

Restrictiveness and Race in Special Education: The Content Mastery Center Model

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Certain minority students are over represented in special education programs nationwide. Many of these students identified for special education receive services outside of the general education classroom through the resource room (pull out) model. The Content Mastery Center (CMC) is a resource/consulting model that is an alternative to the traditional “pull-out” approach to educating students with special needs who are struggling in the general education classroom. The CMC can serve as the first level of support for students who are experiencing academic difficulties, prior to a referral to special education. Students, such as those who are culturally and linguistically diverse, could be assisted to maintain passing grades in general education through the support provided by the CMC. The CMC program requires high levels of collaboration between the CMC teachers and general educators. Studies on CMC programs report satisfactory student performance in general education classrooms with CMC support both for students with mild disabilities and those “at-risk.” More widespread replication and additional studies could provide support for this model as an alternative to placement in special education services for minority students.

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Fierros and Blomberg (in press) conducted a study of the for-profit and non-profit charter schools in California for the school year 2002–2003. Their study examined the nature of student enrollment in charter schools with respect to disability and ethnicity. Specific data were provided for (a) the number and percentage of students with and without disabilities across several ethnic groups who were attending these charter schools as compared to the regular public schools, (b) the percentage of students with special needs across the various ethnicities attending charter schools, (c) a comparison of the percentages of students with special needs across ethnicities in for-profit and non-profit charter schools, and (d) a comparison of four high incidence disabilities groups across ethnicities in for-profit and non-profit charter schools.

The authors provide much needed data regarding student enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools, and further analyzes data by ethnicity and category of disability. Not surprisingly, the patterns of placement in special education follow that of the public schools, resulting in over and under-represented groups in special education. This is disturbing in light of the attractiveness of charter schools across the country and the increasing numbers of students enrolled in them.

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Furthermore, what can be considered the “private school” approach to education in the public school system does not appear to affect the rate of identification of minorities in special education. Data reveal “the racial disproportionality of special education that has been established in regular schools would appear, on the surface, to be mirrored in chapter schools” (p.13). These inauspicious findings further reinforce the already existing trend of the segregation of certain student groups within the public school system.

In comparing the differences between non-profit and for-profit chapter schools, the results were variable. The data suggest no clear enrollment pattern between the two types of schools but an overall lower enrollment in chapter schools of students with disabilities across ethnicities. This further supports the segregation of students with special needs in both non-profit and for-profit chapter schools.

The study touches on the issue that has been debated in the field of special education since the original passage of P.L. 94–142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, renamed in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2003), that of disproportionate representation of minority and ethnically diverse students in special education. Data indicate that African-American males are over represented in categories of learning disabilities, mental retardation, and serious emotional disturbance. Hispanic students are over represented in the category of learning disabilities. Asian Americans and European American students are underrepresented in all categories of special education (Salend et al., 2002). The debate typically has focused on the regular public school system. Studies, such as this one by Fierros and Blomberg, seem to suggest that the issue related to chapter schools will only compound the existing problem. Will the chapter schools of tomorrow be the public school setting for students without significant learning problems, and the regular public schools for those who struggle?

The American public school system has had a difficult time determining the most appropriate education for ethnically diverse students and in answering the question, “Who is responsible for educating students who are ethnically diverse and struggling academically, general education or special education?” Do we enroll all students in special education who meet eligibility criteria, regardless of race or ethnicity? One side of the issue asserts that special education was meant to serve only students who truly have a disability, excluding differences related to race, culture, and ethnicity. The argument here is to provide better support services within the general education setting rather than through special education. Inappropriate special education labels for ethnically diverse students may be the result of vague definitions, biased methods of assessment, or poor instruction. This overrepresentation results in a tracking system for minority students, which restricts further academic success and career opportunities and is clearly a form of discrimination (Benner, 1998).

The other side of the issue purports that special education services should be provided to all students who are struggling academically and meet eligibility criteria. The right to special education should be provided to all who qualify, regardless of an overrepresentation of certain ethnic groups. The argument is that special education should provide the needed remediation and special instruction required to help any student achieve (Benner, 1998). Charter schools provide the opportunity to creatively and effectively meet the needs of students who are struggling, given their

increased flexibility and relative autonomy.

It would appear that the answer does not lie in what presently exists in most public schools and the way services are being provided to struggling students, nor in the chapter schools. Recently, much has been written in support of the merging of general and special education into a more unified education system, a system that more widely includes all students into the school environment without separating them into “general education” or “special education.” Studies have found that some inclusive service delivery models, such as the Content Mastery Center, support the learning of all students combining the expertise of special and general educators (Jenkins & Sileo, 1994). There is promise in this particular service delivery model as a support system for the majority of students who struggle to achieve in the general education classroom.

The Content Mastery Center (CMC) is a resource/consulting teacher model, which allows students to receive all instruction in the general education classroom and attend the CMC classroom for additional support as needed. The model, originally designed to assist students with mild disabilities, is easily adaptable to include providing services to populations of other students, such as those who are at-risk or second language learners. Services provided in the CMC include both indirect services, such as consultation with general educators, and direct services to students, including strategy instruction, modifications and/or adaptations to assignments and tests. The CMC model allows students to receive instruction from the general education teachers, the content area experts, and support from those trained in remediation and strategy instruction. The model could serve as a “first step” toward providing additional services to students who are falling behind in general education, prior to a referral for special education services, in addition to serving those identified as having mild disabilities.

The CMC model varies from the traditional resource room model. Students receiving services in a resource room typically are assigned for specific periods of time daily for specific content areas. There are several disadvantages to this resource room approach. In this arrangement, students miss the instruction being provided in the general education classroom while they are in the resource room. Also, most resource room teachers plan and implement their own curriculum and instruction, which are often times not aligned with the curriculum being taught in the general education classroom. Students generally receive support in resource rooms for remediation in language arts (reading, writing, spelling) and mathematics. When the students attend the general education classroom for other subject areas, such as science and social studies, the general educator must provide appropriate accommodations and modifications with little or no support from the resource room teachers (Jenkins & Sileo, 1994). Studies have reported that most general education teachers need more support, such as personnel and materials support, and time for planning, in order to meet the needs of struggling students in their classrooms. In addition, research over the past two decades indicates that segregating students from the general education curriculum and classroom is detrimental to their academic and social growth (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000).

In contrast, with the CMC approach, students receive all instruction in the general education classroom from the general education teacher. Students are allowed

to attend the CMC classroom when, and as often as, additional support/assistance is needed, to be decided collaboratively by the teacher and the student. This allows the student to become more reflective of his/her own abilities and needs. The general education teacher then sends the student to the CMC with a pass indicating on which assignment the student requires assistance, and provides the appropriate materials needed to complete the assignment (i.e., assistance reading a chapter from the science text). The pass also indicates the time the student is to return to the general education class; a student is not allowed to remain in the CMC while critical instruction is being provided in the general education classroom. For example, with this arrangement, a student may access the CMC three times for reading, math, and science assistance all in one day, and not attend for the next two days. The CMC teachers provide more than just tutoring services; they provide pre-teaching and re-teaching of subject matter, accommodations to curricular materials and tests, and study skills instruction. The success of this model depends heavily upon collaboration between the CMC and general education teachers. The CMC teachers must be informed of the general education lesson plans and provided the materials in advance in order to develop accommodations and modifications prior to the students' attendance. Alternately, the CMC teachers must keep the general educators informed as to the supports needed by and provided to individual students, as well as suggestions for meeting their needs while in the general education classroom. As an added benefit, general education teachers are provided with the modified materials to use in their own classrooms, whenever appropriate (Jenkins & Sileo, 1994). The CMC can be designed to assist any student who may need instructional support, including those with mild disabilities, those who are at-risk, and the culturally and linguistically diverse student. Through this approach, students need not be identified as eligible for special education services before receiving much needed support. Students could receive support in the CMC as soon as they begin to struggle academically, which may alleviate subsequent referrals for special education placement.

Two studies in 2002–2003 and 2003–2004 of a CMC in an elementary school in Hawaii, a state of the most ethnically diverse student population in the U.S., found positive results for providing support services to students identified as “at-risk” and students with mild disabilities. Data were collected on attitudes of parents, students, and general education teachers toward the CMC, student grades, student frequency of access to the CMC, and frequency of modification and adaptations provided. Parent, student, and teacher response indicated strong satisfaction and perceived benefit. Students reported overwhelming satisfaction with the CMC and felt they were doing better in school with the support they had received. Since students with and without disabilities attended the CMC, the negative stigma typically attached to special education pullout programs did not seem to apply in this situation. Teachers perceived the CMC to be beneficial to the students who attended, although some collaboration challenges were identified. Many felt the need for more collaboration between the CMC and general education teachers, a common problem with this type of support model. Parents, too, reported overall satisfaction with the CMC (Fujieki & Scheuring, 2004; Mrasek & Jenkins, 2004).

Data revealed a positive correlation with time spent in the CMC and effect on student grades. Most students who accessed the CMC were able to maintain passing

grades in the general education classroom. Modifications data revealed similar methods of support for both groups of students, including one-to-one assistance, use of supporting materials (highlighted texts), re-taking tests, and oral reading of directions to students. In general, the studies indicated that this model, which combines the expertise of general and special educators, is a viable approach to providing support services to students. The results of widespread use of the model might yield lowered rates of referrals to special education for those who learn differently. If students who are currently overrepresented in special education, such as those who are culturally and linguistically diverse could first receive support services in a CMC, subsequent referral to special education may not be necessary.

Another suggestion receiving wide support is the training of teachers in both general and special education content in order to prepare them to more effectively meet the demands of the increasingly diverse student population. The inclusive schools movement necessitates that general education teachers be prepared to meet the needs of all students. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) has developed a set of standards, *Model Standards for Licensing General and Special Education Teachers of Students with Disabilities: A Resource for State Dialogue* (2001) that specifies the knowledge and skills that all teachers, general and special education, should master to effectively teach students with disabilities. INTASC recommends that states use these Standards to generate dialogue among stakeholders. Institutions of higher education should consider integrating these Standards into their teacher training programs, and state licensing boards should consider the Standards as requirements for licensure. A study, recently conducted at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, revealed that exiting teacher candidates in a Dual Preparation in Elementary and Special Education program reported significantly greater confidence in teaching students with disabilities across all INTASC standards than their counterparts in the Elementary Program (Jenkins & Ornelles, 2004). It would be interesting to determine if this confidence carries over into practice in their teaching careers. More noteworthy would be to determine if dually trained teachers, teaching in elementary classrooms, make fewer referrals to special education than those trained only in elementary education, and specifically referrals of students who are of over represented ethnic groups. Greater numbers of dually trained teachers entering the teaching field into general education classrooms could ultimately impact the numbers and types of referrals made to special education. Dually trained teachers would be the ideal personnel for Content Mastery Centers. They have been prepared in both the general education curriculum and in strategies to meet the needs of struggling learners.

The issue will not be resolved in the near future but efforts can be made today to impact tomorrow's schools. Institutions of higher education must examine their teacher training programs. Public schools must be willing to change existing practices for different approaches to educating all students, such as the Content Mastery Center model. The classrooms of tomorrow will be more diverse, and, clearly, neither special educators nor general educators alone will be able to meet the needs of all students who struggle. Charter schools with their exemption from adhering to local and state regulations are in a position to explore alternative approaches to educating students who are diverse, including those with disabilities. Charter schools

should take the opportunity to pilot programs such as the Content Mastery Center in order to provide data for widespread dissemination.

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