


Chapter 32

Finding Their Voice: Action Research and Autoethnography in Inclusive Teacher Preparation

Bethany M. Rice

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6702-9073>

Endicott College, USA

ABSTRACT

Disability studies seeks to promote equitable education for all students through inclusive education. According to Goodley, disability is multifaceted—being political, cultural, and social in nature. Inclusive education is often underrepresented in teacher preparation. Teacher candidates need experience in providing instruction to all students, not just those considered “normal.” In their research on the use of autoethnography with teacher candidates, Rice and Threlkeld identified that while candidates saw a need for social justice, they lacked the necessary skills to take action. Combining autoethnography with action research would fill a void in the field of inclusive teacher preparation. The critical reflection used in autoethnography would potentially identify areas of social justice needed to improve inclusive practices in the classroom. Candidates would then have an opportunity to engage in action research to explore their identified topic. This chapter proposes a method to combine autoethnography and action research to impact social change among teacher candidates.

INTRODUCTION

Disability Studies seeks to promote equitable education for all students through the notion of inclusive education. According to Goodley (2012), disability is a multifaceted phenomenon being political, cultural, and social in nature. As such, pre-service teachers need a comprehensive experience in providing instruction to many students, not just those considered “normal.” Inclusive education works to place the focus on the barriers students face rather than problematizing the student, as is often the case (Cosier & Pearson, 2016). However, in general, teacher preparation programs vastly neglect Disability Studies and inclusive education in the curriculum (Pearson, Cosier et al., 2016). Some programs spend one course

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discussing inclusive education, while others spread the information over several courses, but usually only as part of one unit. While this is a positive first step, it is not sufficient to meet the needs of all students in our classrooms. On the whole, I argue that teacher education programs neglect to dig deeply into the theories, practices, and issues of social justice related to inclusive education.

In my experience, most teacher preparation programs fail to prepare teachers to meet the needs of all students. Teacher candidates may learn about concepts such as Universal Design for Learning and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), but do not learn the why behind them or how to implement them with fidelity. According to Cosier and Pearson (2016), “teachers leave their preparation programs with limited views of issues related to disability, language, culture, and poverty as they relate to students and their parents.” This leads to grave consequences for some students, mainly those who do not resemble their teacher. This is further complicated in that despite diversity growth amongst students in socioeconomics, race, ethnicity and religion, diversity among teachers is vastly underrepresented in schools (Starr, 2010).

Social justice in inclusive education begins with deep analysis of beliefs and practices before teachers enter the classroom as full time educators. It begins in teacher preparation programs, while candidates are well supported through coursework, mentoring, and field-based practicum experiences. In higher education, there is an opportunity to lay the foundation for an inclusive education framework for equitable instruction and social justice in schools worldwide.

CHALLENGES WITHIN ONE TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

Preparing informed, inclusively aware teacher candidates is at the heart of the teacher education program. Over the past year, Endicott College has undergone significant curricular change in the Graduate College to respect and demonstrate these beliefs. While the program is driven by the Massachusetts State Licensure Standards, several opportunities exist within the curriculum to address inclusive education practices, critical self-reflection, and social justice. Yet, despite these initial efforts, important work remains.

Before the curricular changes, teacher candidates engaged in reflective practice frequently. A resounding trend emerged as the reflections were analyzed for quality and impact on classroom practice. The reflections tended to be self-centric, recounts of the teaching day or a description of student issues. While candidates were reflecting, there was little or no impact on practice. To combat this issue, autoethnography was introduced into the curriculum as a way to promote critical reflection.

All teacher candidates take either the *Inclusive Education* or the *Writing Instruction* courses as part of their preparation program. These courses were selected, as it was a way to ensure that all teacher candidates would experience this curriculum. Candidates in the program must take one or the other as a required course in the program of study. In addition, all teacher candidates, aside from those seeking professional licensure, are required to complete practicum hours in the classroom through a field-based experience. Professional licensure candidates do take one of the courses listed above, but due to already holding an initial license, these candidates do not need to complete additional practicum hours.

In the *Inclusive Education* and *Writing Instruction* courses, teacher candidates learn about and generate an autoethnography. Students learn about the art of autoethnography, the purpose behind writing one, and generate their own piece of writing. Direct instruction is provided through guided readings, discussions, and weekly writing exercises. Students can opt to share their writing with their instructors for research purposes, but regardless of their decision, all students complete the assignment as a course requirement.

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