

“Effects of Literary Texts and Professional Texts on Preservice Teachers’ Attitudes
toward Children with Disabilities”

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Running Head: Literary

Abstract

This study examined the effects of a literary text based course module in special education on changing preservice teachers' attitudes toward characteristics of children with disabilities. An experimental group (N = 20) was instructed with a literary text based module, while a control group (N = 18) was instructed with a professional text based module. Both groups completed a semantic differential survey measuring attitudes toward children with disabilities during the first and last weeks of the six-week modules. Comparison of the groups' pre and posttest survey results, utilizing analysis of covariance, showed the experimental group had a significantly more positive change in attitudes toward characteristics of children with disabilities. Reasons why group differences in attitude occurred are discussed with emphasis on literary texts' ability to provide a more imaginative, relevant, and humane view of children with disabilities.

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A body of professional literature shows that regular classroom teachers' attitudes and expectations toward children with disabilities are often stereotypic and negative (Horne, 1985), and negative expectations breed futility in both students and teachers (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). Children and youth with disabilities are assigned a multitude of negative traits. They are described as aggressive or anxious, attention disordered or affectionless, unmotivated or uncooperative, drug abusers or dropouts. Such terms are either overtly hostile or covertly patronizing in the long established tradition of blaming the victim. Our growing understanding of self-fulfilling prophecies or the "Pygmalion effect" clearly signals the deleterious effects of pessimistic approaches to children.

It has been posited that professional texts in teacher education, e.g., textbooks, journal articles, with their predominant empirical philosophy do not fully engage readers in confronting stereotypes or in examining their own attitudes and expectations toward youth with disabilities (Bower, 1981, p.5; Landau, Epstein, & Stone, 1978, p.xii). Empiricism is aimed at collecting and refining data, discovering correlations, and formulating testable empirical generalizations, hypotheses, and models toward the discovery of law like principles. Within this world view, the teacher's task is to study children deductively, independently, with neutrality, and controlled subjectivity. The professional text, bound by form and intent, offers a range from formal discourse to narratives of educational phenomena that can "name" a problem or a solution but cannot embody a potential experience that can be realized in the imaginative participation of the reader's experience (Kasprisin, 1987).

The use of literature may be one imaginative way to provoke reflection in teacher education students, which in turn, might improve expectations and responses toward

children with disabilities. Literature provides an intimacy where we can learn how a child with a disability views himself or herself and what he or she has in common with all of us becomes clear. Differences take on less importance and stereotypes and categories of all kinds become less relevant. As an advocate for the use of literary texts in medical education, Trautman (1982) maintains that literature provides a more imaginative world than the professional text, broadening and heightening our view of the world, offering psychological and moral journeys, with impasses and breakthroughs, with decisions made and destinations achieved. Coles (1989, p.181), a psychiatrist, notes that literature has a moral force, a visionary side. Wear (1989) proposes that literary texts can portray the difficult and frequently unexamined complexities of the lives of children and their teachers in ways that are inaccessible in the more clinical third person language of the professional text.

As Bruner (1985) indicated, there are different ways to learn. He suggested that as learners, we may have come to value only one kind of thinking; the linear or the logical. He emphasized, however, two modes of learning: the narrative and intuitive as well as the logical and scientific, each differing radically in the way it establishes truth. According to Bruner, one verifies by appealing to the formal verification practices of empirical proof, while the other establishes nonproof likenesses. The logical/scientific mode leads to textbooks and journal articles, while the narrative/intuitive leads to stories and drama dealing with human situations. The two modes utilize language differently; the logical mode uses precise, descriptive language leading to cause; the narrative mode uses imaginative language dealing with intention. They constitute two simultaneous landscapes, which, if we are to really understand reality, must both include the way we view the world.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a literary text based course module in special education on preservice teachers' attitudes toward children with disabilities. Semantic differential scales were used to measure attitudes. It was

hypothesized that preservice teachers instructed with a literary text based module would hold more positive attitudes toward children with disabilities than a control group instructed with a professional text based module. Professional texts are not designed as attitude change curricula with their emphasis on cognitive information, while literary texts tap both the cognitive and affective components of the individual.

Method

Subjects

The control (N = 18) and experimental groups (N = 20) were students enrolled in separate sections of an introductory course in teacher education, "Introduction to Teaching," during fall 1993 and spring 1994 semesters. This four-semester credit hour course is a prerequisite for all undergraduate majors in teacher education at Appalachian State University. The course provides the conceptual basis for understanding teaching as a profession and is designed to examine issues in teaching and learning with one third of the course devoted to teaching children with disabilities. This is the only required course with a special education emphasis for majors in elementary, middle grades, and secondary education. The same instructor taught both sections of the course.

The mean age of the control and experimental groups was 20.1 and 19.6 years, respectively. There were five males in the control group and seven males in the experimental group. The mean number of years in college was 2.2 for controls and 2.5 for experimentals. Two control and one experimental subject identified themselves as African-American; all other subjects identified themselves as Caucasian.

Procedures

A 7-point semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tennenbaum, 1957) "survey of characteristics of children with disabilities" was devised to measure preservice teachers' attitudes. The semantic differential consisted of 20 paired bipolar adjective scales, divided into seven intervals, including traits and format common in stereotype studies (e.g., Lalonde and Gardner, 1989). Utilizing factor analysis, Osgood (1962) determined

that semantic differential scales contain three distinct components of meaning: evaluative, potency, and activity. Evaluative or attitudinal factors are characterized by scales like unpleasant-pleasant, good-bad; potency factors are characterized by scales like strong-weak, small-large; and the activity factor is characterized by scales like fast-slow, static-developing. This study's semantic differential contained eight evaluative scales (good-bad, sad-happy, pleasant-unpleasant, fair-unfair, knowledgeable-unknowledgeable, predictable-unpredictable, uncooperative-cooperative, and different-alike), five potency scales (small-large, strong-weak, thin-thick, light-heavy, and fresh-stale), and seven activity scales (fast-slow, active-passive, cold-hot, responsive-unresponsive, dull-bright, exciting-boring, and static-developing).

Preservice teachers rated children with disabilities on each of the twenty paired items. Subjects were given a forced choice response for characteristics of children with disabilities. On a scale that ranged from 1 to 7, students were asked to judge a child with a disability, for example, as either uncooperative or cooperative.

Preservice teachers completed the surveys during the first and last weeks of the six week modules. They wrote their student identification numbers on each questionnaire, thus enabling the matching of pre- and post-tests. Students were assured that the surveys were for research purposes only and confidentiality would be honored.

Attitudes, of course, can only be inferred from behavioral responses. In general an attitude can be defined as a readiness to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular class of objects. The use of bipolar rating scales is a common tool for assessing perception of attributes. Some researchers (Green and Goldfried, 1965) suggest that respondents may be constrained with the use of bipolar ratings of objects or persons, and that some attributes may not be functionally true opposites. Also many studies using bipolar opposites do not assess the reliability and validity of such measures. Crites, Fabrigar, and Petty (1994) examined the feasibility of constructing reliable and valid indices of the affective and cognitive properties of attitudes. They found that the

semantic differential showed high levels of internal consistency and good convergent and discriminant validity and that it is applicable to multiple attitude objects and has stable psychometric properties across different attitude objects.

Course objectives for both sections of the six week modules included several ways to reduce negative and stereotyping attitudes toward children with special needs on the subconscious level by: (1) establishing a sense of community and open discussion in the university classroom; (2) promoting critical thinking and self-examination by knowing one's own values, assumptions and biases regarding children with special needs as well as examining the beliefs of mainstream culture; and (3) advocating social responsibility and change agency on behalf of children. Nieto, Young, Tran, and Pang (1994) further articulate this three-step process. Both sections read and discussed a packet of six instructor authored handouts on the following special education topics: history of services, legal guidelines, North Carolina state guidelines for screening, identification, and diagnosis, individualized educational plans, service delivery models, and classroom management issues.

The professional texts for the control group were six textbook chapters from Education of Emotionally Disturbed Children (Paul and Epanchin, 1990), Teaching Special Students in the Mainstream (Lewis and McLaughlin, 1991), Effective Programs for Students at Risk (Slavin, Karweit, and Madden, 1989) and Exceptional Children: An Introductory Survey of Special Education (Heward and Orlansky, 1992). The textbook chapters provided definitions, characteristics, and etiologies of disabling and at-risk conditions, and provided information on how to modify and adapt curriculum, instruction, and learning environments. Assignments included panel discussions on course topics and writing six one-page response papers where students responded to specific questions based on the content of the textbook chapters, e.g., “How can educators modify large group instruction to meet the needs of mainstreamed children and to create a sense of classroom community?”

The literary texts for the experimental group were two nonfiction novels by Torey Hayden, One Child (1980) and Somebody Else's Kids (1978). The Hayden texts are intimate first person accounts of classroom life with children whose lives are marked by emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, mental retardation, delinquency, depression, anger, and defeat. These personal stories illuminate the strength and richness of the relationships between teachers and their students and contextualize the social and classroom lives of children with disabilities. The two novels served as the primary source for class lectures and discussion, and the teacher-student encounters in the texts served as springboards for inquiry and critique of theory and practice in special education. Assignments included panel discussions on course topics utilizing the novels as reference points and the writing of two response papers, three to five pages in length, on each of the novels, where students responded to specific questions, e.g., "Describe Torey Hayden's use of cross-age and peer tutoring to create classroom community in One Child. Cite specific examples. What other strategies did she use to create a sense of community?"

Results

Semantic differential data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) procedures to determine if significant differences between experimental and control group post-test scores were present. Separate analyses were conducted for each of the 20 bipolar adjective scales as well as an analysis with all scales combined. Pretest scores were used as covariates. As shown in Table 1, examination of individual scales with ANCOVA showed that literary texts had a significant effect on changing preservice teachers' perceptions of children with disabilities to being more good, strong, light, predictable, responsive, cooperative, and exciting.

Insert Table 1 about here

In order to examine the combined scales scores, all scale ranges were recorded as "1" if the interval next to the negative adjective was checked to "7" if the interval next to the positive adjective was checked. The scores for each scale were then summed to yield a total attitude score. The ANCOVA for combined scales showed a significant difference between the experimental and control group posttests ($F = 15.83, p = < .01$), indicating literary texts had a positive effect on changing attitudes toward characteristics of children with disabilities.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The use of literary texts in the course module appears to have had a significant effect on changing students attitudes in a positive direction toward children with disabilities. Overall, the group instructed using literary texts had positive changes that were significant on seven of the 20 scales, including four of the eight evaluative scales (good-bad, predictable-unpredictable, responsive-unresponsive, and uncooperative-cooperative), two of the five potency scales (strong-weak and light-heavy), and one of the seven activity scales (exciting-boring).

There may be several reasons why group differences in attitude occurred. First, in depicting children with disabilities, a literary account is more vivid than the professional text because literature provides a more fully imagined world, generally much more complete than our own. Literature can mirror the drama of inner lives, and a richer and more poignant understanding of human essence is possible. Within this context, students may acknowledge their beliefs and behaviors toward children with disabilities with greater reflection than before.

Professional texts in special education are predominantly concerned with what is empirical, observable, replicable, and generalizable; literature is concerned with the creation of human empathic identities, grasping at the cognitive emotional insides of readers. Each seeks truth in its own fashion. One seeks rigor and data; the other seeks

relevance and clear images. William Morse (1981, p. vi), a leader in the field of special education, maintains that the professional text has largely left out the "person," and that one way to "know" children and youth is to experience their lives through literature. Vivian Paley iterates Morse's point of view, stating "none of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events (1990, p.xii). Special education stands at the top of all the teaching fields where the helper should know both one's own life and the lives of those to be given assistance.

Second, literary texts may provide us with a more humane and optimistic view of atypical youth than found in most professional publications. Consider the following comparisons of descriptions of youth with emotional and behavioral disorders in the introductory chapter in the Paul and Epanchin text and in Hayden's preface to One Child.

"Many emotionally disturbed children have long-standing patterns of defiant and disruptive behavior. These children are particularly upsetting to teachers because they challenge the teacher's role and threaten the order and composure of the classroom. Some of these children exhibit the feelings needed to get what they want (i.e. to manipulate others), but they don't experience the feelings. These children are often able to identify weaknesses in the teacher and exploit them. . . . These children may be at high risk for delinquency later in life . . . and seem to have little sense of right or wrong or guilt and are least responsive to psychological treatment and educational remediation" (Paul and Epanchin, 1991, pp. 19-20).

Hayden, who spent numerous years as a teacher's aide, teacher, and psychiatric researcher with troubled youth, provides a far different portrait :

"They are simply children, frustrating at times as all children are. But they are gratifyingly compassionate and hauntingly perceptive. Madness alone allows the whole truth to be spoken. But these children are more. They are courageous. While we turn on the evening news to hear of new excitements and conquests on the distant front, we miss

the real dramas that play themselves out amongst us. This is unfortunate because there is bravery here unsurpassed by any outside event. Some of these children live with such haunted nightmares in their heads that every move is fraught with unknown terror. Some live with such violence and perversity that it cannot be captured in words. Some live without the dignity accorded animals. Some live without love. Some live without hope. Yet, they endure. . . This book tells of only one child. . . It is an answer to the question of frustration in working with the mentally ill. It is a song to the human soul, because this little girl is like all my children. Like all of us. She is a survivor" (1980, p.8).

While one may argue this is just realism versus idealism, these are profoundly different ways of describing the same reality. One distances the reader from the subject; the other draws the reader close. An examination of the history of childhood in Western society shows that negative attitudes toward difficult youth are deeply embedded in the cultural milieu (Szasz, 1970, pp. 147-148). The professional text, bound by regulations about human experimentation, the collection of systematic and objective data, reliance on facts that can be measured, and statistical models, contributes, perhaps unwittingly, to our culture's blunted, restricted, and alienated view of youth with disabilities.

Third, the structure of the literary texts in this study may have served to provoke more reflection about children's capacity to change and to act wisely given the psychological opportunity to do so. Stories are not crystallized; they are fluid and serve as a metaphor for change. The personal stories of Hayden have at least three elements basic to all stories: (a) a situation involving some predicament, conflict, or struggle; (b) an animate protagonist who engages in the situation for a purpose; and (c) a sequence with implied causality (i.e., a plot) during which the predicament is resolved in some fashion. This action feature of story makes it especially appropriate to the study of change agency and social responsibility in teacher education.

It is important to iterate, however, that literary accounts of disabling conditions may also be subject to shortcomings. The content of novels written about individuals with

disabilities must be scrutinized, since literary texts may present stereotypes as well as inaccurate information. Biklen and Bogdan (1982) have identified ten major media stereotypes found in novels, plays, films, and television dramas about individuals with disabilities, and these must be considered when selecting instructional media. One only has to recall John Steinbeck's novel, Of Mice and Men (1937) and Steinbeck's portrayal of the big and powerful Lennie whose retardation made him unable to distinguish between stroking a woman's hair and strangling her. This image may help pass bans on executing people with retardation, but it will set back efforts to persuade neighborhoods to welcome group homes and businesses to accept workers with retardation.

Informal end of course discussions by the experimental group indicated the "day to day stories" of classroom particulars in the literary texts served as experiential backgrounds and springboards for the examination and understanding of pedagogical issues, e.g., curriculum models, creating positive peer cultures, classroom management. Story is a basic way of processing information, and both children and adults find it much easier to remember and use material presented in story format rather than as a categorized list (Hardy, 1977). As one student commented, "her books made the abstract concrete."

All 20 experimental group members voiced a preference for reading the novels of Hayden rather than the professional texts routinely assigned in their teacher education courses. "Inspirational," "motivating," "touching," and "eye-opening" were terms used to describe the nonfiction of Hayden. With a show of hands, 13 students admitted to weeping while reading Hayden. While textbooks were seen as having value, they were also described as "dull," "abstract," "sanitized," and "encyclopedic." Unsurprisingly, the sterile content of textbooks has been widely cited by researchers as one reason why student teachers and beginning teachers perceived a lack of continuity between practices taught in university classes and teaching experiences (Katz & Rath, 1982; Carter & Richardson, 1989, Pinnegar & Carter, 1990).

While not downplaying or usurping the importance of pedagogy, the literary text can complement, enlarge, and personalize the issues suggested by the professional text. Bower (1981, p.5) notes that teacher education in the field of exceptional children needs to search for a balance between the artistic/literary and the empirical/scientific. Each approach represents a kind of "knowing" essential to teacher education. The multiple mirrors of children's worlds provided by literary and professional texts offer synergetic possibilities to readers and can serve to stimulate greater reflection about one's beliefs and practices.

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Table 1

Group Pre and Posttest Means and Standard Deviations: Semantic Differential Scales

<u>Scale (Range 1-7)</u>	<u>Experimental</u>				<u>Control</u>			
	<u>Pretest</u>		<u>Posttest</u>		<u>Pretest</u>		<u>Posttest</u>	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Good-Bad	3.0	1.3	1.9	0.9**	2.9	1.3	2.4	1.2
Sad-Happy	3.7	0.9	5.5	1.8**	3.7	1.4	4.3	1.5
Pleasant-Unpleasant	3.7	1.2	2.8	1.3*	3.8	1.8	3.4	1.7
Fair-Unfair	3.8	0.9	3.4	1.5	3.5	1.0	3.2	1.3
Small-Large	3.7	1.2	4.2	1.3*	3.7	1.1	4.1	1.5
Strong-Weak	3.8	0.7	2.9	1.3	3.9	1.0	3.5	1.0
Thin-Thick	3.6	0.9	4.7	1.3**	3.8	1.3	4.4	1.1
Light-Heavy	3.8	1.0	4.2	1.5	4.0	1.3	4.2	1.0
Fast-Slow	3.4	1.3	3.2	1.6	3.2	0.7	2.9	1.1
Active-Passive	3.0	1.4	2.3	1.6	3.0	1.2	2.6	1.3
Cold-Hot	3.7	1.2	4.7	1.8*	4.3	1.4	4.9	1.6
Fresh-Stale	3.5	1.2	2.5	1.5	3.3	1.0	3.1	1.1
Knowledgeable-								
Unknowledgeable	4.0	1.0	2.8	1.5 **	3.5	1.0	3.2	1.4
Predictable-								
Unpredictable	4.5	1.3	4.4	2.3	4.3	1.1	4.1	1.7
Responsive-								
Unresponsive	4.0	1.7	3.2	1.4	3.3	0.9	3.3	1.5

Table 1 (continued)

Different-Alike	3.3	1.5	2.3	1.4	3.2	1.5	3.6	1.6
Dull-Bright	4.1	0.9	5.7	1.5*	4.5	0.8	4.8	1.4
Uncooperative- Cooperative	3.6	0.8	5.0	1.4*	4.0	1.2	4.1	1.3
Exciting-Boring	3.2	1.4	2.4	1.3*	3.2	1.2	3.2	1.7
Static-Developing	5.1	1.3	6.0	1.7*	4.9	1.4	5.6	1.2

*p < .05, **p < .01

Table 2

ANCOVA for the Two Groups' Combined Semantic Differential Scores

	<u>Experimental</u>		<u>Control</u>		<u>F</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
Pretest	80.63	8.93	84.57	8.93	9.86	.003
Posttest	94.41	13.68	89.57	14.58		