

**EXPLORING BIOGRAPHIES: THE EDUCATIONAL  
JOURNEY TOWARDS BECOMING INCLUSIVE  
EDUCATORS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The current study explored the formative processes of twelve student teachers constructing role understandings in the context of their experiences and interactions with people with disabilities. In particular, it examined the participants' changing notions of self-as-teacher and their unfolding perceptions of an inclusive educator's role in teaching children with disabilities. The research aimed to investigate personal and professional forms of knowledge linked with the prior subjective life experiences of the student teachers and those arising from their interactions in situated learning experiences in community settings.

The contextual framework of the study focused on the development of the student teachers' unique understandings and awareness of people with disabilities through processes of biographical situated learning. The investigation examined participants' voluntary out-of-course experiences with people with disabilities across three community settings for the ways in which these experiences facilitated the participants' emerging role understandings. These settings included respite experiences in families' homes of young children with disabilities receiving early intervention, an after-school recreational program for primary and secondary aged children and adolescents with disabilities, and an independent living centre providing post-school options and activities for adults with disabilities.

Two groups participated in the current study, each consisted of six student teachers in the Bachelor of Education Course at the Bathurst campus of Charles Sturt University. Group One participants were in the second year compulsory inclusive education subject and Group Two participants were in the third year elective early intervention subject. The investigation examines the nature of reflexive and reflective processes of the student teachers from subjective, conflict realities in an attempt to link community experiences with real-life issues affecting inclusive educational practices. The voluntary community experiences engaged the research participants in multi-faceted interactions with people with disabilities, providing thought-provoking contexts for their reflections on observations, responses and reactions to situations, such as critical incidents. The participants engaged in reflexive and reflective processes in records made in learning journals and in semi-structured interviews conducted throughout the investigation. Results were analysed from a constructivist research paradigm to investigate their emerging role understandings.

Prior to this study there had been few practical components in the compulsory undergraduate inclusive education subject which meant that previously student teachers gained theoretical knowledge without the opportunity to apply their learning. Many student teachers had expressed their feelings of anxiety and uneasiness about what they should do and say to a person with a disability. Thus, the community experiences were selected in order to give a specific context for student teachers' learning and to provide participants with expanded opportunities to consider their professional identity, social awareness and acceptance of people with disabilities.

An analysis of the data demonstrated the centrality of reflection within a situated teaching and learning framework. Understandings of prior experiences and motivation were shown to interact with the outcomes of the community experiences through an on-going process of reflection and reflexivity. This reconstructing process encouraged learners to reflect on past, present and projected future experiences and reframe actions from multiple perspectives as a way of exploring alternatives within broader contexts. The data reveal the participants' engagement in the community experiences facilitated their awareness of wider socio-cultural educational issues, while focusing their attention on more appropriate inclusive teaching and learning strategies. The reflective inquiry process of identifying diverse issues led participants to consider other possible alternatives to current community practices for better ways to support their changing perspectives on ideal inclusive classroom practices. The dialogic nature of participants' on-going deliberations contributed to the construction of their deeper understandings of an inclusive educator's role.

The findings of the study identified external environmental and internal personal factors as contributing biographical influences which shaped the student teachers' emerging role understandings. The results emphasised the value of contextual influences in promoting desirable personal and professional qualities in student teachers. Importantly, situated learning enhanced participants' unique interpretations of their prospective roles. As a result of analysing their insights from interactions in community contexts, the student teachers had increased their personal and professional understandings of individuals with disabilities and broadened their perceptions of their roles as inclusive educators. Thus, the study found that encouraging a biographical reflexive and reflective orientation in participants was conducive

to facilitating changes in their understandings. Overall, the outcomes had benefits for student teachers and teacher educators in finding innovative ways for integrating biographical perspectives into situated teaching and learning approaches. The study showed that contextual influences facilitated deeper understanding of role identity and produced new ideas about the nature of reflexivity and reflection in guiding student teachers' learning.

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of my loving Mother and Father, Vivienne Marie and Roy Francis Brogan, who  
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