

Session Title: The Impact of Siblings with Disabilities on Individuals Pursuing a Career in Special Education

Description of Session: This session presents findings from a project that examined the impact of a person's experience growing up with a sibling with a significant disability and that person's decision to work in special education and their views on educational practice.

The Impact of Siblings with Disabilities on Individuals Pursuing a Career in Special Education

It is well known that growing up with a sibling who has a significant disability has an impact on the non-disabled sibling, both positive and negative (Beckman, 2002; Fisman, Wolf, Ellison, & Freeman, 2000; Gans, 1997; McHugh, 2003). In fact, the concern for siblings has also been a specific focus for sibling support groups and agencies serving families of children with disabilities (Gallagher et al., 2000; Powell & Gallagher, 1993). Our project was particularly interested in how this sibling experience influenced pre-service special educators. We speculated that some siblings may choose to enter the field of special education in an effort to improve the special education system. So, despite the prevalence of literature on siblings that have focused on the potential negative impacts on siblings who are asked to take on more responsibility for the sibling who has a significant disability (Powell & Gallagher, 1993), there are many who have decided to use that experience to positively influence their career choice. We believe these individuals have a unique perspective that others can learn from.

Our research project focused on the following questions:

1. How have siblings with significant disabilities affected their nondisabled brothers' or sisters' lives in regards to their decision to become a special educator?
2. How has having a sibling with a significant disability influenced these siblings' teaching philosophies, view of special education, and their vision for special education (i.e., inclusion, teaching models, social opportunities, behavior and classroom management)?
3. What do these siblings identify as the most important educational needs for students receiving special education services?
4. How has being a sibling influenced their reactions or views of pre-service teacher training programs? What would they recommend to pre-service teacher training programs in special education?
5. What can the field of special education learn from the perspectives of the siblings of brothers and sisters who have a significant disability?

This research project was conducted by three undergraduate pre-service students with support by a faculty mentor at Northern Arizona University. The pre-service students are dual majors in the Elementary and Special Education program; two of us are siblings of a person who has a significant disability.

This one-hour group presentation will highlight the key findings from a qualitative study that included a series of interviews and focus groups with other siblings in the pre-service dual major education program at Northern Arizona University. We will present the findings from our project and then invite session attendees to share their experiences, particularly those who are siblings of a brother or sister with a significant disability. We believe this presentation will provide others with an understanding of how to use what we have learned to improve teacher education and how to encourage others who have siblings with disabilities to pursue a career in the special education field.

References

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