

Results of a Disability Awareness Assignment Conducted with Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Being contentious of the treatment of individuals with disabilities is especially important for teacher education students beginning their careers within diverse classrooms. With mainstream society views of disabilities, it appears as though people have become desensitized to the treatment and interactions of individuals with disabilities. This article will describe the results of a study regarding a disability awareness assignment completed by teacher education students in a required special education course. Students kept a written log over the course of five consecutive days in which to record their awareness of services and treatment of individuals with disabilities in their daily lives.

Approximately 54 million people living in communities throughout the United States have a disability. Currently, one in five people have a disability, and the number continues to grow (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). The increasing rate of disabilities is due to advances in neonatal medicine (Himmelstein, Woolhandler, & Wolfe, 1992), advances in emergency medicine and trauma care (Shapiro, 1993), aging of the population (Galambos & Rosen, 2000), people with disabilities living longer (White, 2002), liberalization and expansion of the definition of disability (Goggin & Newell, 2003).), and more accurate counting (Yelin, 1992).

Each one of us may be susceptible to acquiring a disability at any time during our lifetime. Because of this, we all must extend rights to those who are excluded because of

stereotypes, fears, and stigmas. It is critically important society view and identify those with disabilities as contributing citizens with value. No longer should one be stigmatized, isolated, marginalized and in many instances, abused or mistreated because of a disability (Engel & Munger, 2003).

As university faculty, we believe we have a responsibility and an opportunity to shape the way citizens understand and treat people with disabilities. Understanding and advocating for appropriate treatment of individuals is important in all professional walks of life. However, it is especially important for future teachers because they have the potential to positively influence the way in which students with disabilities are viewed and treated in classrooms by their peers and by other adults.

Consequently, the purpose of this article is to describe the results of a study regarding a disability awareness assignment completed by teacher education students in a required special education course. Specifically, students were asked to keep a written log over the course of five consecutive days in which to record their awareness of services and treatment of individuals with disabilities (both positive and negative) in their daily lives.

Rationale for the Study

One need only read a newspaper, watch television, listen to the radio, or shop at the local supermarket, to realize that individuals with disabilities are sometimes mistreated, misunderstood, lack access to appropriate services, and are the victims of societal prejudice and discrimination. Fortunately, in most cases, people with disabilities are treated fairly, are recognized as individuals separate from their disability, receive appropriate services, and are not victims of prejudice and discrimination. The following incidents depict both negative and positive treatment of individuals with disabilities.

Negative Treatment

According to the Dallas Morning News, six employees of the Corpus Christi State School were charged with misconduct for forcing “disabled” residents into “fight club” style brawls and recording them on their cell phone cameras. Similar incidents of abuse have been reported at other state institutions. These incidents have caused great concern as lawmakers begin to debate on how to reform state schools, which have been criticized by the U.S. Department of Justice for systematic abuse, neglect, and other civil rights violations (Ramshaw, 2009).

Likewise, the mother of a child with special needs wrote a complaint to the editor of a local newspaper in which she called for an elimination of the term “retards” in response to a previous article in which a columnist had used the term to depict persons who did not vote the way the columnist deemed appropriate. The mother claimed that adults need to set good examples for children at home, in public, and in their deeds and writings. Also, while it may be easier to excuse a child who called her son an incomprehensible word, it was harder for her to excuse adults who know better. In her final statement, the mother stated that “words are powerful and can hurt” (Stover, 2008, p. 5). Atkin, Smith, McFeters, and Ferguson (2008) stated that newspapers are dominant sources of health information and can often define the publics’ view disabled people.

Positive Treatment

The Fort Worth Star Telegram reported on a University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) program to help veterans who suffer from various difficulties; some problems may be social, some emotional, or some financial. The article makes the public aware of the plight many veterans face after returning home from serving their country. Furthermore, the American Council on Education has established a veteran's initiative to help schools reach out and educate officials on the GI Bill that can provide assistance to returning veterans (Vaughn, 2008).

The Dallas Morning News reported that at every event during the Obama campaign, Americans with disabilities were accommodated and welcomed to attend the events. Bob Coward, a member of the disability advocacy group from Washington DC, did a test run from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial to get a glimpse of the challenges he and other people with disabilities might face during the inauguration ceremonies. With foresight and planning – both by individuals and organizing committees – the inauguration activities were more accessible (Associated Press, 2009).

The examples noted above depict our own awareness regarding the treatment of individuals by society. Therefore, we decided to develop and examine the results of an assignment for our students that would increase their awareness as well. We contend that awareness is the first step toward action if individuals with disabilities are to be integrated into society.

We begin the remainder of this article with an overview of disability awareness in regard to its origin and legislative influences. Then we share selected research surrounding disabilities as depicted in the media. Finally, we present the assignment study in regard to methodology, findings, student reflections with regards to the completion of the assignment, and implications for practice.

Overview of Disability Awareness

Origin

Disability awareness began when World War II veterans returned home from war with physical or psychiatric disabilities. It was during this historical time that citizens saw a need to help these individuals. Consequently, society began to look at people with disabilities in a different way. As a result, 2.6 million veterans received compensation for service-related disabilities in 2004. Of those veterans, 506,000 served in World War II; 237,000 in Korea; 1 million in Vietnam; and 540,000 in the Persian Gulf (Gerber, 2012).

Senator Bob Dole was, and continues to be, a major spokesperson for veterans and other citizens with disabilities. His maiden speech on the floor of the Congress, on April 14, 1969, was a turning point for people with disabilities. In his speech, Dole eloquently challenged Congress and the Federal Government to work together in an effort to reach out and help every person with a disability. His human rights speech viewed everyone as full citizens with equal rights to education, to procreate, to own property, to access courts of law, to vote, and to have access to employment (Dole, 2000). These rights are vital to the experience of being equal.

Legislative Influences

There has been much progress since Senator Dole’s speech to protect the rights of people with disabilities and to limit discrimination. Through parent advocacy, case law, and federal legislation, the rights and treatment of individuals with disabilities has improved. A summary of the major legislation which has contributed to increased access of individuals with disabilities (A. Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007) can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Legislative Influences

Legislation	Provisions	Impact
The Rehabilitation Act of 1973	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, or in federal employment practices of federal contractors.	Significant turning point for overcoming some of the deep prejudices and discrimination that individuals may encounter.
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975) Amended and reauthorized in 1990	Governs how states and public agencies provide intervention, special education, and related services for children with disabilities.	Children who were once institutionalized or “warehoused” were able to attend public school and receive special education services.
The Americans with Disabilities Act	Guarantees equal access for Individuals in five areas that include: 1) employment; 2) transportation; 3) public accommodations and services; 4) telecommunications; 5) misc.	Allows for people with disabilities the same rights and access to public places as persons without disabilities.
No Child Left Behind (2001)	Implemented a rigorous accountability system for states and public schools to improve achievement of all students.	The practices are intended to provide children with disabilities access to general education.

People First Language

Walsh (2002) reported as our world changes, our words and the way we use them to describe the world, change as well, and that changes in our language are among the most obvious indicators of overall societal change. Thus, terminology which was once an acceptable part of everyday vocabulary loses its appropriateness and takes on a negative connotation. For example,

at one time in history, individuals with disabilities were referred to as “morons, idiots, feeble-minded, imbecils;” these were acceptable terms used to describe people with disabilities. However, these terms have now become outdated and discriminatory.

Consequently, two basic guidelines to remember when speaking about people with disabilities are to use a “person-first approach” and the realization that “the person is not the condition.” People-first language emphasizes the fact the individual is first a person and that the disability is secondary. No single label can capture the meaning of an entire person’s personality and character. Attitudes, beliefs and misconceptions of society constitute a major barrier for people with disabilities (Ciot, 2010). Furthermore, many people with disabilities consider their disability to be an asset and an integral part of their self-identity.

Disabilities as Depicted in the Media

One need only search the stacks of movies at the local video rental store, browse the newspaper for the new movie releases, flip through the channels on television, or review magazines on a news stand, to find demeaning portrayals of individuals with disabilities. A review of our cultural forms of expression provides evidence of the metaphoric role of disability which is deeply ingrained in our social values.

For many people, media, primarily television is a source of experiencing reality, especially when they lack first hand experiences of an issue presented on screen (Stonewell’s Citizen 21 Report, 2003). According to Bulsara (2002), the media reflects our norms, beliefs and values, acting as a prism through which we interpret and disseminate words and images which impact our lives in a most profound way. Results produced by OFCOM (2005), additionally reveal that television stands in first place (46%) as a source that shapes audiences perception of disabilities.

North American society is not alone in its inappropriate portrayal of individuals with disabilities. According to Bulsara (2002), the media’s portrayal of people with disabilities within the United Kingdom has a long history of oppressive and negative representation. Within the United Kingdom, persons with disabilities have been presented as socially flawed able-bodied people rather than as people with disabilities who have their own identity. Similar findings were indicated within a study conducted by Chen, Hsu, Shu, and Fetzer (2012) which analyzed newspaper articles for content analysis about images of people with intellectual disabilities. Findings highlighted recurring stereotypes to include: personal suffering, family suffering, social deviance, deficiency in life skills, need for professional care, need for governmental support, and need for charitable assistance.

Big Screen Portrayals

The depiction of individuals with disabilities for frivolous shocks and gags within cinema can be traced as far back as 1898 when Thomas Edison produced a film called, “The Fake Beggar.” Within the movie, a male character pretends to be blind in order to beg for money on the street (Ivory, 1997). The stereotypical and demeaning portrayals continued through 1908’s “Don’t Pull My Leg,” a presumably humorous tale about a stolen prosthetic leg. Hollywood has no shortage of films depicting stereotypical and demeaning characteristics of individuals with various types of disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities, speech impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, physical disabilities, etc.). Unfortunately, decades of narrow,

stereotyped, often demeaning portrayals failed to reflect the complexity of living with a disability and provided no enlightenment on the subject to the able-bodied population (Ivory, 1997).

Although the portrayal of individual with disabilities within films has improved somewhat over the past few decades, there remains room for improvement. With the 2008 release of DreamWorks Pictures' movie entitled, "Tropic Thunder," it is evident that individuals with intellectual disabilities continue to be portrayed distastefully within films. The release of "Tropic Thunder" to the big screen stirred much controversy because the movie contains images and language that is extremely offensive in its portrayal of the fictional character "Simple Jack," a person with an intellectual disability, and in the dialogue between the lead characters culminating with the statement "you went full retard, man, never go full retard" (Stiller, 2008).

Television Portrayals

Just as individuals with disabilities have been unfairly depicted on the big screen, they are also inappropriately represented on television. The lead character, Peter Griffin, in Fox's "Family Guy" often makes fun of a friend, Joe Swanson, a paraplegic who was injured on his job as a police officer. Episodes often depict Joe as the butt of jokes related to his disability. For example, in one episode entitled, "No Legs, No Service," Peter Griffin refuses to allow Joe and his friends who are also in a wheelchair, into his restaurant due to their disability. The dialogue within this episode continues to discriminate and stereotype individuals with disabilities to be gamblers and alcoholics. (Henry, 2007)

Other "Family Guy" episodes, such as "Oceans Three in a Half Men" also make fun and discriminate against those with disabilities (Chevapravatdumrong, 2009). These are the types of images portraying individuals with disabilities that our societies (e.g., teenagers) are being bombarded with on a daily basis. We then wonder why our teenagers believe the use of the word "retard" is an appropriate way to address others.

Magazines and Newspapers

Although there does not appear to be a shortage of stereotypical images of individuals with disabilities found within the media, there does appear to be a limited number of positive representations. B. Hardin, Hardin, Lynn, and Walsdorf (2004) conducted a study to investigate the number of positive images of individuals with disabilities within *Sports Illustrated for Kids* between the years of 1996-1999. Findings indicate an underrepresentation of individuals with disabilities within the issues examined during the research period. Specifically, of the 36 issues investigated, with a total of 7,092 photographs (1,527 photos were in advertisements, 5,565 photos were in editorials, and 36 cover photos), none of the advertisements included individuals with disabilities, only 24 pictures of individuals with disabilities were included within the editorial sections, and none of the covers included individuals with disabilities (B. Hardin et al.).

Newspaper articles play an important role in forming public opinion and attitudes towards people with disabilities. In 2012, Chen, et al. analyzed 355 articles using inductive and deductive content analysis. Of the 355 articles, dispirited images (44.5%), needy images (32.8%), and affirmative images (20.8%) were identified (p. 37). Consequently, the majority of the articles were negative connotations of people with intellectual disabilities.

The Assignment Study

Course Setting

The course in which our students were required to complete the disability awareness assignment is titled “Learners with Exceptionalities.” This course is typically taken at the beginning of the junior year for all students who plan to pursue a degree in any teaching field. Thus, it includes students who are seeking certification to teach in general education, bilingual education, or special education K-12 classrooms. Some students in the class may also be pursuing degrees in kinesiology, music therapy, or family studies. It is anticipated that students in each of these career paths will be responsible for educating students with disabilities to one degree or another in a variety of settings. Thus, the purpose of the course is to provide an overview of characteristics of exceptional learners as well as the history, terminology, legal issues, and service provisions for students eligible for special education. Particular emphasis is placed on helping students connect their prior knowledge and perceptions of disabilities with course content that reflects appropriate treatment and educational services for varying populations of exceptional learners.

The class is taught in a face-to-face format with web support. A variety of teaching methods are employed that include direct instruction, web-based research, cooperative learning groups, partner research presentations, current event discussions, and movie reviews that depict individuals with disabilities. The most popular and insightful assignment according to students, is the *Disability Awareness Assignment*. Students are told that the purpose of this assignment is to become aware of services and treatment of individuals with disabilities (both positive and negative) that they experience in their daily lives over the course of five separate days.

Participants

Thirty-eight female students from a mid-sized predominantly woman’s university completed observation logs required for the assignment. Of the 38 students, 24 were Caucasian, eight were Hispanic, four were Pacific Islander, and two were African American. Sixteen of the students were elementary certification majors; eight were middle school majors; eight were seeking a bilingual endorsement; two were music therapy majors; and, four were family consumer science majors. All of the students reported as having some type of association with individuals with disabilities that included: having a family member or friend with a disability; and/or teaching or baby-sitting experiences for children with disabilities. Four of the students in the class had a disability.

The Disability Awareness Assignment

Specifically, the instructions for the assignment are for students to observe and keep a written log in regards to: (1) observable services and/or lack of services for individuals with disabilities in public and private places, such as parking lots, movie theatres, schools, the mall, grocery stores, churches, parks, restaurants, the workplace, the neighborhood; (2) treatment by others toward individuals with disabilities in their immediate surroundings; (3) depictions of disabilities by the media such as in newspaper or magazine articles, movies, television shows; and (4) whether or not “person-first” language is used when speaking about a person with a

disability (see Figure 1). After each observable event, students are instructed to write a brief reflection highlighting their perception of the situation. After the assignment is completed, students share their findings and perceptions with one another. They are then asked to write a personal reflection on what they believe they learned as a result of completing the assignment.

Disability Awareness Assignment

Purpose: Individuals with disabilities are sometimes misunderstood, lack appropriate services, and are the victims of societal prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, in many situations they are treated fairly and respectfully.

The purpose of this assignment is to become aware of services and treatment of individuals with disabilities (both positive and negative) that you experience in your daily life over the course of five separate days. In particular, note if “person first” language is used when referring to a particular disability.

Directions:

1. As you go about your daily life over the course of five days, become aware of how you observe individuals with disabilities being depicted in the media, such as television shows, newspaper articles, magazine articles, movies, etc.
2. As you go about your daily life over the course of five days, also become aware of services, and/or lack of services for individuals in public and private places such as parking lots, movie theatres, schools, the mall, grocery stores, churches, parts, restaurants, the workplace, your neighborhood, etc.
3. Keep a written log of your observations. In your log, give a brief description of each observable event. After your description, comment on how you view the treatment of individuals in that particular situation.
4. Be prepared to share your observation log during class on the date according to the course calendar.

Note: Your log should contain a *minimum* of 15 observable events over the course of 5 days or beyond, if necessary.

Figure 1. Disability awareness assignment.

Study Design

The study is qualitative as it seeks to obtain information from Disability Awareness Logs which contains accounts of real-life observations or experiences. An inductive analysis was conducted as the method to address emerging dominant or significant themes (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Emerging themes were developed through rigorous and systematic reading of the logs to

identify recurring patterns. The categories may help construct a conceptual framework which provides new insights of previous data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

Data Analysis

Because we were primarily interested in what our students had discovered about the services and treatment of individuals in their local communities and through the media, we collected and analyzed the written comments from their Disability Awareness Logs. Assignment logs were first collected and graded. When logs were returned to the students, we asked their permission to use them in the study. Those students who volunteered their logs resubmitted their work.

We analyzed the students' assignment logs in the following ways. First, we independently read and underlined each observable event recorded by the students and coded the event as either positive (+) or negative (-) in regard to the situation. Next, we read the underlined statements again to look for emerging themes. Finally, we met as a group to compare our themes and give each theme a categorical label for reporting the data.

We agreed that for *observable services*, the categories included buildings, parks, sidewalks, restroom, and parking lots; for *treatment by others in public or private places*, the categories were work place, grocery store, restaurants, gym, educational settings, and church; for *media depictions*, the categories included television, newspaper, radio, and magazines. The appropriate comments that fit into each category were then typed and placed into a frequency table to determine the number of positive and negative comments for each category.

Findings

The results of this study will be presented and discussed in separate sections highlighting the following topics: Services for Individuals with Disabilities in Public Places, Depictions of Individuals with Disabilities by the Media, and Treatment of Individuals with Disabilities by Others. Frequencies of positive and negative statements within each area will be discussed along with providing specific comments identified by student participants.

Observable Services for Individuals with Disabilities in Public Places

This section of the analysis represented observable services for individuals with disabilities. Specifically, the participants were instructed to report on findings in relation to the accessibility of buildings, parking lots, restrooms, sidewalks, and parks. Results of this section are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Observable Services for Individuals with Disabilities on Public Places

Category	(+)	(%)	(-)	(%)	N	Sample Comment
Buildings	107	49	113	51	220	(+) <i>I noticed how large the doors are to allow a wheelchair to pass through. The doors also stayed open if you opened them all the way to allow for a wheelchair also.</i> (-) <i>While walking around on campus, I noticed that a lot of wheelchair ramps were far away from the entrances.</i>
Parking Lots	28	54	23	45	51	(+) <i>I have noticed in the past 3 days that places such as movie theater, grocery stores, churches and schools provide parking spots for people with disabilities.</i> (-) <i>They have parking for handicapped outside the building, but there is a lip to get onto the sidewalk and then there are six steps to get to the door.</i>
Restrooms	22	66	11	33	33	(+) <i>The bathroom also has a bar in the bathtub and along the side of the way near the toilet.</i> (-) <i>The restroom is very narrow and poorly shaped in which a person with a wheelchair could not get through.</i>
Sidewalks	10	56	8	44	18	(+) <i>Around campus there are two crosswalks which beep as well as light up when it is safe for pedestrians to cross.</i> (-) <i>There are no sidewalks around the neighborhood, only individual walkways that lead up to front doors.</i>
Parks	0	0	5	100	5	(+) <i>None available</i> (-) <i>I noticed the trail is not very wide and at crossing areas the poles separating the trail from the street are not wide enough for a wheelchair to fit.</i>
TOTALS	167	51	160	49	327	

Note: N = Number of Comments; (+) = Number of Positive Comments; (-) = Number of Negative Comments

Results yielded a total of 327 statements from the study participants. Specifically, 167 (51%) of the total statements were positive while 160 (49%) were negative. The highest number of statements appeared within the “Building” category and was closely distributed between

positive (107) and negative (113) observations. With reference to observable services for individuals with disabilities in public places, participants within this study indicated more negative observations with regards to accessibility of buildings. Narrow entryways, ramps out of the way, and narrow aisles are a few of the negative observations noted by the study participants. On the other hand, participants indicated that overall, parking lots provide sufficient parking spots for individuals with disabilities and most public restrooms visited by study participants were adequate for maneuvering with a wheelchair. Study participants also indicated sidewalks to be sufficient; however, all comments pertaining to public parks were negative. The biggest complaint was that the park trails were too narrow for wheelchair access.

Observable Depictions of Individuals with Disabilities by the Media

This section of the analysis represented observable depictions of individuals with disabilities by the media. Specifically, the participants were instructed to report on findings in relation to the depiction of individuals with disabilities on TV/websites and radio, and in magazines, and/or newspapers. Results of this section are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Summary of Observable Depictions of Individuals with Disabilities by the Media

Category	(+)	(%)	(-)	(%)	N	Sample Comment
TV/Websites	47	53	41	47	88	(+) <i>I was watching TV and I noticed that a lot of family shows have a person with some kind of disability whether it be mental or physical.</i> (-) <i>The media has created stereotypes, which has resulted in a negative image of individuals with disabilities.</i>
Magazines	22	67	11	33	33	(+) <i>Glancing through the People magazine I found an article about Jenny McCarthy and her son who has been diagnosed with Autism and her point of view.</i> (-) <i>Something different I did notice while looking in a magazine was that there was not one person in an ad with a disability or in a wheelchair or with prosthetic leg, a huge stereotype.</i>
Newspaper	18	64	10	36	28	(+) <i>I was reading through the newspaper today and I read an article about Natalie Du Toit who is the first amputee to qualify for the Olympics in swimming. She lost her leg in a car accident in 2001 and is a great example to anyone with a physical disability.</i> (-) <i>Many articles that did not use people first language. For example, some titles, read, "The social isolation for the retard child" and "Preschool blind child."</i>
Radio	3	21	8	79	11	(+) <i>A local radio station was holding a fund raiser to raise awareness of individuals with disabilities.</i> (-) <i>DJs on a local radio station continuously use the word "retard" to make fun of callers.</i>
TOTALS	90	56	70	44	160	

Note: N = Number of Comments; (+) = Number of Positive Comments; (-) = Number of Negative Comments

Results yielded a total of 160 statements from the study participants. Ninety (56%) of the total statements within this section were positive, whereas seventy (44%) were negative. The highest number of statements was made within the "TV/Websites" category with 47 (56%) positive statements and 41 (47%) negative statements. Overall, participants' findings in reference to observable depictions of individuals with disabilities in the media were more positive in magazines, newspapers, and radio. However, comments made with reference to television and

websites were split between positive and negative observations. Historically, this has been an area of great concern, in that so many individuals view television and search the web for extended periods per day. Our youth spend hours of their day glued to the television and searching the web, all the while being bombarded by negative depictions of individuals with disabilities. Such images send a message to our youth that it is okay to make fun of and treat individuals with disabilities unfairly. Lawmakers and other advocates must step up and voice concerns regarding the depiction of individuals with disabilities on television and the web.

Observable Treatment of Individuals with Disabilities by Others

This section of the analysis represented observable treatment of individuals with disabilities by others. Specifically, the participants were instructed to report on findings in relation to the treatment of individuals with disabilities within the educational setting, work place, grocery store, church, restaurants, gym, and the bank. Results of this section are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Observable Treatment of Individuals with Disabilities by Others

Category	(+)	(%)	(-)	(%)	N	Sample Comment
Educational Setting	7	29	17	71	24	(+) <i>I am glad to see that some of my professors take the time to be understanding of individuals with disabilities.</i> (-) <i>When I would get up to ask the teacher to clarify something I would look around and notice a group of girls looking at one another and laughing.</i>
Work Place	6	55	5	45	11	(+) <i>The bus came and the driver got off the bus and helped the person get onto a seat.</i> (-) <i>Children at the pool will occasionally look at the man strangely because he is alone and talks to himself.</i>
Grocery	4	36	7	64	11	(+) <i>I am happy to see that a local grocery does not discriminate against disabilities and provides jobs for people with disabilities.</i> (-) <i>The narrow aisles are not fair for people in wheelchairs.</i>
Church	1	25	3	75	4	(+) <i>My church offers sign language for those who need it.</i> (-) <i>Our church does not have an elevator for those with disabilities to get upstairs.</i>
Restaurants	2	67	1	33	3	(+) <i>Our waitress was extremely kind and cleared the way for my grandmother as she took us to our table.</i> (-) <i>While at the restaurant, I noticed people in wheelchairs had to sit in a certain part of the restaurant.</i>
Gym	2	67	1	50	3	(+) <i>While at the gym my personal trainer said a lot of the equipment is wheelchair accessible.</i> (-) <i>The elevator is at the back of the building.</i>
Bank	1	50	1	50	2	(+) <i>The teller had a counter lowered for those in a wheelchair.</i> (-) <i>The bank did not have an employer that could communicate with a person who is deaf.</i>
TOTALS	23	40	35	60	58	

Note: N = Number of Comments; (+) = Number of Positive Comments; (-) = Number of Negative Comments

A total of 58 statements from study participants were provided within this category. Specifically, twenty-three (40%) of the statements made were positive, whereas thirty-five (60%) were negative. Specifically, the highest number of statements was yielded within the category of “Educational Setting” with the majority (71%) of the statements in the negative category. Alarming, in the area of observable treatment of individuals with disabilities by others, participants in this study witnessed more negative observations in educational, grocery store, and church settings. For example, one participant who has a disability, reported she had been laughed at by classmates when she asked the professor for clarification. Within the grocery store setting, one student was happy to see that individuals with disabilities were employed; however, several students noted that the narrow aisles are not fair for people in wheelchairs. Similarly, within the church setting, one student reported that her church offers sign language for those who need it; however, a lack of elevator access was noted which interfered with individuals with disabilities accessing various areas of the church.

Student Reflections

Being conscious of the treatment of individuals with disabilities is especially important for teacher education students beginning their careers within diverse classrooms. The *Disability Awareness Assignment* completed by the study participants challenged our students to be conscientious of the day-to-day services and treatment of individuals with disabilities. Upon completion of the assignment, students were asked to write a short reflection highlighting what they had learned; student responses were focused on both negative and positive perceptions.

Student responses which reflected on the negative treatment of individuals with disabilities focused mainly on the use of stereotypical terminology, negative attitudes, and mediocre services provided. Specifically, when asked to describe what they had learned through the completion of this assignment, several students indicated concern for the lack of person-first language usage when describing individuals with disabilities. For example, one student responded, “I learned that when individuals with disabilities are discussed, typically person-first language is not used. The person is not considered first, instead they are first considered by disability, race, or ethnicity before being considered a human.” Additionally, several students voiced concern regarding the misuse of the word “retard” within society. One student stated, “ ‘Retard’ is overused without thinking of the negative connotation that is attached to it.” With regards to lessons learned about negative attitudes within society, one student stated, “I learned that people can, without knowing it, be cruel and hurt those individuals’ feelings.” Additionally, many students indicated that the assignment opened their eyes to the fact that “individuals with disabilities are not being given proper treatment or services.” One student reported, “It seemed in all my observations that accommodations made for people with a disability were usually considered second to making things comfortable for those without a disability.”

Although the majority of the reflections written highlighted the negative treatment of individuals with disabilities, some of the reflections were positive. One student indicated that “before this assignment I did not notice as much around me... I think what I learned the most about this assignment is how much more we need to do to make the world more accommodating for everyone.” Another student with a physical disability was thankful that she encountered buildings with ramps which allowed for easier access by individuals with physical impairments. “I learned that although the ramps are hard to figure out, I am pleased that there are ramps for me to get around. I also learned that there is someone who has it harder than me and for me to

appreciate life and smile every day.” Additionally, one student stated, “I learned there are great strides being made toward recognizing people first rather than the disability first.” Finally, one student, whose sibling struggled with a disability, eloquently summarized the importance of disability awareness by the following quote:

We should never assume that our words and actions will not make an impact on the student, no matter whether they have ADD, Autism, or a physical disability. Our responsibility to our students, especially those with any type of special needs, is one we need to take very seriously.

Implications for Practice

Historically, individuals with disabilities have been unfairly treated, underserved, and inadequately portrayed within the media (Bulsara, 2002; Ramshaw, 2009; Stover, 2008) and although treatment and portrayal has improved over the last decade, there continues to be room for improvement. As our population of individuals with disabilities continues to grow, it is imperative that society be knowledgeable and fair in their treatment and interaction with such individuals. It is especially important for our teachers to be aware of the perceptions they have towards students with disabilities.

As university faculty we have an obligation and opportunity to provide experiences for future professionals on ways to improve services for individuals with disabilities. As noted in this article, disability awareness began as World War II veterans returned home from the war with physical injuries. It is especially noticeable that, given the current wars being fought by military personnel and the increased number of soldiers returning home with war-related injuries, increased awareness is pertinent. As more disabled veterans begin entering university classrooms, faculty must be aware of their own perceptions and attitudes regarding disabilities, consequently, this disability awareness assignment is one way to ensure and improve such awareness.

The findings show that observable services in public places and observable depictions in the media of individuals with disabilities had more positive comments than observable treatment by others of individuals with disabilities. In conclusion, using the Disability Awareness Assignment allowed pre-service teachers to develop awareness which may potentially make a positive impact on society by increasing awareness with their future students. Media effects and disability awareness factor in the shaping of teachers’ perceptions and their teaching strategies (Samsel & Perepa, 2013).

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