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**Economies and Effectiveness in Educating Personnel
For Individuals with Disabilities**

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Abstract

It takes a school, as opposed to a single teacher, to properly educate persons with disabilities. In addition to the potential for effectiveness, such an approach may very well come with economic benefits. At one point universities offered teacher preparation programs almost solely for specific majors, such as special education. Now, lines between departments of education are more seamless. Most education majors take one or more courses in special education and get field-based experience with persons with disabilities and special education majors are taking more courses in reading and content areas to be fully certified. The dynamics of the “inclusion” concept has gotten considerable attention at the school level. Educating persons with disabilities in regular classes has been viewed as both more socially and academically beneficial than educating them in restricted settings. However, some professionals think that inclusion may be overly glorified and that diffusing traditional service delivery systems (continuum of services model), may be throwing away the baby with the bath. But if general educators are to be held more accountable for all students, they must be adequately prepared. Is what currently been done in teacher preparation programs sufficient? This presentation reviews former and current practices in educating persons with disabilities and how higher education is leading the way, or responding, in preparing exemplary personnel to meet their needs.

Introduction

Obtaining a quality product for a reasonable price is a way of life in America. This includes the preparation of personnel to educate individual with disabilities. Special education is relatively expensive when compared to regular education. Because of the special personnel (often coupled with low staff-student ratio), resources, and materials needed, separate special education for certain categories of persons with disabilities may cost three to four times as much as for a person in regular education. But as costly as special education can be, educating them in regular classes may be more beneficial.

Within the last several decades, there has been a major revolution in the education of persons with disabilities. Before the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (now IDEA), persons with disabilities were denied any decent opportunity to an education. More than half of all students with disabilities were receiving no educational services (Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006). For those receiving educational services, the early paradigm for educating them included separate classes in regular schools and even separate schools and facilities. Along the way, resource rooms and mainstreaming these students into selected regular classes became popular. Today, inclusion is the most talked about and “preferred” placement for persons with disabilities. The basic educational rationale for inclusion is added benefits in terms of academic and social gains. Though less discussed in the literature, inclusion also has economic justifications. If regular classroom teachers can accommodate persons with disabilities with supplementary aids and services, there will be less need for the relatively expensive separate special education services. But such a transition should have a research, evidence-base of effectiveness. This presentation will help inform the

profession by providing documented benefits and possible pitfalls of inclusion and reporting how institutions of higher learning might respond to practices and promises in preparing personnel to meet the needs of persons with disabilities.

Educational mandate for persons with disabilities

Realizing that more than half of all students with disabilities were receiving no educational services, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1975 (now, IDEA). Today, it is reported that nearly 14 percent of public school students have disabilities and receive services under the IDEA. But achievement levels for these students are substantially lower than that of their typical peers. Over three-quarters of students with disabilities score below the overall mean achievement level, compared to half of students in the general population. More than 13 percent of schools that did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) standards failed solely because they did not achieve the standards established for their students with disabilities (Feng & Sass, 2010).

Historically, where students with disabilities have been educated has been influenced by several factors including (a) placement efficacy research, (b) legal mandates, (c) judicial interpretations, and (d) changing definition, as with intellectual disabilities (Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006). The least restrictive environment (LRE), or regular class is the preferred placement for persons with disabilities. Regulations in IDEA and its subsequent amendments have defined LRE in terms of a continuum of educational settings. The LRE provision mandates that states educate students with disabilities with students who do not have disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. Separate schooling or other removal of students with

disabilities from the general education classroom should occur only when the nature or severity of the student's disability is such that education in general education classes cannot be satisfactorily achieved with the use of supplementary aids and services. The LRE regulation is further strengthened by the requirements that each student's individualized education program (IEP) consider how the student will have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum and explain the extent to which the student will not be educated and participate with students without disabilities (Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006).

Service delivery models

Students with disabilities have, and continue to receive educational services through different service delivery models. Service delivery alternatives or placement options may include general education class, partial day (in general education class), separate class, and separate facility (Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006). For example, students with severe cognitive, emotional, or physical disabilities may be served by special education teachers who primarily teach them life skills and basic literacy. Students with mild to moderate disabilities may be served in regular classes, using or modifying the general education curriculum (*Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2010-11).

The perception is that schools districts that segregate large proportions of their students with disabilities from the regular classroom are probably doing more harm than good for many of those students; they may even be in violation of the law. Both federal and state laws have been amended to insist on placing students with disabilities in the LRE, the regular classroom, unless solid evidence shows otherwise. Labeling and

removing students from the regular classroom limit student expectations of success and lower student self-esteem, peer acceptance, and academic performance. The benefits of placing students with disabilities in regular classes include higher academic achievement and to an even greater extent, improved social skills (Adkins, 1990). Data on placement of students with intellectual disabilities reveal that in the 1999-2000 school year, these students were far more likely to be placed in a general education classroom for some or much of the school day and far less likely to be placed in a separate setting than they were at the beginning of the decade (Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006). Even though the programs have reported considerable success, some parents and educators oppose returning students with disabilities to regular classrooms. A primary fear is that needed supplemental services will not follow (Adkins, 1990).

Despite the emphasis on the placement of students with disabilities, it is argued that the most important school-based determinant of student achievement is teacher quality. Therefore, the logical starting point for addressing the achievement of students with disabilities is the quality of teachers instructing them. It is an unfortunate commentary that over 12 percent of teachers employed to provide special education services to children ages 6-21 and that 10.5 percent of teachers in general education are not fully certified (Feng & Sass, 2010).

The inclusion practice

The IDEA of 1975 ushered in the concept of instructing students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE); for many the LRE is a general education classroom. A decade later, Madeline Will, the former Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, called for shared responsibility in

educating students with disabilities. This set schools and researchers on a quest for successful models of inclusion (Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006). Full inclusion is defined as the provision of services to students with disabilities, including those with severe disabilities, in their neighborhood schools, in age-appropriate regular education classes, with the necessary support services and supplementary aids – for both children and teachers. The ultimate goal of inclusion is to prepare students to participate as full and contributing members of society. It accomplishes the law’s requirement of a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The judicial interpretation is that inclusion in general education classrooms is a right and not a privilege for a select few (Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006).

The movement toward inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classes has become the overwhelming trend in education. It is more than just the “right” thing to do, it leads to improved academic functioning for students with disabilities and offers them the opportunity for socialization with their peers without disabilities in general education classrooms (Pavri & Luftig, 2001). Additionally, students who spend most of their day in regular education classrooms tend to perform better on standardized tests (Feng & Sass, 2010).

Approximately half of special-education students spend 80 percent or more of their school day in regular education classrooms and only about one-fourth spend 60 percent or more of their day outside regular education classrooms. With such numbers in regular classrooms, it is crucial to know just what kinds of training make general education teachers more effective with special education students (Feng & Sass, 2010).

Inclusion is not easily accomplished. It is often misunderstood and sometimes resisted by teachers, and it is not always fully understood or supported by school administrators (Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006). Some think that inclusion eliminates the discretion granted parents and guardians and that they will no longer be able to participate meaningfully in deciding where their child should be educated (Wright, 1999). However, more might be read into inclusion than is expected or needed. The IDEA (1997) stipulates that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment but also requires that districts provide a continuum of placement options. This allows states and districts to have some latitude with regard to IDEA implementation (Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006).

It has been suggested that three major factors contribute to the success or demise of inclusion programs: school leadership, district/state policy, and teacher tenure/turnover. These factors also impact philosophical and financial commitment to the reform (Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006). Research regarding the effectiveness of inclusion shows that students with disabilities achieve more positive results in the integrated classroom than do their counterparts in the segregated classroom. It further noted that placement in general education classrooms tends to improve their social skills and competence, the strongest evidence supporting the education of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and schools (Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006).

Preparation of personnel for persons with disabilities

Historically, special education and general education operated as dual systems at the school level and at the preservice teacher training level. At the preservice level,

future educators from both disciplines typically received their training with little or no interaction with the other. But in the mid 1980s, Madeline Will called for an educational partnership in which special education and general education “cooperatively assess the educational needs of students with learning problems and cooperatively develop effective educational strategies for meeting those needs. Her call became known as the “regular education initiative.” More recently, the term “full inclusion” has become popular (Mayhew, 1994).

Now that IDEA requires that children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment that is appropriate, it is crucial that general education teachers be trained to teach these students as a part of their teacher training; and that special education teachers are trained to function effectively as inclusion teachers. The vast majority of special education children spend a significant portion of their day in the regular education classroom. It was reported that between 67 and 73% of teacher training programs require at least one course on educating children with disabilities. The number should approach 100%. Meanwhile, only 51 to 58% of teacher preparation programs require some field experience with children with disabilities (Geri, 2009). Other studies show that to help general educators prepare to work with these students with diverse needs, some states require special education coursework by preservice general education teachers, some have competencies, and some have both coursework and competencies (Mayhew, 1994).

The IDEA highlights the need for collaborative training for general and special educators. In the past, the credential training programs for general educators have emphasized general education curriculum and methodologies. The credential training

programs for special educators have emphasized instructional strategies and remediation techniques. It is now apparent that both groups, general and special education teachers, need the knowledge and skills of each other to effectively educate students with disabilities (Davis, 2003). After all, teacher education programs are being asked to demonstrate how their candidates impact children's achievement in ways that they have never had to before (Bauer, Johnson, & Sapona, 2004).

Although many areas in education are experiencing teacher shortages, the shortages of teachers who are qualified in the area of special education are of critical concern (deBettencourt & Howard, 2004). During 2001-2002, U.S. public schools employed nearly 49,000 teachers (of children ages 6-21) who were less than fully certified, over 12% of the workforce. It was 13.6% for preschool-aged children with disabilities. In response to these shortages and more recently to the No Child Left Behind (2001) mandate that all teachers be fully qualified by 2005-2006, alternatives to traditional teacher preparation are proliferating. Such alternatives are thought to help ameliorate teacher shortages in special education by providing access to teaching to individuals who did not and perhaps cannot enter teaching through traditional routes. In typical alternative route programs, coursework is abbreviated and field-based requirements are extended. The idea of abbreviating pedagogical training evolved in the context of secondary teacher preparation, where it was argued, subject matter mastery was as important if not more important than pedagogical training (Sindelar, Daunic, & Rennells, 2004). In the United States, two thirds of teacher education institutions currently offer some type of alternative licensing routes. Because these initiatives promote quick entry into the profession they appear attractive to many outside the field of

teaching. Several critics, however, dismiss alternative programs, especially those that remove certain requirements or lower standard for certification (deBettencourt & Howard, 2004). In addition to certification, a number of other factors have created special education teacher shortages. A growing number of students in need of special services, an increase in special education caseloads, and the departure of special education teachers from the teaching profession are but three determinants contributing to the shortage of special education teachers (deBettencourt & Howard, 2004).

Research on traditional versus alternative routes shows that graduates of a traditional special education teacher program had superior classroom practices compared to their counterparts from a university-district partnership and from a district “add-on” program (Feng & Sass, 2010). There was little support for the efficacy of in-service professional development courses focusing on special education. However, teachers with advanced degrees are more effective in boosting the math achievement of students with disabilities than are those with only a baccalaureate degree. Also preservice preparation in special education has statistically significant and quantitatively substantial effects on the ability of teachers of special education courses to promote gains in achievement for students with disabilities, especially in reading. Certification in special education, an undergraduate major in special education, and the amount of special education coursework in college are all positively correlated with the performance of teachers in special education reading courses (Feng & Sass, 2010). It is suggested that universities can provide highly qualified, effective teachers for students with disabilities by (1) redesigning credential programs to include collaboration of general and special educators, (2) streamlining admission procedures into teacher education programs, (3) coordinating

existing resources, and (4) increasing the ability of local education agencies to participate in career ladder programs (Davis, 2003).

How personnel value their preparation in serving persons with disabilities

The status of teacher education and special education has greatly improved, although there are still critical problems and challenges to address. There has been increased emphasis on content knowledge and the establishment of more rigorous, national, performance-based standards that define the expectations of the knowledge and skills of special educators that have significantly impacted teacher education programs. Where the single course or two on “mainstreaming” was the norm in the preparation of general education teachers, now personnel preparation programs must provide content coursework and experiences that will help teachers organize classroom learning environments and instruction designed to meet the needs of all learners (Bauer, Johnson, & Sapona, 2004).

Both general and special education preparation programs face the challenge of recruiting and retaining diverse teachers. The challenge of meeting the needs of diverse learners and addressing the complex needs of families are coupled with the pressure of providing candidates with flexible programs and content knowledge to pass licensure tests (Bauer, Johnson, & Sapona, 2004).

There are two significant differences between the past and now. First, the stakes are much higher today than they were in the past. Policymakers and other critics are seriously attacking the teaching profession. Some have even suggested dismantling teacher education programs and create alternative pathways that do not involve teacher education departments or colleges. The slow pace of incorporating research into practice

has contributed to this risky political challenge, and the gap must be closed with haste. On the other hand, the second thing that is different now from the past is the quality of research on teacher education. The research on teacher education has greatly improved in the last decade (Bauer, Johnson, & Sapona, 2004).

From a comparative study of 3 teacher preparation prototypes: traditional, university-district partnership, and district add-on programs, samples of program graduates were observed during their 1st year of teaching using the Praxis III assessment. A larger sample completed a follow-up questionnaire assessing preparedness and efficacy, and a subset of them had principals submit ratings. On the observational measure, all teachers met minimum standards, but graduates of traditional programs outperformed their counterparts on several instructional criteria. By contrast, principals' ratings favored graduates of alternative programs, particularly partnership programs (Sindelar, Daunic, & Rennells, 2004).

Summary and Implications

Roughly one of every ten students in American schools has a disability. Providing them with a free and appropriate education is the responsibility of both regular and special education teachers. Working together, these teachers can certainly enable students with disabilities to benefit academically and socially at a higher level in the regular classroom than what they would achieve in a separate special education class. Inclusion also has economic benefits during the school years (for example, placement in regular classes can possibly reduce the number of special education teachers needed) and in adulthood (they will be better prepared for postsecondary education and become better candidates for gainful employment and quality citizens of society). For persons with

disabilities to attain these lofty levels of achievements, both regular and special educators must in their teaching be organized, patient, able to motivate students, understanding of their students' special needs, and accepting of differences in others (*Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2010-11).

To not be overwhelmed by the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classes, it might helpful to view it in simple terms. Inclusion calls for:

- ❖ Educating all children with disabilities in regular classrooms in the neighborhood school;
- ❖ Providing age-appropriate academic classes and extracurricular activities; and
- ❖ Providing essential services in the regular classroom without “pulling out” students.

Inclusion operates from the premise that:

- ❖ It is a right of all students;
- ❖ Students with disabilities learn social skills and benefit from friendships of peers;
- ❖ Nondisabled students benefit by establishing social relationships;
- ❖ Inclusion permits friendships among diverse students; and
- ❖ All children can learn to understand human differences.

The bottom line for this presentation is that educating personnel for students with disabilities can be both economical and effective. Then when these teachers accept positions in schools, all students will learn together and become productive citizens of society.

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