 (See Table 1). All participants in the Traditional group were seniors attending school full time. In the ARC group, one female candidate was not employed as a teacher and was provided a field placement by the university. The other three candidates were employed as first or second year special education teachers working on Emergency Permits.

Procedures

The 10 weekly reflections of each of the 8 participants were used as the data source for this study. Reflections were placed in chronological order with the reflection from the first week of the field experience on top. All reflections were read and analyzed in the same order by two independent researchers. Reflections were analyzed with an inductive cross-case analysis (e.g., LePage, Nielsen, & Fearn, 2008) looking for patterns, themes, and categories in the data rather than imposing predetermined categories. Construct codes were generated from the data as they emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each time a new construct code emerged, each previous reflection was re-read for that construct and coded, if found. When all reflections for Week 1 had been read and coded, the process was repeated for Week 2 reflections and so on.

When all 10 weeks of reflections were read and coded independently, the two researchers met and identified and categorized the primary patterns in the data. As a result of this process, some codes were combined (e.g., collaboration combined to include interactions with colleagues and parents) and some were not pursued because they were unique to only one participant. The final list included the five construct codes of Ethical Behavior, Empathy, Classroom Behavior Management, Reflective Analysis, and Collaboration. All reflections were read again specifically looking for the five selected constructs. Then data were interpreted. Interpretation means “attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order, and dealing with rival explanations” (LePage, Nielsen, & Fearn, 2008, p. 81).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the first research question, results showed that reflections were a rich source of information on students’ dispositions to teach in special education. The five constructs that emerged, Ethical Behavior, Empathy, Classroom Behavior Management, Reflective Analysis, and Collaboration, while not comprehensive, are supported in the literature and the CEC standards as important for teaching in special education.

For the second research question, overall, candidates in the two groups, traditional undergraduate and graduate alternative route to certification (ARC), were judged to be similar for Ethical Behavior but differed for the other four constructs. In each instance where they differed, the ARC candidates showed more advanced dispositions than the Traditional candidates. Results and discussion are presented by construct.

Ethical Behavior

Berkeley and Ludlow (2008) described an ethical dilemma as a situation where a conflict arises between competing values. They suggested that special education teachers are bound to practice ethically *and* work toward social justice for their students. The Council for Exceptional Children delineated ethical conduct for special education teachers in their Code of Ethics for Educators of Persons with Exceptionalities (1993). It is expected that special educators should, among other things, maintain a high level of competence and integrity in practicing their profession, engage in professional activities that benefit individuals with exceptionalities, and exercise objective professional judgment in the practice of their profession.

Only four teacher candidates wrote comments in their reflections that were clearly of an ethical nature. Two were Traditional candidates and two were ARC candidates. Comments from both groups of students were similar and related to the ethics of certain teaching behaviors. For example, Candidates U-C and G-E questioned the ethics of providing students with too much attention and support. “Was I helping her by not having her do any on her own?” “Am I just teaching them learned helplessness by rewarding them for how they should act to begin with?” Candidate G-B questioned if she was providing appropriate interventions and Candidate U-A was disturbed by teachers talking about a student when the student was present. All four of these candidates showed reflective thinking about the ethics of their and other teachers’ actions. None of the other candidates made comments related to the ethics of teaching.

Empathy

The ability to empathize and understand students’ perspectives is important in teaching. Ahn and Stifter (2006) reported that young students exhibited stronger cognitive growth when their teachers were responsive and sensitive to their needs. Empathy is essential when teaching students with disabilities. Special education teachers attempt to understand their students’ emotional reactions to instruction so that they can adjust task demands to reduce frustration and increase achievement. Chang (1981) reported a correlation between teacher empathy and students’ self-esteem. Unfortunately, relatively few teachers express empathy (Ahn & Stifter; Tettegah, & Anderson, 2007). Long, MacBlain, and MacBlain (2007) surveyed 25 students with learning disabilities and found that 72% reported that their teachers were generally lacking in empathy and had little understanding of the individual needs of their students.

In the present study, three of the four Traditional candidates began to mention students’ feelings and perspectives in their later weekly reflections, but not in their early ones. In their early reflections, they made comments about students’ behavior, moods, or attitudes but not their feelings. For example, in an early reflection, Candidate U-B stated, “How can I motivate a child to do well on an assignment when their attitude about it is terrible?” Candidate U-C in her first reflection commented, “She refuses to do any work in class and chooses to take it all as home work.” She made no attempt to understand the behavior or understand the student’s perspective. Other early comments from Traditional candidates’ about students’ feelings were summative and impersonal. For example, in her Week Three reflection, Candidate U-A was surprised to learn that some students with disabilities are, “not embarrassed about their special education but take advantage of it and put forth their best effort and try their hardest to improve.” Later, in week six, this same candidate made a more personal comment about an individual, “She is very motivated and a very happy girl.”

Candidate U-A’s only comment about students’ feelings was in her last reflection. She said, “I learned that students are sincere about their feelings for people. The students all wrote me letters about what they liked about me.” This comment, while about students’ feelings, really focused on the students’ feelings about the candidate, suggesting that this candidate did not reach the level where she was able to understand her students’ perspectives. By the end of the 10-week field experience, Traditional Candidates U-B and U-C were trying to understand their students’ perspectives. For example, in Week 9, Candidate U-B commented that, “the boys were very excited about writing about trains and did a great job.” She goes on to talk about the importance of connecting her lessons to students’ interests. In Week 10, Candidate U-C summarized that she, “was able to get to know the students as individuals and was able to relate to them to help them finish their work.”

Candidate U-D was more advanced than her peers in this area, possibly because her husband was an educator who was serving as a principal of an elementary school. She attuned to students’ feelings and perspectives from the first week. In her first reflection she stated, “The students want a routine and if they don’t have it they feel lost until someone explains to them what is going on.” In reflection three she wrote about teachers who asked, in front of other students, if someone had taken their medication. She wrote, “How insensitive! I could see these comments affect the students in which they were directed.” In her fifth reflection she stated, “I did notice that some of these students get very frustrated and almost embarrassed if they do not know an answer.”

All of the ARC graduate candidates empathized with their students' feelings from the beginning. In Candidate G-B's first reflection, she told of a student with autism who had a difficult day. She said he, "went home with red puffy eyes and hadn't enjoyed his school experience." Rather than focusing on the behavior management challenge the student presented to her that day, she, instead, took the student's perspective and focused on the challenges the student experienced with school demands. In her first reflection, Candidate G-E commented, "It doesn't do a lot of good to move quickly through a text because the students get frustrated." Twice in this same reflection he described certain activities that students "enjoyed" doing. Candidate G-C commented in her first reflection that it was "a confusing day" for her students because of the new schedule and that her students with autism had a "difficult time." Even the one ARC candidate who was not employed as a teacher and was attending field one day a week, like the Traditional undergraduates, was able to empathize from the beginning. In her first and second reflections she wrote, "I saw...just how desperate these kids are for attention," and, "This young man loves ancient history! ... It was wonderful to see him excited to learn more about the subject."

Kliss & Kossewsk (1996) reported that special education teachers were significantly more empathetic than secondary general education teachers and were slightly more empathetic but more similar to elementary teachers in the trait. Warner (1984) demonstrated that teachers can be trained to empathize with their students. In the present study, results suggest that ARC candidates were able to express empathy from the beginning of their field experiences whereas Traditional candidates were still developing this skill. The ARC candidates may have had prior opportunities to develop empathy for students with disabilities, possibly reflected in their decisions to pursue licensure in special education. The Traditional candidates in this study were still considering whether to go into special or elementary education for their careers. As a result of their activities in their special education field placements, they may have developed empathy over the 10 weeks and increased their desire to teach students with disabilities.

Classroom Behavior Management

Both Traditional and ARC teacher candidates wrote comments on classroom behavior management throughout their field reflections. The Traditional candidates described what they saw but didn't always make the connection between teacher actions and classroom management. For example, Candidate U-A described how her host teacher, "tried to assist one of her students in the general education classroom, she refused her help and didn't want her to look at her paper... The strategy the teacher used was to tell the student across from her how to do the problem and (she) said it loud enough for her student to hear." But then in her very next comment, in response to a prompt to discuss any behavior management strategies used in the field that day, the candidate wrote, "There were no behavior issues. The teacher says she does not have any behavior issues with her students." This candidate did not see that effective management strategies were being employed and contributed to the lack of behavior problems.

The Traditional candidates exhibited growth in their behavior management over time and began to question the effectiveness of practices. In her Week 10 reflection, Candidate U-D described a situation where a student with Autism was told that if she didn't complete her test, she would have to stay in for recess and complete it. The student began to cry, got more upset, and lashed out at another student. The candidate concluded that "response cost" did not work in this instance. She further commented, "I learned how fragile some of these students can be... This student was devastated at the thought of missing recess." She ended her reflection with this question, "Should we have different punishments for these students and should we talk differently to those students than others that may not be so sensitive?" This suggests that she was beginning to understand the importance of effective behavior management strategies for students with disabilities. Candidate U-C also illustrated growth in understanding classroom management in her ninth reflection when she described a situation where a student hit other students when the fire alarm went off. "Due to their behavior system, they had to take him to level one which is an isolation stage for one day." At the end of her reflection she questioned, "If you have a behavior plan in place ...and someone hits another student but truly seems sorry and sincere about his apology, do you have to take him to that stage or can you work with it depending on current behaviors?" She didn't discuss if the strategy resulted

in improved behavior, but was beginning to question why certain behavior management strategies were used and whether they should be.

Throughout their reflections, the ARC graduate candidates' comments were mainly focused on the effects of behavior management strategies. For example, Candidate G-C wrote in her first reflection, "I have now stopped telling the class to quiet down. I simply put up my hand which is their signal to get quiet and pay attention. I was surprised at how quickly it became a success." In their first reflections, Candidate G-E said, "I learned to go at the students' pace," and candidate G-B wrote, "... distraction is really a good strategy to avoid the melt down." From the beginning they demonstrated what they had learned by applying skills in the field that they had learned in their teacher preparation classes at the university.

The Traditional and ARC candidates were receiving very similar instruction over the same content during this field experience, but the ARC candidates seemed more able to apply that knowledge and skills from the course. In her sixth reflection, Candidate G-E wrote about the importance of antecedents to behavior and how she was, "writing down what I witnessed before they displayed negative behaviors." Even the ARC candidate who was not employed as a teacher had insight into effective classroom and behavior management. For example, in her fifth reflection she wrote about the students having a, "great deal of physical energy" and needing "some kind of physical outlet." She wrote, "We expect them to spend too much of their day sitting and not in active learning pursuits." She concluded her reflection by asking, "Why have we made our schools places where our primary concern is controlling behavior and not the education of our children? How can we as educators keep learning fun and active yet still instructional?"

Reflective Analysis

Reflective analysis was viewed as the ability to think back on a situation and analyze the related variables for the purpose of learning from it. It could result in consideration of cause and effect or the functions of behaviors or in higher order thinking about one's practice as a teacher. Although all teachers engage in reflective analysis to improve their practice, it is especially important for special education teachers who must meet diverse needs and address complex behavioral problems.

Three of the four ARC graduate candidates engaged in reflective analysis throughout their field experience. For example, Candidate G-B questioned, "Why is "Sammy" hitting himself today?" and "How do we get "Neville" to quit eating glue?" She described in detail the process by which she concluded that "Neville" wasn't eating glue to meet his sensory needs but was engaging in a power struggle with her. She wrote, "The more we held back his eating glue, the more agitated he became. Eventually, we were in a full tantrum of hitting, kicking, and screaming." She went on to describe how she solved the problem by consulting with her Occupational Therapist and restraining the student for a, "long 6 minutes," until he calmed down. The second time the restraint lasted only three minutes and then the student "went back to the table and completed the work without eating glue." Candidate G-E wrote, "...I am finding that every student shows patterns in their behavior and what triggers their behavior." One ARC candidate, G-C, was somewhat reflective but less so than the other graduate students. She wrote more succinctly than her colleagues and provided less description, but demonstrated reflective analysis to some degree, such as the day she wrote about a student with ADHD who uncharacteristically engaged in aggression. She questioned, "Why did he hit and choke? What provoked him?" She was beginning to consider the effects of her actions as a teacher.

The Traditional candidates showed varying degrees of reflective analysis with Candidate U-D showing mature skills in reflection similar to the ARC candidates. She described a situation where two students with ADHD had come to school without their medication and she noticed an extreme change in their behavior. She wrote, "I learned that some of these students truly need medication to be able to focus on their schoolwork. I find myself SO against medicating our children that I never really stopped to think that in actuality, some children may truly benefit from it." Later in the reflection she wrote, "...I may need to have more of an open mind when it comes to the medication issue in education." This example shows how she examined the information and integrated it with her prior thinking to adjust her opinion.

Candidate U-C showed a budding level of reflective analysis when she questioned a classroom behavior management plan, “that says if you hit someone you go into isolation for one day...” But she failed to question why this student with Emotional Behavioral Disorder hit two students when the fire alarm went off.

The other two Traditional candidates demonstrated low levels of reflective analysis. They tended to describe events but not analyze or question them. For example, Candidate U-A wrote, “I learned that when a student is not having a good day, sometime there is nothing you can do.” She provided no details about the student, the behavior, or her attempts to intervene. She observed in Week Nine, “When teaching my lesson, two students began talking and when I called both of their names they focused their attention on me.” While making a cause and effect connection, this shows a low level attempt to understand and change behavior. Candidate U-B also demonstrated naïve reflective analysis initially with observations like, “...Some of the children respond well to new material, while it takes others a significantly longer period of time to understand.” By Week Nine she engaged in greater reflective analysis when she observed that, “I realized that it was much more difficult for some students than others. Our lesson was about trains and some of the students didn’t know what a caboose is or what box cars are. I must make sure that they are interested in the subject and they have a little prior knowledge.” This shows that the candidate was beginning to reflect on and evaluate variables related to the effectiveness of her instruction and to learn from her reflection.

Collaboration

Each of the four Traditional candidates wrote comments suggesting they were beginning to understand the importance of collaboration for providing appropriate education for students with disabilities. Candidate U-C had attended her first IEP meeting and wrote, “Today I learned the importance of communication between the school and parents...the school and parent came together to discuss what is best for the student and what he needs to succeed.” They also began to examine the challenges to effective collaboration. For example, Candidate U-D wrote, “...how can we communicate with the General Education teachers that they can modify lessons in their own classroom that can help the students in special education as well? How can we let them know that it doesn’t just have to be during just special education time?” Candidate U-A questioned, “How do you deal with general education teachers who are not so receptive to having special educators in their classroom?” Candidate U-B’s comments on collaboration were the most critical. She wrote, “I sat in on an RTI meeting today and I was appalled at the attitudes of some of the teachers. They spent more time complaining about having to be involved in the meeting than the meeting would’ve taken if they got straight to business. I didn’t think that a teacher’s attitude about helping a child who is doing poorly could be so bad.” These comments reflect their understanding of the value and need for effective collaboration and their awareness of the challenges in developing these relationships.

All four of the ARC candidates also wrote comments on collaboration but their comments showed a different level of understanding and skill. Candidate G-C wrote about the value of her three experienced paraprofessionals who could run classroom instruction while she was dealing with a student in crisis. Candidates G-B and G-E wrote descriptions of their successful collaborations. Candidate G-B told of successfully collaborating with many different stakeholders including parents, other special education teachers, and her occupational therapist. She wrote, “(X) my OT, came to see one of my students today and ended up sharing her 6 years of knowledge with me and modeling a strategy for me to use with (a student).” She wrote a full page describing this wonderful learning experience. Candidate G-E described an adaptation meeting he called for a student who was struggling. He described each participant at the meeting and then wrote, “As a group, we came up with some good ideas of how to give the student a better chance of success.” He went on to describe everything he learned from his colleagues and summarized, “Collaborating with colleagues is an excellent way to come up with ideas to help my teaching and classroom management.”

Only candidate G-D, the graduate student who was not employed as a teacher, focused on the frustrations of collaboration. She wrote, “The general education teacher running the classroom couldn’t

wait to get his form and write him up. I agree that behavior should have consequences but the teacher made no move to help or allow him extra time. He took great joy in the 'I told you so' idea that this is a bad kid and will always be a bad kid. Don't expect the General Ed teachers to be the least sympathetic to your kids. They won't." She further described this negative event but summarized with questions on how we could change the attitudes of other teachers and better integrate students with emotional and behavioral difficulties into general education classes.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study had two purposes. The first was to determine if reflective field journals could provide insight into candidates' dispositions to teach in special education. Results showed that reflections were a rich source of information on students' dispositions to teach in special education. Students were provided a template to guide their reflections but they were encouraged to go beyond the prompts and reflect on the events and their feelings each day they participated in their special education field experience. From the qualitative analysis of the 80 reflections, five constructs were identified: Ethical Behavior, Empathy, Classroom Behavior Management, Reflective Analysis, and Collaboration. Participants' reflections demonstrated their growth as special educators related to these constructs over time. Candidates in the Traditional program were preparing for dual licensure in General and Special Elementary education. The semester of the Methods course used in this study represented their first extensive field experience with students with disabilities (they had a brief four-day observation earlier in their program). The results of this study demonstrate the importance of quality field experiences in developing the disposition to teach in Special Education. All four Traditional candidates showed improvements in their dispositions toward students with disabilities over the course of the 10 weeks.

The constructs identified in this study to some extent support the model presented by Hong, Ivy, and Schulte (2009) who proposed three categories of dispositions to teach in special education (i.e., empathetic teachers, teaching students with disabilities, and interpersonal and intrapersonal competence). They suggested that empathetic teachers care sincerely about their students and pay close attention to their learning needs. They appreciate student differences and adjust their lessons and behavior management plans based on students' needs. In special education, the focus is on the individual instead of a whole class. Traditional participants in this study may have experienced a shift in their thinking from whole class, General Education instruction, to individual needs and differentiating instruction as a result of this field experience. Their empathy increased as they gradually knew and understood their students' challenges and learning needs. The qualitative analysis used in this study allowed for more in-depth understanding of candidate's thinking than the lists of behaviors presented by Hong, Ivy, and Schulte. Rather than observing if a behavior was demonstrated or not, the reflections allowed us to understand why candidates engaged in certain behaviors and what they felt about them. These data support the value of field experiences in teacher preparation and the value of examining field reflections for an understanding of a candidate's development of the disposition to teach in special education.

The second question addressed in this study related to differences in the dispositions of undergraduate Traditional students and graduate students enrolled in an alternative route to certification (ARC). Three of the four ARC participants in this study were employed on Emergency Permits as full time special education teachers. The fourth was placed in a classroom with a host teacher, like the undergraduate students. Results of the present study suggest that ARC candidates were more advanced than the Traditional participants for most of the constructs examined. They engaged in higher order thinking about their practice as teachers and utilized their reflections to develop professionally. They were quicker to empathize with students' feelings about their learning experiences and were working to collaborate effectively with colleagues and parents. Traditional participants showed progress over time so that by the end of the 10-week Field Experience, both groups of participants were more alike, supporting the value of field experiences in developing teaching dispositions.

The results of this study support those presented by Miller, McKenna, and McKenna (1988) and Hawk and Schmidt (1989) who found that teachers who were prepared in ARC programs were similar to

those from traditional programs on many teacher effectiveness variables. In the present study, ARC participants were more advanced in the beginning but they became more alike over time.

Bliss (1992) reported weaknesses in ARC teachers' classroom management and strengths in their teaching skills, comparing their skill levels to those of new teachers completing a traditional preparation program. In the present study, ARC candidates were more analytical in their approach to classroom and behavior management than were Traditional participants. The advanced dispositions of our ARC participants may be attributed to their maturity since the ARC group was five years older, on average, than participants in the Traditional group (See table 1). It is also possible that ARC participants were better prepared because most were employed full time and had daily opportunities to integrate instruction into their practice. Although this was the fourth semester of sequential field experiences for the Traditional participants, they attended field only one day a week. The lack of continuity of this type of experience may require more time for a candidate to develop important skills and dispositions. Any group differences in the disposition to teach in special education could be the result of the ARC groups' more extended and consistent exposure to students with disabilities as part of their employment.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Group/ Code	Race	Gender	Age (years)	Mean Age	School Level
Traditional				29	
A	African American	Female	31		Elementary
B	White	Female	36		Elementary
C	White	Female	24		Elementary
D	White	Female	24		Elementary
ARC				34	
B	White	Female	35		Pre-school
C	White	Female	39		High School
D	White	Female	34		Jr. High
E	White	Male	27		Elementary

Another possible explanation for these findings is that the ARC participants may have been more prepared for the role of the special education teacher when they entered the program because of their higher education levels and prior life experiences. They may have had important personal or professional experiences with adults or children with disabilities and developed sensitivities to their needs. Some of these candidates leave other careers to go into special education because they want to make a difference, a disposition that can affect their development in the knowledge and skills needed to be successful special education teachers. Conversely, undergraduates also enter education programs because of a desire to make a difference. Future research may want to assess both entry and exit dispositions to gain a clearer understanding of the development of dispositions.

The results of this study should be considered along with its limitations. This study must be considered an exploratory pilot study due to the small number of participants. The results are heuristic and additional research will be needed to determine if the dispositions of these candidates are representative of others. Another limitation was that the graduate participants of this study were enrolled in one ARC program. There are many different types of ARC programs and results may not generalize to programs that differ in admission procedures, programs of study, field experiences, or other important ways. A third limitation was that the undergraduate, traditionally-trained candidates used for comparison in this study were enrolled in a dual licensure program. They may differ from candidates in single licensure special education programs.

In conclusion, continuing shortages of teachers in special education have prompted various alternatives for preparing teachers of students with disabilities. Regardless of the type of program, the

results of this study support the value of engaging in field experiences with students with disabilities and the value of reflecting on those experiences. Those reflections reveal a great deal about candidates, including their disposition to teach in special education. We encourage field supervisors to carefully read field reflections, respond to comments, and engage in conversations in ways that help candidates develop their dispositions to teach in special education.

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