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ABSTRACT

Most children with learning disabilities receive all or part of their instructional programs in the general education classroom. To prepare teachers to meet the needs of these students, the Department of Special Education at West Virginia University designed a course of studies for rural regular education teachers leading to teacher certification in learning disabilities. The program targets the regular educators of entire rural schools and expects program competencies to be demonstrated in the teachers' own classrooms and school, thereby institutionalizing program effects. Parents are involved in training and preparation of training materials. A major program innovation is the integration of applied classroom assignments with coursework. Each course includes assignments that require the application of specific methods or procedures in the general education classroom, thereby enhancing the connection between theory and practice. Applied assignments are briefly described for six courses: Introduction to Special Education, Curriculum and Methods, Assessment in Special Education, Classroom and Behavior Management, Introduction to Learning Disabilities, and Teaching Strategies in Learning Disabilities. Over a 3-year period, the program will train a maximum of 40 rural teachers, who will likely remain in their respective rural counties. (SV)

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## PREPARING GENERAL EDUCATORS TO SERVE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: RURAL CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Background. The general education classroom has become a setting of ever increasing importance for children with disabilities. A larger number of children with disabilities are receiving all or part of their instruction in the regular education setting. Over 95 percent of children with disabilities attend regular schools. Of the 4.9 million students ages 6 through 21 with disabilities during the 1994-95 school year, 2.2 million spent 80 percent or more of their school day in general education classrooms (U.S.D.O.E.,1997). In relation to other educational settings, inclusive schooling has grown much more dramatically in rural schools(Capper & Larkin,1992; Mallory & Berkeley, 1988; Templeman, Frederick & Udel, 1989). Over 78 percent of children with learning disabilities receive all or part of their instructional programs in general education classrooms. If analyzed by category, it is found that children with learning disabilities receive a much greater portion of their instruction in the general education classroom than all students except those with speech and language disabilities. For example, during the 1994-95 period, only 9.7 percent of students with mental retardation received their instruction in regular class placements. Hence, the regular classroom teacher is very likely to have responsibility for serving numerous students with learning disabilities.

In rural West Virginia, State Policy 2419, Regulations for the Education of Exceptional Students (West Virginia Department of Special Education, 1990),provided major emphasis to "non-pullout" instruction for students identified as having disabilities. While this policy has been in effect since 1990, a monitoring report by the U.S. Department of Education (1994) found that an area of concern in West Virginia was assurance that pupils are appropriately placed in the least restrictive environment. Acting on this information, the West Virginia Legislature in 1994 passed legislation dealing with the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. The provisions of this bill mandate that: 1) school Faculty Senates must develop a strategic plan for inclusion in their school, 2) there must be

increased participation of regular education teachers in the IEP process, and 3) specific training for regular educators to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the regular classroom must be provided.

Project Focus. In an attempt to meet the need for preparation of general educators to serve students with disabilities, the Department of Special Education at West Virginia University designed a course of studies for rural general educators which leads to teacher certification in learning disabilities. Learning disabilities was chosen because general education teachers are most apt to be responsible for serving students with an academic disability in this category (U.S.D.O.E.,1997). Teacher certification in West Virginia is categorical and therefore learning disabilities was the best match for the certification structure.

The course of studies for rural general educators was crafted as a project and achieved federal funding from the U.S. Office of Special Education. The major goals of the project are: 1) to increase the knowledge and skills of functioning general education teachers through training leading to full certification in area of learning disabilities, and 2) to provide trainees with the skills and competencies needed for a facilitative role to involve all educators and parents in preparing for and implementing responsible inclusive practices. Several requirements were agreed upon as measures for enhancing the successful implementation of this project: 1) rural general education teachers within entire schools were targeted for certification training in learning disabilities, and leadership skills in inclusive practices, 2) the selected rural general education teachers must be fully employed while engaged in the program of studies, 3) program competencies must be demonstrated in the teacher's home school and in their own general education classroom with the assumption that the effects of the program would become institutionalized, and 4) that parents be involved as part of the training, including the preparation of training materials.

Training Leading to Certification. The project provides NCATE approved coursework required for teacher certification in learning disabilities in our Special Education Program. Included are four core courses followed by two courses focusing on learning disabilities. There are two teaching practicums. One is carried out in conjunction with methods related courses, and one serves as a final teaching practicum . A major innovative aspect of this teacher training model is the way applied course assignments are integrated with the coursework. Courses included in this project have all been modified to include applied assignments which are designed to be carried out in the general education classroom.

The courses and practica experiences in this project are designed to assure trainee competence in planning and implementing instruction using the most current effective practices for delivering instruction in the general education classroom to students with learning disabilities. Achieving a better relationship between theory and practice is a major principle guiding the implementation of this project.

Applied Assignments Within Coursework Each of the courses provided assignments which required the application of specific methods or procedures in the general education classroom. In some instances the assignments required application only with the children with learning disabilities and in other cases they required application with the entire class with a focus on modifications for specific students as needed or as indicated in their IEP as available to the teacher. Teachers were urged to provide accommodations for all students who had specific learning needs, and not limit their attention only to students with an identified learning disability. Brief examples of applied assignments and their respective courses are provided to help clarify the approach taken in the project.

*Introduction to Special Education* Design and implement a one week instructional program for a subject which you teach. This must include detailed lesson plans using the format which you will encounter during practicum, including behavioral objectives, activities, materials, and a plan for evaluation. Specific modifications/accommodations and alternative assignments must be described for students with disabilities in your class. Begin with an instructionally relevant detailed description of the target students with disabilities. Conclude with a description of the outcome and a reflection on the impact of the instruction provided.

*Curriculum and Methods* Develop and implement a learning package suitable for the students in your classroom, including specific attention to the learning needs of your students with learning disabilities. An abstract of the learning package will be submitted and approved in advance of implementation. Follow the lesson plan format prescribed for practicum, being sure to fully describe adaptations or accommodations planned for the students with disabilities, including plans for reteaching in areas where mastery was not achieved. Include teacher made support materials. Copies of the learning packet along with entries on the prescribed reflective response log must be submitted following implementation.

*Assessment in Special Education* Prepare an IEP for a student with an identified learning disability. You must select and use the forms approved and used in your county. If you have not been involved in administering the

required assessments, you must interview the person(s) who did administer the assessments and discuss the outcomes which were relevant to the IEP. Along with the IEP provide a statement reflecting your experience with the process.

*Classroom and Behavior Management* Design and implement a behavior management intervention with a student in your classroom. Follow the prescribed format being sure to include identification of student need and target behavior, specify the intervention strategy and data taking mechanism. Provide a report describing the aforementioned elements, charted data depicting the results, and a narrative description of the results. Include a statement of your reflection on the process.

*Introduction to Learning Disabilities* Targeting students with learning disabilities or other special learning needs, design and implement a series of five lessons using direct instruction following the principles and processes provided in class. Be sure to specify the specific learning needs of the target group, describing the linkage of the lessons with the student needs. Provide a report including the aforementioned information plus the outcome data, and finally a personal statement of reflection on the process as implemented.

*Teaching Strategies in Learning Disabilities* Design and implement a learning strategy for a small group of students in your classroom, focusing on students with learning disabilities plus at-risk students in need of special instructional attention. Follow the guidelines and use the Deshler text as you prepare and implement the strategy. An abstract of the strategy must be approved by the instructor in advance of implementation. Provide a report including a description of the students and their learning needs, the instructional materials developed/selected and implemented, outcomes of the instruction including any reteach plans. Finally, a reflective log focusing on your experiences should be included.

Impact The applied assignments were very successful in preparing these experienced general educators to provide effective instructional programs for students with learning disabilities in their classrooms. Their comments indicated that they believed the instruction which they encountered in the project was meaningful because it focused on direct application in their classrooms. They viewed the course of studies as distinctly different from prior coursework because of the immediate theory to practice approach. They also indicated that post-instruction they felt much more comfortable and confident in planning and implementing instruction for their students with learning disabilities as well as other at risk students under their responsibility.

Over a three year period this project will prepare a maximum of 40 general educators to achieve teacher certification in learning disabilities. They will demonstrate competency in planning, implementing and evaluating instruction in general education settings for students with identified learning disabilities. In addition, they will demonstrate competency in preparing and implementing instruction for the academically at-risk students in their classrooms. The participants were primarily experienced teachers and as such will probably remain in their respective rural counties providing excellent service to all the students in their classrooms. The impact of this project is judged to be highly significant given the investment by all those involved in the enterprise.

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