

Community of



learners

The Special Education in Scotland group at Dalkeith House.

When Amy Kimmes attended UW-Eau Claire as a special education major a few years ago, she hoped to participate in a study abroad program, but none of the university's study options was compatible with her degree program and schedule. She then heard about the Special Education in Scotland program, which allowed her to have an international study experience she says had a big impact on her life and career.

Kimmes spent six weeks in Scotland in summer 2007 learning about the country's special education system as well as its culture and people. She graduated from UW-Eau Claire that December with a degree in special education.

"The Scotland program was a real eye-opener for me," said Kimmes, a first-grade teacher in Black River Falls. "It gave me the confidence to do things that are outside of my comfort zone. It also opened my eyes to a different way of life."

The Special Education in Scotland program, offered through UW-Eau Claire's department of special education and Center for International Education, allows undergraduate students to study and experience firsthand the Scottish special education system, said Rose Battalio, associate professor of special education at UW-Eau Claire and Scotland program director.

Students observe children with disabilities for two

weeks at a Scottish school and then attend a three-week class on emotional/behavioral disabilities at the University of Aberdeen, taught by Battalio and Scottish guest lecturers. The program concludes with a five-day tour of the Scottish Highlands.

First offered in 2001, the program has morphed over the years, Battalio said. It was offered as a three- or four-week program through 2005, when she decided the program needed to have more depth to ensure that students have the best experience possible. It was first offered as a six-week program in 2007.

"The students learn to be more observant of the world and recognize differences in a way that gives them an opportunity to grow and understand themselves better," Battalio said. "The nuances and the expectations, the ways of seeing life and of running their life are very different in Scotland. American students feel comfortable going there because the Scottish people sound and look like us, but there definitely are differences."

Battalio said an important aspect of the program is the close connections the students form before the trip even happens.

"I try to create a community so the students learn how to support each other when they go to a new place," she said. "I recruit the students the previous fall. After that we meet about once a month with hopes of moving from a group of people who didn't really know each other to start with to a group that now has a support system for each other."

The program begins around the end of May, after the end of UW-Eau Claire's academic year, and runs through the first few weeks of June when Scottish schools are still in session.

"We developed it as a summer program so it wouldn't interfere with our students' progress toward graduation," Battalio said. "Our education program is really precise. Students need to take their courses in a set order, so if you miss a semester studying abroad, you're literally going to add a semester to your program. Doing Scotland as a summer program makes it more efficient for our students."

While students are observing in the classroom for two weeks, they live with host families in the Edinburgh area, Dunkeld or the Orkney Islands. The primary host within each family is a teacher or school employee who works in some capacity with students with disabilities.

"The most valuable part of the program for me was the host family stay," said Sadie Bassette, a senior communication sciences and disorders major who participated in this year's program. "I was not only immersed into a family but a whole community. I was able to learn so much about myself and others through this part of the program."

Assisting Battalio this year were faculty leaders Art Brandt, associate lecturer of special education, and Gloria Fennell, now retired associate professor of social work, who worked with the students during the classroom observation phase of the program.

"My role was to be available for the students whose school placement was in Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands," Fennell said. "The school was incredibly welcoming, and everyone made sure that the students had every opportunity to learn and experience as much as they could. The students were exceptionally eager

STUDENTS ARE IMMERSSED IN SCOTLAND'S SPECIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

By Ann Hoffman



A local pub in Dalkeith, Scotland.

learners, and that made my role very easy.”

While enrolled in the three-week class at the University of Aberdeen, students are housed on campus. The course, “Introduction to Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities,” is required for students who wish to be certified in EBD. It also can be taken as an elective.

“Beyond an understanding of children with EBD, I hope the students gain an understanding of the differences between the special education systems in Scotland and the United States with help from lecturer Barbara Hookey,” Battalio said.

Hookey, a longtime faculty member in the education program at the University of Aberdeen, was a school-teacher for many years, Battalio said, adding that her knowledge of the national curriculum, the process of inclusion and the process for educating future teachers provided the students with a broader understanding of how the Scottish education system works.

“During Barbara’s time with the students they were able to ask questions about and discuss the similarities and differences between the systems in order to clarify their own thinking about our education system,” Battalio said. “Barbara provided the students with opportunities to critically reflect on how we educate children in the states.

“The Scottish system has a broader base of services that are more easily attainable than ours. All children with any kind of need can receive service, whether they’re experiencing a crisis, are dyslexic or have been bullied. They have a different approach to eligibility than we do. Their terminology doesn’t really include the title ‘special education.’ They prefer the phrase ‘students with special needs.’

“It is difficult to compare a small country’s educational system to the educational system of the entire United States. For example, services for kids with the most severe needs can easily be seen in Scotland. At that level it’s a commitment of funds, it’s a commitment of programming. There are schools for kids with emotional disabilities and severe cognitive disabilities that are supported by the country.”

In the United States, children with special needs must meet numerous eligibility requirements in various categories to qualify for services, Battalio said, adding that our special schools are more likely to be private organizations that are costly to attend.

“One big difference, however, is the emphasis on inclusion in U.S. schools,” she said. “We expect everybody to graduate from high school, and those with special needs, depending on ability levels, will be able to advance through the system like everyone else or will have special accommodations and modifications to meet graduation requirements. The Scottish system requires students to pass exams before they can progress

in their schooling. Scotland is moving more toward an inclusive model, which means they have to grapple with how students with special needs fit into their system of education.”

Battalio said she challenges the students to explore the differences between the two systems and develop their own philosophy of education.

“I hope the experience has them questioning what they are being taught about their own teaching,” she said. “I want them to be active observers of what works and what doesn’t, the pros and cons of what we do and what we don’t do.”

Battalio describes the Highlands trip as another eye-opening experience for the students. The group’s guide, Ruthie, blended stories, songs and sights to teach the group about Scotland — its history, culture and people. Also traveling with the group were individuals from several other countries, enhancing the cultural aspect of the trip.

“Stops in Edinburgh, Inverness, the Isle of Skye, Oban and other places of interest provided the students with many adventures,” Battalio said. “Although it rained quite a bit, the students were willing to step out of their comfort zones and climb hills, hug rocks and charge a castle.”

A 2006 special education graduate who participated in the Scotland program in 2005 said it had a huge impact on her teaching career.

“I not only learned about education, children and collaboration, but I learned a lot about myself and the kind of teacher I wanted to be,” said Cathy Smith, a Title I reading and math teacher and data coach for the Chester Creek Academy in Duluth, Minn. “As the data coach, I’m responsible for collaboration, and I use the Scotland experience as a model for teamwork. Also, the Scots’ enthusiasm for teaching rubbed off on me: Keep positive and full of hope even when it seems like there is none.”

Bassette, the CSD major who participated this year, called the Scotland program a truly life-changing experience.

“The program made me realize what a tiny portion of the world I actually take up and how many different lifestyles, cultures and beliefs are out there,” Bassette said. “It is important to remember that our own way isn’t always the right way, and it’s amazing what you can learn once you open your eyes.”



The headmistress’s home at The New School in Dunkeld, Scotland.



A student from The New School, center, with program participants Sadie Bassette, Lucy Weisenbeck, Ashley Meinen and Laura Christensen.



An 1800s military outpost in the Scottish Highlands.



Rose Battalio and students meet to discuss their trip to Scotland a few days before their departure.