

Preparing General Education Teachers for Inclusion

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The schools across the nation are moving towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general classroom, including those who have severe multiple challenges. The supporters of inclusion movement draw their impetus from the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provision of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) formerly known as Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142). The LRE provision requires schools to educate students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. It strongly promotes their placement in general education classrooms. However, the LRE provision does not mandate that all students with disabilities, regardless of the nature and severity of their limitations be placed in the general classroom (Kirk, Gallagher, & Anastasiow, 2000). Despite the very obvious intent of the LRE, students with all types and levels of disabilities are being placed in the general classroom.

Supporters of Regular Education Initiative (Stainback & Stainback, 1984; Will, 1986) believe that inclusion is a civil right movement. Although, there is not sufficient empirical evidence to conclude that the needs of all children can be met in the general classroom, they demand merger of special and general education. On the other hand, there is evidence that suggests that general education teachers do not believe that they are fully prepared for the inclusion of students with disabilities (Schumm & Vaughn, 1995; Schumm & Vaughn, 1992; Singh, 2001). And as Heller, Fredrick, Dykes, Best , and Cohen (1999) found out, even many of the special education teachers do not feel prepared to teach students with physical disabilities. Soodak, Podell, & Lehman (1998) have ascertained that general educators' willingness and confidence in their professional readiness is critical to the successful implementation of inclusive educational practices.

The **literature on inclusion indicates** that majority of the teachers support inclusion and believe that inclusion benefits students with disabilities and does not harm the non-disabled students. Further, the presence of students with disabilities has no negative impact on the instructional process (Scruggs & Mastropieri (1996). Inclusion offers several other benefits such as increased opportunities for social interaction for students with disabilities and facility in accessing the general education curriculum (Peck & Scarpati, 2004; Idol, 2006).

In view of all the advantages of inclusion and in the context of standards, and No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) that recognizes that millions of children do not have the benefit of well prepared teachers in their classrooms, there is an urgency to address inclusion issues as they relate to teacher preparedness.

We argue that general education teachers be prepared to work with students with disabilities at pre-service level. In our regular elementary teacher education program, we require our teacher candidates to take a course in special education (EDU 374). It is a 3-credit course that introduces the teacher candidates to special education legislation, individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Section 504 plans, the characteristics of students with various disabilities, life-span needs of students with disabilities, collaboration, families of children with disabilities , Universal Design of Learning (UDL), positive behavior supports, differentiated instruction and various adaptations/modifications that they can make to accommodate students with disabilities in their classrooms. We use a book entitled, “Teaching Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Settings” by Smith, Polloway, Patton, and Dowdy (2004). Teacher candidates watch a few videos relating to students with disabilities, they interview a special education teacher about his/her role in the education of learners with disabilities as well as challenges and benefits of inclusion; groups of students role play and make a class presentation

on accommodations that they would make for students with a disability of their choice, they write lesson plans with accommodations, and take two tests.

Concurrent with this course, teacher candidates spend 45 hours in an inclusive classroom in local schools. During their **clinical experience**, teacher candidates observe their co-operating teachers and their learners. They also get opportunities for tutoring and one-to-one instruction. The field experience also meets requirements of two other education classes that they take in concurrently with this special education course.

At the beginning of our spring semester, we raised the following question: **Does this introductory class in special education prepare our teacher candidates to teach students with disabilities?** We wanted to explore. So, we **designed a pre-experiment**. Our design involved a group which we pre-tested (O), exposed to treatment (X) and post-tested (O). On the second day of our introductory class in special education (EDU 374), we administered a pretest to 22 of our elementary teacher candidates who were enrolled in this class. The pretest had several Likert type questions. It took teacher candidates approximately 15-20 minutes to respond. It gathered data on teacher candidates' perceptions about their professional preparedness to teach students with disabilities. At the end of semester, we administered a posttest to our 22 teacher candidates. The posttest had items identical to the pretest. It aimed to collect data on our teacher candidates' perceptions about their professional readiness to teach students with disabilities. In Roundtable format, we share and discuss the findings of our experiment.

Some professionals maintain that it is fair, ethical, and equitable to include all students with disabilities in the mainstream. As was decided in Brown vs. Board of Education decision, separate is not equal (Kavale & Forness, 2000). It is discriminatory that students with disabilities should wait for some educational researchers to prove that that they can benefit from mainstream, when other students are allowed unrestricted access because they have no label (Stainback & Stainback 1992).

There are others who do not support inclusion. They believe that empirical evidence does not support full inclusion. Moreover, general educators are unwilling and/or unable to cope with all students with disabilities. Many agree that the hesitation of general education teachers is justified and that training all teachers to be able to meet the needs of all students with disabilities is simply impossible from a practical standpoint (Dover, 2005).

Whether or not one supports the concept of full inclusion, the fact is that most special educators are in favor of some degree of mainstreaming/inclusion-integration of students with disabilities with non-disabled students (Hallahan & Kaufman, 2002). And as reported in the 24th Annual Report to Congress, during 1999-2000, approximately 75% of the students with disabilities were educated in the regular classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The current evidence does indicate the urgency to prepare regular educator to teach students with disabilities.

We share the findings of our pre-experiment. Data analyses indicate that there are significant differences in pretest and posttest responses of our teacher candidates. During pretest, 54.5 % of the teacher candidates reported that they are aware of the educational rights of students with disabilities. During post-test this percentage increased to 100%. Similarly, during pretest a small minority of the teacher-candidates reported that they feel prepared to teach students with mild-disabilities (Learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral challenges and mild mental retardation) but during posttest approximately 80% of the teacher candidates reported that they feel prepared to teach students with mild disabilities. Further, during pretest, approximately 13% of the teacher candidates reported that they feel prepared to teach students with physical disabilities and sensory impairments but during posttest this percentage increased to approximately 73%. During pretest, approximately, 5% of the students demonstrated knowledge about IEPs and classroom accommodations. However, in pretest, approximately 95% of the teacher candidates demonstrated satisfactory knowledge about IEPs and classroom

accommodations. We present empirical evidence that suggests that a course in special education combined with a field experience is likely to prepare general education teacher candidates for inclusion. We also recognize that our teacher candidates will learn more about students with disabilities as they work with them.

The findings of our pre-experiment should be generalized with caution. We had a sample of convenience. Our sample may not be representative of the target population of elementary education teacher candidates. We conducted a pre-experiment; history might have affected the validity of our findings. The reliability and validity of our survey tool is unknown at this time. And finally, the experimental bias, experimental effects, instrumentation, pre-test treatment interaction might have confounded our findings. **Despite, obvious limitations, our study is significant. It has investigated the effectiveness of a special education course combined with a clinical experience in preparing elementary teacher candidates for inclusion.**

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