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At SERVE Center UNC, Greensboro

Preparing elementary school teachers in the Southeast Region to work with students with disabilities



Summary



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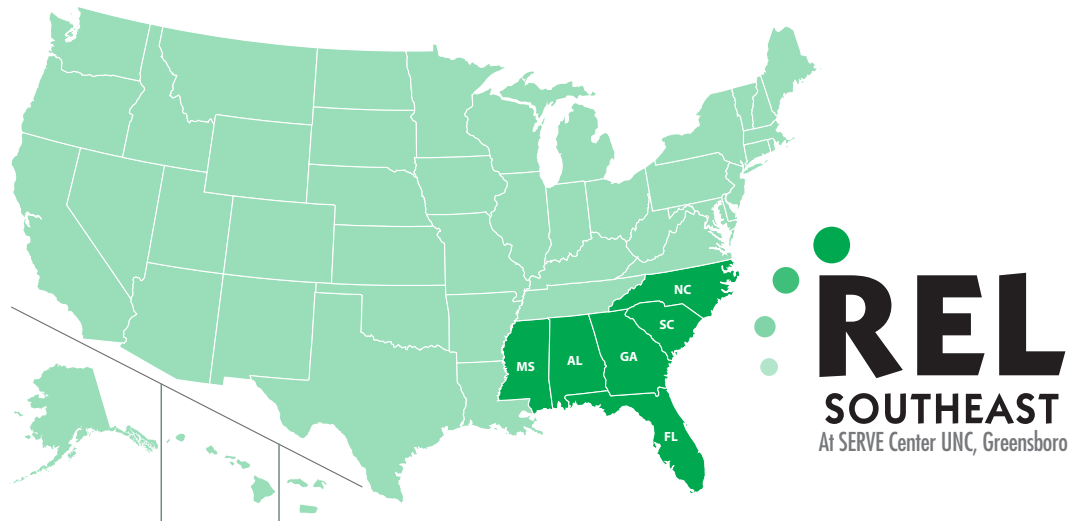
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Preparing elementary school teachers in the Southeast Region to work with students with disabilities

The study examines the extent to which elementary education teacher preparation programs in 36 randomly selected colleges and universities in the six Southeast Region states integrate content related to students with disabilities. Most programs require one disability-focused course, two-thirds incorporate fieldwork related to students with disabilities, and more than half incorporate disability content into their mission statements.

Recently reauthorized federal legislation has increased general educators' responsibilities for educating students with disabilities. Specifically, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires that all students, including those with disabilities, have access to and achieve in the general curriculum (No Child Left Behind Act 2002). And the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 is renewing emphasis on inclusion and on reducing the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education (Arthaud et al. 2007; Donovan and Cross 2002; Blanton and Pugach 2007; Goe and Cogshall 2007). Teacher preparation in this area will likely enhance the ability of future elementary education teachers to provide instruction to students with disabilities.

This report examines the extent to which content related to students with disabilities is

a part of elementary education teacher preparation programs in the six Southeast Region states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina). The report seeks to inform the discussions of state policymakers and teacher preparation leaders as they work to improve teacher quality through better teacher preparation. In the Southeast Region state committees are exploring ways to bolster teacher preparation, and teacher quality initiatives are under way in Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Identifying the strategies used to integrate disability content into elementary education training can provide important information for renewal efforts by schools, colleges, and departments of education and for state agencies considering changes to licensing structures and program performance standards.

To examine the current status of disability content in teacher preparation programs in the Southeast Region, the study analyzed information from 36 randomly selected institutions, stratified by state, program size, and whether the institution is a historically black college or university. During phase 1 (May–August 2007) the web sites of colleges and universities were searched for information on mission statements, course requirements, course descriptions and syllabi, faculty expertise and credentials, organizational arrangements,

and fieldwork requirements. During phase 2 (August–September 2007) interviews were conducted with the department chairs of six elementary education preparation programs.

The findings show that disability content is integrated into teacher preparation programs through a variety of strategies:

- Pursuing a program mission with disability-focused priorities.
- Requiring disability-focused courses.
- Embedding disability content in other required courses.
- Incorporating disability content into field experiences.
- Aligning mission and coursework requirements.
- Sharing course experiences between general and special education.
- Practicing collaborative program design.

The most prevalent strategy used to integrate disability content is requiring one disability-focused course. The majority of teacher preparation programs in the sample (30 of 35) require one disability-focused course, and about a quarter of programs (9 of 35) require more than one. Another common approach is incorporating fieldwork related to students with disabilities—two-thirds of programs (22 of 35) use this strategy. And more than half of programs (21 of 36) incorporate disability content into their mission statements. A few programs embed disability content into core

courses—and when embedded, such material appears most often in reading courses (13 of 35) and multicultural courses (10 of 26).

Programs with disability-focused priorities in their missions are more likely to incorporate disability content into fieldwork (18 of 21, or 86 percent) than programs that do not include disability in their missions (4 of 15, or 27 percent), a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p = .000$). However, 17 of 20 programs that include disability in their missions require one or more disability-focused course, about the same proportion (13 of 15) as those that do not include it. Among programs with disability-focused content in their mission, the strategies of requiring multiple disability courses and embedding disability content co-occur—six of the seven college and universities that require more than one disability course also embed disability content into reading coursework. References to disability and diversity are also often found together in teacher preparation program mission statements and core disability courses, yet seldom was the relationship between disability and diversity clearly articulated.

While this was a small sample of programs and the difference did not prove to be statistically significant, the data suggest that small programs may integrate less disability content than large programs do. Small programs have lower average extent of disability integration composite scores (2.7) than do larger programs (3.3). And of the 10 small programs in the sample, only 1 requires more than one disability-focused course, and 7 require only a basic categorical survey course.

Of programs within colleges and universities that have special education programs, shared

courses between general and special education are often required—12 of 17 institutions in the sample share 6–13 courses in the general and special education programs. Offering programs supporting licenses in both general and special education is the least prevalent strategy—4 of 36 institutions offer a program supporting dual licensure, and only 1 institution offers a program that fully merges general and special education.

Based on these findings, this report offers three key points for consideration:

- Disability content is integrated in teacher preparation programs through various approaches and to varying degrees in the Southeast Region.
- In both mission statements and core courses disability is frequently associated with diversity.
- Small teacher preparation programs face particular challenges in integrating disability content.

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