CURQ Vignettes

Special Education Collaboration: Undergraduates Provide Voice and Perspective for Students and Families Living with Disabilities

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Our special education course on collaboration and development of individual education plans has been instrumental in affording our undergraduate students the opportunity to collaborate and build partnerships in the field, increasing their skills in qualitative research. Every student is required to engage in field research and spend time with a family that has a child with a disability. Each student chooses a case-study family based on a particular interest he or she has in the field. The students clarify their conceptual framework, decide on what qualitative design to use, develop research questions and conceptualize problems, and collect and organize their own data. Ultimately, the students put their findings in writing and share them with the family studied, faculty members, and their fellow classmates. Some of the students publish and present their findings at educational events and conferences. These collaborative experiences benefit everyone involved, as well as the university and the field of disability study at large.

The current statistics on disabilities, albeit important, do not convey the human impact of the disability. Therefore, the collaborative partnerships our students form with families dealing with disabilities provide a voice for the children and their families living twenty-four hours a day with a disability. This is what Featherstone (1989) terms “a people’s scholarship”—a study in which “scientific facts gathered in the field give voice to a people’s experience.”

After spending time with each family and collecting data for their case studies, students analyze data, individually and then in groups, to identify significant statements, code data, and eventually discover emerging themes. They seek inter-rater reliability and report the results.

The study consisted of the families of seven females and 13 males, aged five to 53 years, whose primary disabilities included intellectual disabilities (ID), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as shown in Table 1. Three of the six individuals with ADHD had a secondary diagnosis of a specific learning disability (SLD), and one also had a mild intellectual disability. One individual qualified as having Asperger’s Syndrome, and two others had a pervasive developmental disorder.

Table 1. Participants: Individuals with Disabilities

		Male	Female
		N=13	N=7
Primary Disability	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	4	2
	Autism Spectrum Disorder	5	1
	Intellectual Disability	4	4
Age	0 – 5 years	0	1
	6 – 10 years	6	0
	11 – 15 years	2	1
	16-20	5	2
	21-25	0	2
	>26	0	1

Not only does engaging in action research provide valuable experience in collecting and analyzing data, but students gained invaluable insights that they can implement to better collaborate with the families and children they will serve during their teaching careers (Rogers 2007). Through interviews and discussions, students learned that families experience a wide range of emotions when their child is first diagnosed with a disability including, most commonly, sadness, fear, guilt, and hopelessness. For example, the mother of a child with ADHD, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and a mild intellectual disability said, “I felt as if I had done something wrong or let my daughter down when she was diagnosed at age eight.” A mother of a nine-year-old boy with autism reported, “I feel fear every day; it’s the not knowing. ... You do not know what autism will dish out day to day.” A mother of a six-year-old boy with autism lamented, “I think I was mourning the loss of the child I thought I would have. As any parent, I had dreams of the star athlete or scholar, and now I had to let go of those dreams.” Finally, hopelessness came through in a quote from a mother of an eighteen-year-old with an intellectual disability who said, “I felt so alone, like no one was on my side. I wanted him to go to the same school as his siblings, but the district was very small, and they didn’t think they could educate him. I became hopeless.” Although far fewer, some families also expressed feelings of anger, frustration, and denial. Conversely, some parents also described more positive emotions, including relief, hope, and purpose. From the results, pre-service teachers developed greater empathy for families and ascertained practices that they would need to employ to better meet the needs of the families and students.

While many of the families in the study reported positive experiences with schools, teachers, and service providers, our students also learned best practices from parental reports of negative experiences. The results of this study demonstrated overwhelmingly that families value communication, understanding, support systems, and non-academic experiences as part of the collaboration between families and schools.

Each student's case study highlighted the strengths, needs, challenges, hopes, and the fears of each family. Their findings were authentic, multifaceted, intimate, and holistic. As Donlevy (2001, 8) has said, "In special education, the most significant variables have little to do with curriculum details and mandated exams; they have everything to do with the lived experience of important human relationships." This means building a relationship of trust between the student, the parent, and the teacher for every child. Special education is a dynamic and diverse field, and professionals, teachers, students, and parents are desperately seeking best practices to meet the needs of those with disabilities. We hope the collaborative efforts of our education students are helping to fill voids in the research, discourse, and practices that in due course will benefit children with disabilities and their families.

References

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doi: 10.18833/curq/36/4/18

A Distributed REU Site Focused on Serving Physics and Astronomy Students from Comprehensive and Community Colleges

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This project sought to provide students with their first faculty-mentored research experience. The principal difference between this National Science Foundation (NSF) Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) initiative and the more traditional, single-campus physics and astronomy REU is that our program used a distributed model with students conducting their research at different institutions across the nation. Seven universities participated in hosting REU students during the program, including Central Washington University (CWU), College of Charleston, Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, SUNY-Geneseo, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Weber State University, and Wright State University.

The CUR Physics and Astronomy (CURPA) Division's distributed REU had some features that resemble those found in a traditional, single-institution REU and others that are not.

1. As with a traditional REU, the CURPA program featured faculty mentors who were seasoned researchers. Most had significant experience mentoring undergraduates, including students in their early years of college. Faculty members without prior mentoring experience were coached by experienced faculty.
2. CURPA REU undergraduates joined two learning communities: other students in the CURPA REU cohort and students at each host site supported by other programs. Thus all CURPA students had on-campus peers with whom they could work and interact. CURPA REU students "networked" with one another electronically throughout the summer, in much the same way that today's large-scale research groups communicate (e.g., webinars and email). All CURPA students participated in an end-of-summer, face-to-face multiday networking experience at the principal investigator's campus, Central Washington University, an activity identified by other programs as necessary and important (Hubenthal and Judge 2013).
3. Participants received feedback from their immediate supervisor and from the broad array of faculty and students participating in the project. This exposed partic-