

Cycling Paths For Mentor Teachers: Building Successful Paths For Student Teachers With Disabilities



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ABSTRACT

This article chronicles the path of a student teacher with a disability and the efforts of his mentoring teacher and university supervisor to assist him in learning how to teach. The researcher interprets journal entries made by both the mentor and the student teacher as well as conversations, conferences and communications with each of them in order to construct eight steps along the path to build successful educational experiences for beginning teachers with disabilities.

In the fall of 1999, a Special Education mentor teacher with fifteen years of experience agreed to supervise Phil through his student teaching experience at an elementary school in eastern Montana. She knew that she had a considerable challenge ahead. Phil was a delightful pre-service teacher who had cerebral palsy. His academic record was excellent and he had an admirable work ethic. His university advisor, in collaboration with his mentoring teacher, offered Phil an internship for a full academic year prior to his student teaching because he had special social needs. These professionals needed to prepare Phil to work with the school community and they needed to prepare the school community to work with Phil. As an intern he was well prepared, worked hard and expressed a fervent desire to become a teacher. As his student teaching approached this researcher asked the mentor teacher and Phil to journal their progress through the semester which eventually became a year of student teaching for him. This researcher has interpreted journal entries from both sources to provide the following helpful hope-

ful hints for those university professors and public school teachers who are supervising student teachers with disabilities.

1. Check your attitude: The mentor teacher reported that she needed to change her attitude about student teachers with disabilities. She, like so many others, found herself wondering, "I'm not sure he can make it." She faced the sobering reality that she had preconceived ideas about the limitations of an individual with cerebral palsy even though she was a Special Education teacher! This pathway had to be cleared before she could create an atmosphere of confidence for her student teacher. As time went on, Phil's caring, perseverance, determination, and unbelievable dedication was very apparent. He did not look at his multitude of disabilities as a handicap; rather this was a part of him a unique part of his identity.

In researching the area of educators with disabilities, the area of job placement for this group of minorities is under represented. (Keller, Karp, and Somali, 1992). This is due in part to

our perception of these individuals. Wendell J. Lewis is an administrator for the Disability Determination Referral and Services. He is an African-American man with muscular dystrophy. In an interview addressing the perception of label he said, "The majority of non-disabled people view persons with disabilities as needing help, they cannot do anything for themselves, and they cannot accomplish much." (Obiakor, 1994)

This quote brought to mind Phil's response to this researcher's inquiry, "How was your junior field experience? What do you feel you would like to learn more about?" His response was, "I feel I didn't get as much as I would have liked... My mentor teacher felt she had to pull my chair out for me." The negative impact that the environment plays in these individuals' lives was becoming clear. "A more educationally-relevant conceptualization of self concept of persons with disabilities is that self concept is multidimensional and situation-specific. It changes as contexts change (Obiakor & Algozzine, 1994). This was a grand opportunity for the mentor to be a part of special education coming full circle, and she was courageous to be a part of this experience. Phil had so much to offer, coupled with an intense desire to succeed and each participant wanted to do everything to facilitate his growth. Phil's journal was abundant with learning experiences he had with individual students. He cited examples of his successes and expressed excitement and anticipation in his journey to become a teacher.

2. Identify the characteristic strengths, and weaknesses. The first step is to begin creating an informal Individualized Educational Plan, with long term goals, short term objectives, and modifications, adaptations, and accommodations:

a) Daily observations revealed that Phil was a loner, very affable always smiling, but always on the outside looking in. He had limited eye contact and seemed set apart.

b) The physical set up of the classroom had to be modified to meet Phil's specific needs

c) Unique health related situations required modifications of program assignments

Even though he demonstrated very capable teaching skills, Phil was not assigned to the fourth grade collaborative which had been originally planned. This class was located on the third floor of a ninety year old building which meant he would have to climb six flights of stairs several times a day. Arrangements were also made for his work area to accommodate his unique physical needs for his individualized groups of learners.

Each student teacher acquires his/her teaching skills at varying rates. For Phil, it was evident that the higher level modeling was not working. He was not able to make the transfer from theory to practice. He needed to have the components of teaching a lesson broken down into small increments. The mentor initially asked Phil to write extensive thorough lesson plans for each lesson. Phil had the typical difficulties that most student teachers have: pacing the lesson, redirecting questions for clarity, monitoring students work, classroom management, time management, and transitions. His mentor modeled the lesson to have him complete the lesson with the assignment and assessment. This would carryover and proved successful for one or two lessons, and then they would be back at the beginning.

The mentor teacher found some success in attempting a multisensory team approach to assist Phil in making the transition from theory to practice. She used cooperative planning, team teaching, and shared responsibilities as strategies.

Phil was open to all assistance. At times he expressed self doubt in his journal. He was however eternally positive and willing to work. Giving up was not an option.

3. Encourage autonomy At times the mentor teacher expressed frustration indicating she had offered her student teacher all she knew. Her next pathway was allowing for him to head down the path alone. She needed to step back to allow for stumbles, bumps, and falls. This was very difficult for her. She watched her student teacher fail and she didn't understand what was happening. After they had worked so hard neither could understand what was wrong.

Phil's journal expressed profound appreciation for all that he was learning. He had no idea the job of learning to teach would be so complicated.

4. Work Closely With College Supervisor

The University link is the first contact students make and sometimes the strongest and most helpful. This researcher knew this student and his areas of strengths/weaknesses and characteristics. This writer knew Phil and his great determination, brightness, and genuine love for teaching. She also knew he had limited exposure to working with children, and would need additional experiences. This researcher introduced the mentor teacher to Phil one full year before he would actually student teach. As Phil's professor in Curriculum Theory and Design class, the writer suggested an internship in the spring before he would begin his student teaching. Phil had the need for more experience and exposure in an educational setting. This writer had not been assigned Phil as a student teacher, however, she volunteered her time, guidance, and support which was in addition to her required class load. Her thinking was that Phil would need the supervision of one who already knew him, allowing for a consistent, supportive follow through.

Oftentimes the university link is the oil that kept our cycles running. To guide the mentor and Phil it was necessary to be in close contact with them at least once a week and sometimes more often. The mentor teacher knew the writer's schedule to often work in the office on Sunday afternoons, and she would feel the need to consult with the writer so she included the campus as a route on her jogging runs. When the mentor realized Phil needed to become more independent, he still was not making the connections and was not successful, she called for help. "I don't know if I understand what is happening. What am I supposed to do now? In the same breath she would say, *I'm not giving up!!!*"

The mentor teacher and the writer went back to the original pathway. They refocused as they examined Phil's style of learning and the patterns he exhibited. Phil needed to fail before he could succeed. He also had difficulty generaliz-

ing his teaching skills. Versatility and flexibility were difficult for him. Most special students learn best in a structured environment. Often changes of any sort would throw them off balance. This pattern was recognizable in Phil. He was not able to make transitions easily because they would throw him off his course.

5. Adjust time frames as needed Again, the guidance of the university supervisor was needed to balance the emotion and the academic issues. Their journey to date had not been typical, and so was the time line. They could see that Phil was making gains yet he was neither ready nor prepared for his own classroom. He needed more teaching time with time to cover IEP's, testing, CST's and conferencing with parents. The University agreed to extend Phil's assignment as a student teacher. Each agreed Phil needed to student teach for an additional semester.

Phil faced this reality squarely. He knew he was beginning to learn how to teach and he needed more time to do so. His journal reflected the fact that the pressure was lifted when his student teaching assignment was extended.

6. Monitor progress carefully The mentor teacher's journal reflections helped to put Phil's growth into a time line. She could see areas that needed readdressing. She required that Phil write his lesson plans in detail. He reflected daily both verbally and in writing to determine his perceptions about his teaching and progress. She requested that he indicate his concerns, celebrations, and new goals. There were times when both Phil and his mentor knew his teaching was not going well but they didn't know what to do to change. Transitioning and behavior management were the two most difficult areas for Phil. Again, the university supervisor's assistance was needed. As an experienced student teacher supervisor the writer pinpointed these areas and developed a graph that was utilized in determining when/where Phil had the most difficulty. From there behavior plans were developed and additional strategies were included. One final area needed to be addressed. Phil still had difficulty building a student/teacher relationship in

his elementary classroom placement. The Special Education mentor teacher, Phil's fourth grade classroom teacher, the university supervisor and Phil met to discuss this issue. This group had been working so diligently on his weak areas that they had not considered his greatest strength, his unique sense of humor and Phil was an incredible story teller.

Once they utilized this strength along with addressing his unique disability, the students started to become comfortable around him. Phil's mentoring teacher during his elementary placement gathered the students and Phil around in a sharing circle. Phil told about his disability. A miraculous bonding occurred. Soon, they were "his class" and he was "their teacher." He enjoyed telling them about goals he had set and achieved. He continued to be an inspiration for the professionals who worked with him. This was a breakthrough for all. The children began to ask Phil to play basketball with them at lunch. He jumped rope with his class at recess. Phil was becoming a teacher who had unique abilities to offer his students and the school.

Phil's journal was filled with joyous comments about his relationships with his students, observing their learning, and the delight of a job well done. He was confident he could succeed.

7. Create various evaluation techniques

Typically the mentor would observe and evaluate her student teacher three times during the teaching time. In Phil's case she needed to find additional ways to address and evaluate the progress he was making. She needed to find meaningful avenues that would evaluate specifically each objective that he was addressing. She technically observed Phil six times. Each time she held a pre conference, where they discussed the objective she observed and the procedure to be used and a post conference with Phil to discuss how the lesson went, including strengths, weaknesses, and areas that needed improvement. She invented a variety of methods to gather data: Pattern analysis -she video taped Phil twice; SCORE- she charted the verbal flow in his reading group and scripted him. She required that Phil evaluate himself before she would. Phil was

an excellent self-evaluator. This proved to be a very necessary component for his growth.

8. Encourage hope for the future This journey was not yet completed. Phil's teacher was certain that he could indeed teach because he passed formal evaluations, met personal goals, and been affirmed by the students. One final lap still remained. His mentor needed to prepare him for the interviewing process, possible questions, scenarios, and situations. The university supervisor again was the link. She notified Phil when public school representatives were coming to the university to interview potential teachers. She strongly encouraged Phil to sign up. They were back to square one. As a resource team; the Special Education mentor along with her two teaching assistants gave Phil several mock interviews.

Phil successfully completed his student teaching in a Special Education resource room and in a fourth grade elementary classroom. He had earned his degree, with certification to teach both elementary and special education.

Teaching colleagues at the university and in this elementary school agreed that this fine young man taught them more about teaching than they taught him. He helped them and their students realize the importance of setting goals and never giving up. He looked on the bright side of life. They concluded that this outstanding beginning teacher would be an asset to any faculty.

They had the great pleasure of receiving a call a principal of a rural elementary school in Montana in August 2000 where Phil had applied for a teaching position. Each of them confirmed Phil's skills and later learned he was hired for this teaching position. He completed his second year of successful teaching and went on to apply for graduate school to earn his Master's degree in Special Education Administration.

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