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Linda Innemee

The College of William & Mary

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An Interview with Jacqueline Rodriguez

Linda Innemee

This fall semester, we are glad to welcome Dr. Jacqueline Rodriguez as a new Assistant Professor of Special Education at The College of William and Mary School of Education. Particularly interested in global inclusion practices, STEM education for linguistically and culturally diverse exceptional students, and the use of simulated environments in teacher training, Dr. Rodriguez has a wealth of knowledge and experiences to share with students, faculty, and staff.

Dr. Rodriguez grew up “with parents, who had international lifestyles,” which greatly influenced her interests and career path. As an undergraduate at The George Washington University, Dr. Rodriguez earned a BA in International Affairs with a concentration in International Development, as well as a BA in Latin American Studies with a concentration in Culture and Society. After college, she taught high school special education through Teach for America, which allowed her to gain more multicultural and special education experience. She continued her studies at American University, where she earned her Master’s in Special Education, Learning Disabilities Track. She then earned her Ph.D. in Education, Exceptional Education Track, from the University of Central Florida.

During her doctoral internship, Dr. Rodriguez worked with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees in the Near East. “My grandfather used to be on Air Force duty in the Middle East, and my sister currently lives there; so I have long been familiar with the area,” she responded when asked why she chose this particular location. Education is one of the many services UNRWA provides for Palestine refugees, and the organization presented Dr. Rodriguez with the perfect opportunity to combine her interests in international affairs and special education. “My research focused on current inclusive practices in UNRWA classrooms. I was able to come to an agreement with the organization that I would help them with their policies, strategies, and advocacy materials in return for letting me work as an intern,” she explained.

There appear to be minimal inclusive practices in place in UNRWA classrooms. According to Dr.



Rodriguez, “Teachers are currently provided with zero preparation for inclusive education and teaching special education students, except for one course on differentiation.” However, she pointed out that there are informal strategies in place, such as giving a student more attention or providing different work. “Students with disabilities are included in these schools based on ability and parent advocacy for enrollment. Teachers do not have enough support, especially for students with moderate to severe disabilities,” she stated. It requires teachers to look at themselves and say, “How do I teach this specific content to this particular child?” UNRWA has endorsed a promising inclusive policy this past January but still needs to be implemented across the fields of operation.

Through her experience working with UNRWA, Dr. Rodriguez has come to believe that “inclusive education has a place in every region. However, the definition of inclusive education needs to be localized and should integrate aspects of cultural, historical, and financial context.” In order for the UNRWA inclusive policy mentioned earlier to be truly effective, input from the local people should have been used to develop and localize it, Dr. Rodriguez argued.

Another one of Dr. Rodriguez’s interests is STEM education for diverse learners. “As co-director of a STEM camp in the summer of 2010, we brought in students from Central

Florida for a week-long camp, which included site visits to interact with engineers, students, and other professionals in the field,” she explained. The students also completed group work and projects to learn how to brainstorm, collaborate, manage time, problem solve, and multitask. She estimated that ninety percent of the students had not considered a STEM career before coming to this camp.

When asked about challenges the nation faces in terms of STEM education, Dr. Rodriguez responded, “Starting in middle school, schools do not offer the kind of curriculum students need to successfully enter a STEM college program... Teachers also need to know how to teach this coursework to diverse students and those with disabilities. Hands-on experiences, apprenticeships, internships, and other real-life experiences are very important.” Therefore, Dr. Rodriguez hopes to see changes in the STEM education field in the upcoming years in terms of curriculum access, teacher knowledge, and access to STEM professionals.

Dr. Rodriguez also shared some information about her work as the program director of TLE TeachLivE™, a simulated mixed-reality environment at the University of Central Florida. As Dr. Rodriguez explained, “It is a lab that involves real experience and avatar experience. It is a normal classroom with a high-end computer and a TV screen or projector. A teacher walks into the room and works with five diverse avatar students who respond to anything that is said by the teacher.” Currently the only program in the country of its kind, it has been used to prepare pre-service teachers for delivering content, managing classrooms, and combining the two. In-service teachers have used it to work on difficulties encountered in the field. According to Dr. Rodriguez, “The program is very dynamic and can be molded to any environment or setting. For example, administrators can learn how to interact with parents about an IEP, or counselors can practice counseling techniques.”

While working at The College of William and Mary, Dr. Rodriguez hopes to pursue international research and continue to collaborate with the United Nations. Eventually, she would like to take students abroad so that they can learn from and exchange ideas with other teachers. Since she has done a considerable amount of policy work at the national level, she also plans to advocate on Capitol Hill for educational policies. As a professor in the

School of Education, she hopes to develop a sense of mentorship with her students and is looking forward to working closely with her new colleagues, who have been welcoming throughout the process. It is clear that Dr. Rodriguez is a valuable addition to our faculty who has exciting experiences to share and promising plans in store for her work at William and Mary.

About the author

Linda Innemee is an EdS student in the School Psychology program.