Teacher Perceptions of Students’ Understanding of Their Own Disability

Authors
Tammy V. Abernathy, Associate Professor of Special Education, University of Nevada, Reno
Shanon S. Taylor, Assistant Professor of Special Education, University of Nevada, Reno

Purpose
The aim of this study was to examine teachers’ perceptions regarding students’ knowledge of their learning disability. This study also sought to identify what teachers tell their students about their learning disability, and what specific actions they take to help students understand their disability and how it affects their academic, social and emotional lives. A mixed-method survey was used towards these ends.

The Article
The ability to teach students the skills considered to comprise a self-determined individual is a key characteristic of any special education teacher. The authors suggest that in order to convey self-determination skills, teachers must first be able to teach students about their learning disability. However, there existed a gap in the body of research relating to how special education teachers promote self-determination skills in their students. Therefore, this study was undertaken to fill that gap and better understand how teachers promote these vital skills. Special education teachers from the second largest school district in the state were mailed a survey that included both open and closed questions. Results indicate that teachers often speak in jargon and euphemism to children with disabilities. They also tend to deflect the responsibility of teaching students about their disability to parents and the children themselves. Furthermore, although the surveyed teachers are aware of activities that promote self-determination, they failed to implement them appropriately. In general, this study highlights a significant area of need within teacher education.

What this Means for the Field
The results of this study indicate that current pre-service self-determination programs have not adequately prepared special education teachers for promoting effective self-determination skills amongst their students. The special education teachers surveyed seemed to lack the ability to communicate honestly about how their students’ disabilities manifested themselves in academic and social situations. Therefore, pre-service and in-service teacher education programs need to make teachers aware of and encourage communication skills that allow them to comfortably talk to students about the nature of their disability and how it affects their lives.

Citation

Contact
Dr. Tammy Abernathy: tammy@unr.edu; 775-682-7862 or visit www.unr.edu/education