

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of their Preparedness to Integrate Equity and Social Justice Principles in an Inclusive Learning Environment

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Abstract: Recent research studies have revealed that while many pre-service teachers express feelings of confidence in their core understandings of teaching, they still express concerns about applying this knowledge to practice. This study examines student teachers' feelings of their preparedness to teach in an inclusive environment that caters for learners with a variety of backgrounds, learning styles, abilities and special needs, and specifically to integrate social justice principles in their teaching. The study adopts a one-on-one semi-structured interview protocol with five fourth year undergraduate students in a childhood (grades 1-6) certification and special education certification program, who were just about to join the teaching profession. Overall, the PSTs felt prepared but expressed a need for constant professional development to gather practical strategies to assist them in the day-to-day business of teaching. The participants only partly felt prepared to work in an inclusive learning environment with relative comfort in creating a positive learning environment, planning for lessons and designing instructional strategies, but felt inadequately prepared to integrate issues of social justice in their teaching.

Keywords: Pre-service Teachers, Perceptions, Preparedness, Inclusive Learning Environment.

1. Introduction

Although few researchers have studied whether perceptions of preparedness lead to actual preparedness of a teacher in the classroom, several studies indicated a relationship between student teachers' perceptions of preparedness and an increased sense of efficacy (Brown & Collins, 2015). Indeed, as Housego (1990) observed, student teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach may influence their ability to perform instructional tasks and it is important for them to feel well prepared and to be highly motivated to perform a task effectively. A teacher's sense of efficacy in teaching or their confidence about being prepared and able to influence student learning is an important aspect of effective teaching.

Teachers can exert incredible influence on the type and quality of educational experience their students receive if they feel well prepared and have a sense of efficacy (Al-Bataineh, 2009). The perceptions of preparedness and sense of efficacy can only be achieved through adequate preparation of teachers. Research has shown that the type of preparation teachers

receive has a direct impact on student achievement (Cwikla, 2002). If students are to get the best possible education, they must be provided with teachers who have been well prepared. Consequently, the preparation of teachers is of vital importance to any educational system to give preservice teachers (PSTs) a feeling of preparedness to teach. As Al-Bataineh (2009) observed, universities that educate prospective teachers are directly responsible for providing the best possible preparation for teaching candidates, including the opportunity to gain classroom experience before they assume teaching responsibilities.

It is with this background information on the importance of PSTs being and feeling prepared for better student achievement that I proposed this study to explore the feeling of preparedness of PSTs in an inclusive childhood program, to teach in an inclusive learning environment. The following research questions guided the study:

- How do preservice teachers describe an inclusive learning environment?
- What according to PSTs are some of the elements that go into a lesson plan for an inclusive learning environment?
- What are some of the instructional strategies that PSTs associate with an inclusive learning environment?
- How do the preservice teachers view their teacher preparation program?

2. Literature Review

A. Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach

While some studies have examined PSTs perceptions of preparedness to teach in specific contexts or to teach specific kinds of learners, some have focused on the general perceptions of preparedness to teach and the feelings of self-efficacy. To a large extent, research studies on PSTs' perceptions of preparedness to teach indicated that PSTs just completing their teacher education programs felt fairly well prepared to teach in a general classroom. The perceptions of preparedness became stronger as the teacher candidates progressed in their

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coursework and especially after the student teaching component, after being in the classroom and teaching real lessons to real learners (Brown, Lee & Collins, 2015; Lee, Tice, Collins, Brown, Smith & Fox, 2012). However, some studies (Crosswell & Beutel, 2012; Housego, 1990) also revealed that while the graduating PSTs felt prepared to teach, they wanted on-going professional learning opportunities to gather practical strategies to assist them in the day-to-day business of teaching.

B. Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Culturally Diverse Learners

Unlike the positive perceptions of preparedness to teach in general classrooms, research studies suggested that PSTs did not feel prepared to teach culturally diverse learners. Causey, Thomas and Armento (2000) observed that as student populations grew more diverse, the preservice teacher population had become more homogeneous, primarily White middle-class females, creating a challenge of mismatch of teacher and student cultures in terms of how to facilitate intercultural sensitivity and learning among prospective teachers. Many PSTs expressed little to no confidence in their prior knowledge about other ethnic groups and it was not until their college years that they interacted with others of different ethnic groups.

As evident in many studies, where PSTs showed elements of feeling prepared for culturally responsive teaching, many only seemed to feel prepared to teach in schools that were minimally culturally and linguistically diverse. Siwatu (2011) found that PSTs felt more prepared and confident to teach in suburban schools. They felt most prepared to teach White, African American, Hispanic and English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolled in suburban rather than urban schools. Additionally, they felt less prepared and confident to teach ELLs regardless of their enrollment in an urban or suburban school. PSTs felt that contexts that were less culturally and linguistically diverse came with less complexities such as the obligation to understand and appreciate a variety of cultures. Many believed they understood to the greatest extent the culture of students who were members of their own racial group, had more interactions with this group, knew more about the contributions of this group and therefore felt most prepared to teach this group (Kea, Trent & Davis, 2002).

C. Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Learners with Special Needs

While many studies (Gately & Hammer, 2005; Laprairie, Johnson, Rice, Adams & Higgins, 2010; Voss & Bufkin, 2011) focused on the preparation of teachers to teach learners with special needs, a few studies (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014; Nutter, 2011; Rupp, Neeper & Dalsen, 2016) focused on perceptions of preparedness of PSTs and teachers in general to teach learners with special needs. The studies showed that perceptions of preparedness to teach learners with special needs were generally low with teachers both in special schools and mainstream settings exhibiting a lack of clarity and coherence in their conceptualization of 'inclusion' and the complexities associated with it (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014).

However, perceptions of preparation improved with PST preparation and teacher professional development as evident in Nutter's (2011) finding that a good knowledge of instructional strategies and a higher skill level in instructional strategies led to better attitudes towards learners with special needs and therefore stronger feelings of preparation to work with these learners. Focusing on the preparation of early childhood and early childhood special education PSTs for inclusive settings, Voss and Bufkin (2011) also found statistically significant gains in self-perceived competence by PSTs in each area analyzed.

The studies showed that PSTs specifically prepared for special education had stronger perceptions of preparedness to teach learners with special needs than general education teachers, even as these learners increased in general education classrooms (Nutter, 2011). Special education teachers indicated higher perceived competence in working with special needs students compared to general education teachers (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014). Studies on regular teachers indicated that they felt more comfortable to complete educational programs and collaborate with other educational team members but felt least prepared to support students' medical and physical needs, incorporate universal design for learning, and use assistive technology (Rupp, Neeper & Dalsen, 2016).

D. Preservice Teacher Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach for Social Justice

From the few studies on PSTs' perceptions of preparedness to teach for social justice, it was evident that PSTs felt only partly prepared. They felt that teacher education programs prepared them to integrate social justice principles and practices but did not prepare them to apply these principles in the face of complexities and specific contextual factors they may encounter.

In a study in a rural school in the United States (US), Ajayi (2017) investigated PSTs' perspectives on whether a teacher preparation program prepared them to use social justice teaching, how they applied the approach and the challenges they faced. It emerged that while coursework may have prepared them to integrate social justice principles and practices into teaching, they faced significant institutional factors that constrained their efforts to integrate these practices and generally taught the mainstream knowledge prescribed by the school system.

Coursework may have prepared the participants to draw on certain aspects of their students' cultural backgrounds and to discuss specific contextual factors that constrained teaching in rural schools but it did not seem to have prepared them to apply the principles of social justice to relate instruction to the complexity and specificity of the rural community or to connect their instruction to specific constraints on their practices such as poor funding, fewer instructional resources, and less qualified and experienced teachers (Ajayi, 2017).

Research literature attributed the perceptions of partial preparation to teacher preparation programs that focused on technical aspects of teaching and classroom management skills to raise learner standardized scores but ignored teacher

candidate cultural capital and cultural responsive teaching. Teacher education programs claiming the mantle of social justice often failed to practice what they preached (Zeichner, 2016) and many 1.0 and 2.0 teacher preparation programs in the US did not provide high quality, effective teachers for all children in public schools; thus the need for the teacher education 3.0 program (Kretchmar & Zeichner, 2016). Kretchmar and Zeichner (2016) argued that given the weaknesses in all types of teacher education programs in the US, there was need to transform rather than defend or reform the existing system.

Although there have been many studies examining the preparation of PSTs and perceptions of preparedness, studies on perceptions of preparedness to teach in specific learning environments such as culturally diverse, special needs, or to teach for social justice were limited.

From this review, PSTs just completing their teacher education programs generally felt well prepared although they were also receptive to continued learning in terms of more practical skills and ongoing professional development. Their perceptions of preparedness were varied on what aspects of teaching they felt more prepared in. Some felt more prepared in classroom management and questioning skills as others felt more competent in instructional planning and motivation of learners, all owing to the teacher preparation program they had gone through.

However, perceptions of preparedness to teach special categories of learners such as those in culturally diverse classrooms, those with special needs and integration of social justice principles in teaching were not as strong. Research studies portrayed PSTs as feeling unprepared to teach culturally diverse learners as many felt comfortable in less culturally and linguistically diverse settings or with learners of their own race. They believed that this came with less complexities of cross-cultural nature. Many PSTs also seemed to subscribe to a narrow perspective of diversity as race and ethnicity, leaving out other factors such as sexual orientation and individual classroom behavior.

Research studies also showed that PSTs not specifically prepared for special education had lower perceptions of preparedness to teach special needs learners even though these learners were increasing in general education classrooms. The perceptions of preparedness however improved with professional development. The situation was similar to PSTs' perceptions of preparedness to teach for social justice where the PSTs felt only partly prepared to integrate social justice principles in their teaching. They especially felt inadequate in the face of the different contextual factors that they expected to encounter. Overall, PSTs felt well prepared to teach in general education classrooms, but only partly prepared to teach culturally diverse learners, learners with special needs and to integrate social justice principles in their teaching.

3. Methodology

A. Research Approach and Design

Consistent with Marshall and Rossman's (2016) idea that the

phenomenological approach seeks to explore, analyze and describe the meaning of individual lived experiences, I used the approach to understand the PSTs' perceptions of their preparedness, as shaped by their experiences, to teach in inclusive settings. I adopted the qualitative methodology as its flexibility enabled me to interact with participants through deep probing for clarification and to understand their perceptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It was appropriate for the subjective nature of the perceptions that I sought to establish as it began with the individual's experiences, setting out to understand and interpret their experience of a given phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2000).

B. Sample and Sampling Procedure

I used simple random sampling to select five PSTs from fourth year undergraduate students in a childhood (grades 1-6) certification and special education certification program. The PSTs were just about to complete their program at a private research university in northeastern US and join the teaching profession. Table 1 shows a description of the participants.

Table 1
Description of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Major
Loreal	Female	Inclusive Childhood Program
Jon	Male	Inclusive Childhood Program
Marcelle	Female	Inclusive Childhood Program
Tom	Male	Inclusive Childhood Program
Madeline	Female	Inclusive Childhood Program

C. Data Collection

1) Interviewing

I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each of the five PSTs to gather information on their perceptions of preparedness to teach in an inclusive environment. Each of the interviews lasted about an hour. The semi-structured interview enabled me to probe for meaning and clarify questions for respondents, for instance by rephrasing some, or pursuing emerging issues in line with Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2000) idea that a semi-structured interview enables participants to raise and pursue issues and matters that might not have been included in a pre-devised schedule. I used a semi-structured interview guide that allowed for both pre-determined and spontaneous questions. I audio recorded each interview with the participant's consent to capture the full script and to free me to reflect on the course of the interview as I planned for the next line of questioning, as well as to take reflective notes and comments (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2009).

The interview method was appropriate for eliciting the PSTs' perceptions first hand and describing them to understand their feelings of preparedness to teach in an inclusive classroom. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) observed, "interviews are used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 103). The five interviews not only allowed deeper probe and understanding of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007) but also data triangulation that strengthened the reliability and validity of the investigation (Creswell, 2009). The use of multiple sources also enabled

building a logical justification for the themes that emerged (Creswell, 2009) and ensured that biases emanating from one source were overcome by the other.

D. Data Analysis

The data analysis process was ongoing and run concurrently with the progressive collection of data, interpretation and writing of the report as advised by Wiersma and Jurs (2009). This helped me familiarize with data to build better understanding and restructure subsequent interviews by considering emerging issues related to the study. I transcribed all the interviews and then used the Dedoose software to organize the transcribed data into related ideas that were similar in meaning. As recommended by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006), I read through the information carefully to establish the patterns and key ideas, find and cluster the segments that related to one another and organize them into the coding categories. The process of creating codes was a combination of a priori or predetermined codes, based on the theoretical constructs of the study as well as emergent codes. I then clustered the codes that related to each other under six broad themes related to the interview questions. These were perspectives of an inclusive learning environment, a positive learning environment, ability to plan for lessons, instructional strategies, concerns about the program and the general perceptions of preparedness.

I then interpreted the themes with reference to literature to make meaning. It is from these themes that I was able to draw an interpretation or meaning from the data in relation to my research question. The process led to a detailed description in narrative form.

E. Presentation of Findings

In this section I present the findings from the data collected on PSTs' perceptions of their preparedness to teach in an inclusive learning environment. The findings are organized under six themes based on similar or related ideas that were evident when I compared the various data sets. These were perspectives of an inclusive learning environment, positive learning environment, ability to plan for lessons, instructional strategies, concerns about the program and the general perceptions of preparedness.

F. Perspectives of an Inclusive Learning Environment

When asked what came to mind when they thought of an inclusive learning environment, all the participants mainly cited issues around learning ability and disability, as well as cultural diversity. They also minimally discussed social justice when the issue came up.

1) Learning ability and disability

To a large extent, all the participants associated an inclusive classroom with disability issues. They identified learning disability as a major factor in an inclusive learning environment and gave examples like dyslexia, autism, auditory processing disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and physical disabilities as some forms of disability that made some learners

unique and made the class inclusive. In explaining what an inclusive learning environment entailed, Jon spoke of an environment with many kinds of learners and learners with different kinds of disability learning alongside all other learners. Madeline echoed Jon's words in her view that "it's an environment with different kinds of learners, probably with different kinds of disabilities... some may have IEPs¹. I mean, different kinds of learners all learning together." The participants felt that inclusive classrooms comprised learners with and without disability in the same environment and under similar conditions.

Marcelle and Tom also focused on learning abilities such as fast learning as an issue that distinguished learners and created diversity. Tom was of the opinion that classrooms have learners of different learning abilities and styles such as those that work best in groups and others that are more productive individually, or learners who can read above their grade level and others who need help. The participants therefore saw learning in different ways and paces as aspects of diversity and the presence of these learners in the same environment as an element of inclusivity.

2) Cultural diversity

Differences in cultural background was another factor all the participants identified as characteristic of an inclusive classroom. They felt that the diversity of backgrounds made the class an inclusive environment. The participants associated cultural diversity with different cultures and races as was evident in Tom's view that an inclusive classroom could be diverse with students from different cultures and races. Jon added that some of the learners could have difficulties with the dominant language or other aspects of what took place in the classroom.

3) Unclear about social justice

Some of the participants discussed social justice issues but only when I raised it. Their responses were thus hesitant and lacking in detail. When prompted about social justice as an issue in inclusive learning environments, Loreal said, "I think social justice has to do with a situation in which all learners have equal access to resources, and... like they are treated equally regardless of their race or gender." Tom was of a similar opinion only adding that "everything that is done in the classroom should as much as possible be fair to everyone." However, while Loreal and Tom merely gave a general description of what they associated with social justice, Marcelle and Jon discussed it in more detail when probed further, giving examples of what might constitute a social justice issue in a learning environment and possibly what can be done about it.

Marcelle gave the example of a teacher making sentences with young kids and consistently associating some professions like engineering and pilots with males, and teaching with female names as constituting elements of social injustice. She felt that strengthening the stereotypes that engineers and pilots should be male and teachers female could be discriminatory in terms of gender, where certain genders were led to believe they can only be one thing or the other. She felt that how such

¹ Individualized Education Program that requires schools to provide for the individual needs of students and provide accommodations for them

matters are handled could have implications for the inclusive nature of a learning environment. Marcelle therefore saw inclusion in classrooms as also expressed through teachers' constant consciousness of social justice issues.

G. Positive Learning Environment

The participants largely expressed their ability to create a positive learning environment and high expectations for learners in an inclusive learning environment. All had a fairly good idea of what exactly they would do to create a positive learning environment for all the learners. Their ideas revolved mainly around creating comfortable environments for learners with disabilities or teaching in a way that is responsive to culturally diverse learners.

1) Comfortable learning environment

The participants cited ideas like providing assistive technology for learners with physical disabilities to make them comfortable. Tom, for example, talked of ensuring that all those with physical disabilities had all the aid they needed, like equipment to move around and assistive technology like ipads with voice over apps that they could use to research. Madeline was even more elaborate in explaining what she would do to make the learning environment comfortable:

Almost each category of learners requires very specific strategies to be comfortable. For example, for those with learning disabilities, I would suggest strategies like using pictures, diagrams, gestures, manipulatives, and high interest materials to always have their attention. I would also use direct instruction techniques and other methods of questioning that allow for more response opportunities like unison responses, and teach thematically to allow learners to bring together and integrate ideas and make connections.

Like Madeline, Loreal, Jon and Marcelle also cited thematic teaching, connecting different curriculum areas using a common theme to allow learners to synthesize ideas and make connections. Jon gave the following example, "this would be like say young kids focusing on a beach theme learning vocabulary for common objects on the beach, reading books about the beach and perhaps doing beach themed artwork, like drawing painting and stuff."

2) Culturally responsive teaching

The participants saw another aspect of creating a positive environment in catering for the needs of culturally diverse learners, making them feel comfortable. Three participants proposed culturally responsive teaching that they described as using classroom activities that touched on the learners' cultural background. Tom proposed that it is important for the teacher to have an idea of the learners' cultural background and possibly learn a few words of their first languages. He felt that if a teacher learned and used these words occasionally, the new learners would feel at home and learning would be more positive for them. Loreal suggested having the new learners sit with other learners who could speak both their language and English to help with translation, improve interaction and make the learning environment more positive for them. Marcelle for her part proposed activities such as using texts and materials that reflected the learners' culture, and incorporating aspects

like music and artifacts they could relate to. The presence of familiar items and language would make the learners more comfortable and learning more positive for them. Jon and Madeline had similar ideas but referred to them as culture-sensitive teaching.

H. Ability to Plan for Lessons

Another aspect of preparation that emerged in explaining the participants' feeling of preparedness had to do with creating a lesson plan that would adequately cater for an inclusive learning environment. Here, the participants' ideas revolved around planning for differentiated and individual learning, creating accommodations for special needs students and making adaptations to include practical ideas or real-life examples.

1) Differentiated learning

The participants generally felt that a good lesson plan for an inclusive learning environment should as much as possible, plan for delivering the material to each learner's learning style. Their suggestions focused on individualized or differentiated learning. Jon submitted that "Students have diverse levels of expertise and experience with reading, writing, thinking, problem solving, and speaking and therefore need different experiences and tasks to meet their learning needs." This meant that learners with all manner of differences, required different teaching approaches, learning experiences and tasks to improve their learning.

More specifically, Marcelle felt that learners with dyslexia related problems for example, could be given audio books to listen to rather than be exposed to text reading. Madeline added that learners require different amounts of support from the teachers thus the need for individual attention and giving the learners opportunities in a way that is unique to their individual needs. Only Loreal did not expressly talk of individualized instruction but suggested that assistant teachers could attend to learners with individual needs.

2) Provide accommodations

The participants also talked of planning lessons in ways that provided accommodations for learners with special needs. They gave examples of planning for students with IEPs to help them receive individualized attention. Jon cited taking tests in separate rooms for those with attention disorders like ADHD or even getting audio books for those with reading disorders. Tom added that learners could get accommodations like different kinds of assignment if one had difficulty in reading. This meant that some learners could be exempted from the regular assignments and given those within their ability. Loreal expressed the need for assistant teachers to ensure that accommodations were effected for special needs learners and suggested that they could be pulled out of the classroom for extra help. She said, "there is kind of a lot of extra people in the classroom to help them because they are required to get extra assistance like if they need to get pulled out of the classroom to get extra help." Loreal unlike the other participants seemed to factor in some assistance from extra personnel to help the special needs learners.

3) Making adaptations

The participants talked about making adaptations in their

lesson plans to include practical ideas or real-life examples like visual aids, real pictures or real items that could help learners understand concepts better. Tom for example said, “I would make adaptations in my lesson plan to include things like real pictures, and real items that can help the learners understand the concepts in question such as teaching some vocabularies. Loreal also talked of using lots of graphic organizers to help students organize words while Madeline thought that visual sentence starters and verbal prompts would be helpful for learners with learning disabilities. This meant that lesson plans would be adapted to more practical aspects that learners would identify with.

I. Instructional Strategies

The participants expressed several specific examples of instructional strategies they would use in an inclusive learning environment. Strategies such as use of hands-on activities, group work, prompts and use of visual aids in a developmentally appropriate manner featured. Some of the participants also grouped the idea of assessment as part of instructional strategies.

1) Group work

All the participants talked of organizing learners in pairs or small groups for maximum involvement and attention. Loreal said, “you can get groups to work together and give them group projects and come up with a strategy to get everyone involved.” Jon on the other hand suggested that he would alter the way of selecting students to participate in class to avoid calling on one at a time and instead have them respond by telling their partner, writing down or drawing their response. This would in a sense have the learners collaborating in a group.

2) Hands on activities and visual aids

Madeline and Marcelle cited inclusion of hands on activities that allowed learners to work directly with objects and materials. While describing some of the instructional strategies she would use, Madeline explained that she would make the class very tactile and allow the learners to safely touch, taste, smell and see the objects they were discussing or reading about.” In essence the participants felt that it would be helpful to have real items in class and let learners engage with them. Marcelle agreed with this in her opinion that:

At a certain age, like up to 3rd grade, children will learn a lot more if they are exposed to something they can see, touch, taste or smell. For example, if you cut open a fruit or vegetable and give the learners the opportunity to touch, smell, and taste it, they may understand it better than just looking at pictures or listening to an explanation.

Marcelle seemed to think about the developmental appropriateness of the activities.

3) Differentiated assessments

The participants saw assessments as largely embedded in learning and therefore a part of the learning process. Further, the teacher candidates articulated multiple, purpose-driven assessment practices. They suggested that the assessment would also pay attention to learner differences. For example,

Loreal observed that rather than give a student with dyslexia text to read, she would organize assessment that they had to listen to and perhaps respond to questions. She said, “...so in class I would present the assessments in two forms so that those with reading problems can take the audio one. I would also provide visual sentence starters for learners with learning disability and not give the rest.” Tom on his part gave the examples of kinesthetic learners saying they would require assessment that appeals to their kinesthetic nature such as sourcing information online then presenting it in graphic organizers.

The participants, however, admitted it would be challenging to identify some of the special needs of the learners or to cater for all of them. Jon suggested that making versions of assessment that are accessible to the learners with disability but also accessible to everyone else would be one way around having to identify and create unique assessment for each.

J. Concerns about the Program

The participants generally expressed satisfaction with their preparation program which they felt was adequate. From their responses, field placement emerged as an outstanding aspect of the program that played an extremely important role in their preparation and hence perceptions of preparedness. They also identified some specific courses that were very helpful.

1) Field placement helpful

Most of the participants expressed the idea that field placements accorded them the opportunity of some contact with the actual classrooms and they benefitted a lot from the experience of real classrooms, real learners and actual teaching as opposed to most of what they were used to theoretically. Loreal gave the following example:

we went to observe and I could actually see the things we had learned about happening in the classrooms. This was great because it was like applying what I had learned and it was definitely great preparation for me becoming a teacher in future.

Jon added that, “field placement was great because it was like applying what I had learned in the classroom. I was able to share what I had learned and see what was going on in the classroom.” Tom also felt it was an opportunity to try out his role as a teacher and learn more. He said, “when the teacher was busy I was a second hand for those kids because they weren’t just sitting there lost. I was able to help them and answer their questions. I was kind of an assistant teacher in the classroom which was quite interesting. I think I learned a lot.” The participants felt that field placement had given them a great opportunity to see and actualize all they had been learning. They thus felt field placement played a big role in helping them prepare and feel prepared.

2) Some courses helpful

Participants also felt that some courses in the program went a long way in preparing them specifically for inclusive classrooms. Loreal and Madeline cited a specific course in their program, *Perspectives in Disabilities*,² a course they felt was very helpful in learning about specific disabilities that kids had.

² A course with weekly field experience for getting to know a child with a disability

Loreal further observed that the content in the classroom was very helpful because she for example got to learn about IEPs in the class. “The first day I got into the field placement classroom, the teacher said something about IEPs. I wouldn’t have known what that was if I hadn’t learned it in my other class so that was very helpful.” Loreal felt that the content from the course helped her understand issues of inclusion much better.

3) *Social justice issues*

Although the participants to a large extent felt satisfied with the program, they all raised the issue of social justice, now that I had mentioned it earlier, and expressed the need for the program to highlight social justice issues in a stronger way. Marcelle was of the opinion that the program needed a stronger component on identifying social justice issues and ensuring they are addressed in learning environments. When asked what would be done better in their preparation program to prepare for inclusive learning environments, Jon said, “I personally think that the program is great. May be a bit more can be done about dealing with social justice issues but I think the program is generally okay.” Jon seemed to feel that the program was satisfactory although a little more could be done about social justice issues. Essentially, the participants felt their program was good save for the issue of social justice that they did not feel confident about.

K. *General Feeling of Preparedness*

I also examined the participants directly on how prepared they generally felt for inclusive learning environments. Although all the PSTs felt prepared, they expressed the need for ongoing professional development to enable them keep translating the knowledge they had into practical skills for the varied classroom contexts. Madeline captured the feeling thus:

I think the program is great. I can’t say we have learned everything but it is a great step towards our preparation. I think being out there in the field will give us much more daily experience. And perhaps a little more training once in a while.

Prodded further on what she meant by training she cited examples like workshops and professional development opportunities that would keep them growing. Tom for his part felt fairly well prepared but acknowledged there was still more to come in the student teaching component and a lot more experience to gain when he finally got to actual teaching. This means that although the PSTs generally felt prepared, they also saw a need for continuous learning.

4. Discussion

While the findings on the PSTs’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach in an inclusive learning environment were consistent with findings from previous and related studies, some of the findings ran contrary to findings of previous studies. The results showed that the PSTs largely thought of an inclusive learning environment in terms of learning ability and disability, and cultural diversity. The prominence of learning ability and disability in the participants’ views was probably due to emphasis of these aspects in their teacher education program as cited by some PSTs. In addition to disability, their views on diversity revolved mainly around the cultural and

linguistic background of learners, a fairly narrow perspective. This is, however, not uncommon with PSTs. Sharma et al. (2016), while investigating how teacher educators’ knowledge about diversity was viewed and integrated into teacher training literacy programs, found that teacher candidates’ understandings of diversity tended to be along the lines of race and ethnicity and were less likely to include other dimensions like religion or sexual orientation. This means that the participants’ perspective of an inclusive learning environment may have left out some categories of learners thus making any perceptions of preparedness problematic.

The findings suggested that social justice was not a major aspect of an inclusive classroom environment for the PSTs and only came up occasionally in the discussions when prompted. The PSTs were generally not very conscious of social justice issues and by extension, did not feel fully prepared to teach for social justice. This was probably due to the little emphasis accorded issues of social justice in teacher education programs. Zeichner (2016), in his article on advancing social justice and democracy in teacher education in the United States, observed that teacher education programs claiming the mantle of social justice often failed to practice what they preached. They did not tackle social justice matters in the way they claimed it should be done. PSTs therefore ended up with little practical experience on matters of social justice.

Generally, the rather narrow perspective of diversity and the lack of consciousness on social justice issues suggested that PSTs in the context of the study were only partly aware of what an inclusive learning environment entailed. This resonated with Hettiarachchi and Das’ (2014) finding, while exploring PSTs’ perceptions of inclusion and its applicability, that teachers often lack clarity in their conceptualization of inclusion and complexities associated with it. The participants, therefore, felt only partly prepared to work in an inclusive learning environment

As far as creating a positive learning environment goes, the results showed that the PSTs seemed to have a good stock of ideas as to what they would do to make the learning environment comfortable for all learners and thus felt prepared. They did not however express any ideas on issues of social justice meaning they were probably not going to cater for them. In addition, Ruppar, Neepor and Dalsen, (2016) found that teachers assigned to positions serving students with severe disabilities, generally felt unprepared for using assistive technology to make learning more comfortable. The perceptions of preparedness and the many specific ideas the participants had were therefore probably due to emphasis on special education in their specific program, contrary to Gately and Hammer’s (2005) idea that theoretical knowledge in best practices to meet special education needs are not adequately addressed in teacher preparation programs.

Although it emerged from the findings that PSTs felt prepared to create a positive learning environment for culturally diverse learners judging by the measures they suggested, studies (Causey, Thomas & Armento 2000; Kea, Trent & Davis 2002; Siwatu 2011) revealed that PSTs often only felt prepared for culturally responsive teaching in school contexts that were

minimally culturally and linguistically diverse. They felt that these contexts came with less complexities such as the obligation to understand and appreciate a variety of cultures. The PSTs may have felt prepared because perhaps they had not been exposed to the full range of complexities that come with a culturally diverse environment.

The findings also revealed that the PSTs generally felt that a good lesson plan for an inclusive classroom should as much as possible, plan for delivering the material to each learner's learning style. This was despite Ruppar, Neeper and Dalsen's (2016) finding that many teachers felt unprepared to incorporate the universal design for learning that provided for the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences. Although the PSTs may have felt prepared based on the ideas they gave, they approached the lesson plan issue in a rather general sense and it was not clear how some of the ideas would be implemented. For example, the responses were inconclusive on how they would cater for many learning styles alongside creating unique learning experiences and tasks for each learner.

Although choosing suitable instructional strategies, grouping and assessing learners have ranked low among PSTs' perceptions of preparedness in a number of activities that constitute teaching (Housego, 1990), the results of the study showed that the PSTs seemed to have ideas about some specific strategies they would use in an inclusive learning environment. While a lot more detail was necessary, the PSTs' knowledge of specific instructional strategies to some extent justified their perceptions of preparedness. This was in line with Nutter's (2011) suggestion that a good knowledge of instructional strategies and a higher skill level in instructional strategies probably led to better attitudes towards learners with disability and subsequently, perceptions of preparedness to teach. Strategies such as use of hands on activities, group work, prompts and use of visual aids in a developmentally appropriate manner featured. The PSTs saw assessments as largely embedded in learning and therefore a part of the learning process. Like in DeLuca and Chi Yan Lam's (2014) study on teacher candidates' conceptualizations of the meeting point between assessment and diversity, the teacher candidates were beginning to link assessment concepts such as assessment and learning together. Further, the teacher candidates articulated multiple, purpose-driven assessment practices.

According to the findings, the PSTs showed some satisfaction in their preparation program and this probably influenced their feeling of preparedness. Field placement and student teaching for example, played a big role in helping them feel prepared. This was consistent with Brown, Lee and Collins (2015) findings that PSTs' sense of efficacy and preparedness increases significantly with student teaching and that the opportunity to observe how an experienced teacher teaches and manages a classroom is the most beneficial part of student teaching. The PSTs also attributed their perceptions of preparedness to specific courses in their program. They largely felt well prepared and that the program had prepared them well except for the issue of social justice. The element of self-doubt as far as the social justice issue was concerned showed that the

PSTs did not however feel fully prepared to work in an inclusive learning environment.

Overall, the PSTs felt prepared but expressed a need for constant professional development, a feeling that was not isolated. While investigating perceptions of personal preparedness to teach among graduating PSTs from an Australian university, Crosswell and Beutel (2012) found that whereas the PSTs felt prepared to teach, they wanted on-going professional learning opportunities to gather practical strategies to assist them in the day-to-day business of teaching. It is clear therefore that the participants only partly felt prepared to work in an inclusive learning environment, probably with perceptions of inadequacy in certain aspects. It is common for PSTs to feel prepared in only certain aspects of teaching and not others. For example, in a study on student teachers in a southwestern university in Canada, Housego (1990) found that after only five weeks of coursework, students felt adequately prepared in general tasks of fitting into the setting as a teacher, designing and using questions as part of instruction, and encouraging pupils. On the other hand, they felt least prepared to deal with classroom behavior problems, to group and to assess learners, and to choose suitable teaching methods.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore PSTs' perceptions of their preparedness to teach in an inclusive learning environment. Based on the results of the study, the PSTs felt fairly well prepared. For example, participants expressed relative comfort in creating a positive learning environment, planning for lessons and designing instructional strategies for an inclusive learning environment. However, a closer look at some of the responses they gave showed a lack of depth and specifics about activities they would undertake in an inclusive learning environment.

For example, while at face value the responses and examples they gave suggested they could effectively plan for a lesson in an inclusive class and create a positive learning environment, specifics as to how they would cater for all the different learners simultaneously were lacking. In addition, the participants felt inadequately prepared in matters such as how to address issues of social justice. This showed that although the PSTs felt well prepared to teach in an inclusive learning environment, there were elements of self-doubt and it would be safe to say that the PSTs did not feel fully prepared to teach in an inclusive learning environment.

It is therefore debatable whether these PSTs were actually prepared, besides their own perceptions. It would be a good idea then to follow the PSTs to the classroom in subsequent studies to establish if they were actually prepared. This would present an opportunity, using a wider range of methodology, to study the participants' ideas in practice and make sense of whether they were prepared as they felt.

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