Working with diverse populations has long been a challenging endeavor for physical education teacher education programs. This is especially true for student teachers working with special needs students. Evidence points to the fact that contact with special needs groups can often create fear among teacher candidates (Sideridis & Chandler, 1996). This uneasiness among teachers often leads to huge teacher turnover, particularly among special needs teachers. In a 2002 article Fore, Martin and Bender estimated that the yearly attrition rate among special needs teachers (10%) is almost twice as high as it is among the general teacher population (6%). The turnover rate for special needs teachers after 10 years of teaching jumps, by some estimates, to 75% (Special Education Degrees, 2013). With the costs involved in finding, interviewing and hiring a new teacher, this staggering turnover rate can be a huge burden on cash-strapped school districts. Given the high turnover rate, particularly among special education teachers, it would seem reasonable to assume that additional attention should be given to addressing teacher candidates’ early exposure to this diverse group. Theodorakis, Bagiatis and Goudas (1995) examined the correlation between the comfort levels of teachers working with special needs students and an increase in job longevity and satisfaction. They found that those teachers who had achieved a high comfort level in working with students with disabilities had prolonged careers and higher job satisfaction. This article looks at one possible approach to addressing student teachers’ understanding of, sensitivity toward and comfort level in working with special needs individuals.
In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), Atticus Finch talks about not being able to really understand another person unless you walk around in their skin. He asserts that only by going through the process of immersing ourselves in the life of another person can we truly appreciate someone else’s life experience. Feeding off of this premise, the author of this article employed a class lab in which students “walked in the shoes” of someone with special needs.

**Process**

The lab, titled “Immersion for an Afternoon,” was conducted at a moderately sized Atlantic Coast university. The class in which the lab took place was an adaptive physical education curriculum and methods class. Participants included 18 physical education teacher candidates preparing for internship. This project/lab was conducted in the first week of class, which met once a week for three hours.

Students were partnered up and then randomly placed into one of three disability groups. Six students were assigned to each of three disabilities; 1) wheelchair bound, 2) vision impaired and 3) nonverbal. After being placed into their groups, students were asked to take turns with their partner to perform several requisite tasks around campus. The tasks varied based on the assigned disability. Students had 90 minutes to complete all the assigned tasks. Each of the three pairings for each disability group were assigned the same tasks but in a different order to enhance the experience by avoiding influence from the other groups. Students were specifically told not to divulge to anyone they encountered that they were participating in a class assignment while immersed in their disability.

**Wheelchair bound**

Students were asked to complete the following tasks while in a wheelchair: 1) use the wheelchair to navigate from the classroom, across campus and to the student center (approximately a quarter mile); 2) use a public restroom; and 3) enter a car from the wheelchair without assistance.

**Vision impaired**

Students were asked to complete the following tasks while blindfolded (simulating blindness): 1) walk from the classroom to another building on campus (use hand on shoulder of lab partner to navigate; approximately a quarter mile); 2) enter restroom, find sink and wash hands; and 3) use hand-on-shoulder method of navigation to take one flight of stairs up to the second floor and then find the elevator and take it back to the first floor.

**Nonverbal**

Students were asked to complete the following tasks without speaking: 1) go to the student center, enter the campus store and find out (without verbally asking) where to find cold cans of fruit juice and where to find dental floss; 2) nonverbally find directions and navigate to an unfamiliar office on campus; and 3) go to the student recreation center and, without speaking, find information about and times for an aerobics class.

**Reflection**

After completing the tasks, students returned to the classroom for reflection. All six pairings of each disability were put into groups and were asked to share their experiences and reflect on those situations that were the most challenging during the immersion exercise. Additionally, students in each group were asked to express any attitudinal changes they personally experienced with regard to their thoughts about special needs or disabilities. Each disability group then created a list of their thoughts and looked for similarities and commonalities among the group members’ responses. Finally, each group elected a member to present their findings to the entire class. Students in other disability groups were then encouraged to add to the discussion by acknowledging similar experiences and by asking follow-up questions.

**Findings**

Students overwhelmingly enjoyed the immersion lab. Their comments in the post-immersion reflection and discussion seemed to indicate a much higher appreciation, understanding and empathy for individuals with disabilities. Some of their comments are listed in the following paragraphs. They are divided by disability.

**Wheelchair bound**

- “I have new respect for the upper-body strength needed by someone to get around in a wheelchair.”
- “Some of the ramps on campus are way too steep to get up and down while in a wheelchair.”
- “It weirded me out how some looked at me pushing across campus in a wheelchair. They really thought I was disabled!”

**Vision impaired**

- “It was really scary walking across campus with the blindfold; I can’t imagine what it would have been like if I had been using a cane!”
- “So much trust was needed to use someone else to guide me.”
- “It was really hard to do something as easy as washing my hands! I racked my knuckles really hard trying to turn on the water.”

**Nonverbal**

- “I was kind of angry with the way the cashier acted when I was trying to describe that I needed floss; she was very rude!”
- “I thought I got the easiest of three disabilities; I never realized how much I rely on talking. It was crazy hard!”
- “Asking strangers how to find a building was next to impossible.”
Summary

Teaching diverse populations poses a series of challenges to teacher candidates and new teachers. These challenges often lead novice teachers to exit the profession early. Although the actual experience of working with these diverse populations — in particular, special needs groups — can never be replicated in the classroom, other imaginative experiences can be incorporated. Experiential projects can help teacher candidates gain, in some modicum, an empathetic appreciation for individuals with special needs. This immersion project seems to be one appropriate means of facilitating this appreciation.

References


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Submissions Welcome!

Readers are encouraged to send “Theory into Practice” submissions to column editor Anthony Parish at anthony.parish@armstrong.edu.

The purpose of the Strategies column “Theory into Practice” is to distill high quality research into understandable and succinct information and to identify key resources to help teachers and coaches improve professional practice and provide high quality programs. Each column (1,000–1,300 words or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages) summarizes research findings about a timely topic of interest to the readership to enable practitioners to apply research, knowledge and evidence-based practice in physical education and sports.