Attitudes toward individuals with disabilities improve after simulating disability

August 7 2014

Music students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities are more positive after they simulate having a disability, a University of Kansas study found.

Cynthia Colwell, a professor of music education and music therapy, recently published an article in the International Journal of Music Education that looked at what happened when music students were asked to simulate a disability.

Students training to be music therapists or music teachers were assigned to simulate one of the following disabilities: a one-arm amputation, lower-limb paralysis that required a wheelchair, a hearing impairment or a visual impairment. With one student simulating the disability and another acting as an aide, the pair had to be in a public place, such as a restaurant or grocery store, for at least 30 minutes each.

The students filled out a questionnaire before and after the assignment and wrote a reflection piece on their experience. This was followed by an in-class discussion.

Consistent themes emerged. Initially, many students were worried the assignment would be perceived as being disrespectful toward those with disabilities. And, some felt it was unnecessary to them developing an understanding or empathy toward their future clients or students.

But, after the exercise, students overall were positive about the

experience and wrote that they felt more empathetic toward those with disabilities and gained insightful knowledge.

"Without fail, all of them came back and said, 'That was really cool'," Colwell said. "They don't necessarily like the experience, but they said, 'This will help me working with a student or client with a disability.'"

For nearly two decades, Colwell has researched different ways to better prepare therapists, teachers and schoolchildren to interact with individuals who have disabilities. Earlier studies looked at the benefits of sharing knowledge about a disability with classroom peers. Colwell then compared that approach to doing simulation experiences in the elementary general music classroom.

For the peer simulation exercise, elementary students read from sheet music that had jumbled words to simulate learning disabilities, other students used goggles that impaired vision, and some students were asked to simulate physical disabilities such as putting an arm in a sling to immobilize it.

"The kids were really engaged no matter what method we used. But what I found was there were more 'aha moments' when we put the kids in the simulation experience," Colwell said. "After we did the simulation, it was a great opportunity for kids to really talk and have a much better understanding of what their peers were going through. Then we could lead a discussion on how they could be helpful."

From there, Colwell moved to pre-service teachers, who have the benefit of passing positive attitudes onto future students.

"The primary goal is for students to be excited to work with children with disabilities and to see it as a potentially rewarding experience and not just a challenge," Colwell said.

Because music teachers see a higher frequency of students with disabilities than a standard classroom teacher, Colwell said it is especially important for them to be comfortable. And music class is sometimes where students with disabilities feel the most at ease.

"Music is a medium with oral, visual and kinesthetic components. And, sometimes for children with disabilities, music is an area where they are at their best and where they can be successful," Colwell said.

Colwell is now studying how a simulation experience compares to university students watching a video where master teachers in various music settings from elementary through high school describe their experiences with students who have disabilities. She is looking at which experience – the video or the simulation – has the most effect on university students' attitudes.

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Attitudes toward individuals with disabilities improve after simulating disability (2014, August 7) retrieved 29 March 2023 from https://phys.org/news/2014-08-attitudes-individuals-disabilities-simulating-disability.html