

Teacher Education and Students with Significant Disabilities: Revisiting Essential Elements

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

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INTRODUCTION

The status of teacher education and students with significant disabilities is examined in the context of five essential elements that characterized the development of the field in the mid-1970s. The five elements are: (1) a clear teacher role with advocacy at the center, (2) a focus on student learning and meaningful outcomes, (3) strong curriculum guidance, (4) partnerships with parents and schools, and (5) the national capacity to develop a sufficient number of quality teachers. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the elements that characterized the development of teacher education in the area of severe disabilities, consider their status today, and discuss research and practice implications for the future.

A CLEAR TEACHER ROLE WITH ADVOCACY AT THE CENTER

Focused Advocacy

Students with significant disabilities. Much of the advocacy focus has been on the inclusion of individuals with significant disabilities, e.g., in regular schools, in regular classes, in the regular curriculum, in extracurricular offerings. One way to determine whether this type of advocacy is still needed is to look at the annual data on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]. Based on the latest available data, about half of the students with significant disabilities are in self-contained settings. The percentage of students in self-contained classrooms has changed minimally for students with mental retardation (54.28% in 1998 and 53.92% in 2004) and multiple disabilities (62.3% in 1998 and 60.18% in 2004). For students with autism, there was a more significant progression toward inclusion (60.44% self-contained in 1998 and 47.15% in 2004).

Racial and ethnic disparities. IDEA's annual data can be used to gauge progress in other areas, including the extent to which we are reducing racial/ethnic gaps in opportunities. Patterns of inequity remain in percentages still in self-contained classrooms and differences in post-school outcomes.

Toward Clarity

Purpose and role. The issue of job design and role ambiguity of special educators has been studied extensively, particularly in the context of teacher retention. Among the factors related to stress are dissonance between job expectations and actual requirements, obvious job design stressors (e.g., burdensome paperwork and extensive meetings), limited opportunities for individualization and managing wide ranges of student performance levels, and the conflict between a fully inclusive model and the need for specialized instruction in areas such as vocational and functional curriculum.

Inclusion and role complexity. Teacher advocacy has been centered on gaining access to regular schools and to some regular classes. Although we trust that students with significant disabilities are so fully owned by schools that their needs and interests are consciously and routinely considered at all levels of decision-making, to keep the instruction anchored in grade-level expectations, the team generally begins with the regular curriculum and differentiates it to include students with significant disabilities.

To help the newly prepared teacher who expresses confusion around his or her role, we answer these questions affirmatively:

- Should he or she work as an insider, collaborate within a regular team structure, and plan and differentiate the curriculum together with the “whole” group in mind?
- Should this newly prepared teacher also focus on learning priorities that arise from considering the unique needs of students with significant disabilities, realizing that they will not be sufficiently addressed even in a strong, collaborative planning model?

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- Finally, is it acceptable for this teacher to focus mainly on students with significant disabilities rather than working cross-categorically to take full advantage of developed expertise?

We know of no literature or professional standards that provide the type of direct response that teachers are seeking. It is important that teacher education programs operate from a clear picture of the present and desired role of the teacher.

A FOCUS ON MEANINGFUL OUTCOMES

In the mid-1970s, there was a move toward large-scale accountability for learners with significant disabilities with the criterion of ultimate functioning—to successfully work and live as part of our heterogeneous society. Nearly all curriculum models that followed shared two common characteristics: (a) identification of life domains for curriculum planning (e.g., community, vocational, home, recreation) and (b) some type of prioritization process to select skills for a student based on preferences and functional use. We have come to expect post-school success in employment, social life, and more independent living as a function of schooling. We are now in an era of standards-based reform. The question for those concerned with learners with significant disabilities is whether the prior standards (i.e., working and living in the community) that have served this population well should be replaced by standards more closely aligned with the academic core of the regular curriculum. The push toward greater access to the regular curriculum as articulated in IDEA (1997) and alignment with regular education standards as outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] are greatly influencing how school districts and states are answering the question. In an effort to raise the achievement of students with disabilities, NCLB required states to more fully include students with IEPs in the regular assessment system. Initially 1% and now 2% of IEP students are exempt from regular assessments and therefore eligible to participate in alternate assessments.

Alternative Assessments: A Missed Opportunity?

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 pushed forward the notion that accountability must extend beyond the individual child's team—beyond the IEP and had the potential to set in motion national discussions and deliberations on what outcomes should be viewed as priorities for students with significant disabilities. However, individual states were left to determine how best to comply with this new legislative expectation, and a state's alternate assessment may not be the best vehicle to measure effectiveness.

Instilling a Personal Sense of Accountability

New teachers will face accountability on different levels. In addition to state and district alternate assessments, on a more personal level, teachers must be prepared to track how students' repertoires change as a result of their good instruction. Today's challenge is agreeing on the outcomes for which to assume responsibility.

STRONG CURRICULUM GUIDANCE

A curriculum based on functional skills, systematic instructional methods, and a positive support system have been the underpinnings of curriculum and methods courses for teachers of students with significant disabilities. Today IEP teams are expected to be more selective in what functional skills get addressed in schools, complement applied behavioral analysis with other methods, consider the learner's cultural background, understand how to facilitate support systems, and involve peers in a wide range of relationships.

Curriculum Content

The professional standards developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium [INTASC]; Council of Exceptional Children [CEC]; and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS] all use a non-categorical approach. We have drawn on

the NBPTS standards and our understanding of promising practices to suggest curricular content that should be prominent in programs preparing teachers for students with significant disabilities.

Adapted regular curriculum, including the arts. Special educators are expected to demonstrate basic content knowledge and some pedagogical knowledge in core curriculum and enrichment areas. The goal is to have a sufficient working knowledge in the regular curriculum that will enable special educators to adapt the curriculum, collaborate effectively with colleagues, strategically “opt out of” sections of the curriculum because of competing priorities in specialized curriculum areas, and use coherent decision-making frameworks in collaboration between regular and special educators.

Vocational preparation, transition, and daily functioning skills. The vision of graduates living and working in the community—particularly with respect to work—has become a reality for an increasing number of graduates. The most recent National Longitudinal Transition Study [NLTS2] revealed an increase in working for pay by students with significant disabilities—from 37.9% to 41.5% for students with mental retardation and from 9.6% to 36.1% for students with multiple disabilities/deaf-blindness, although estimating that about 60% of the graduates are still unemployed. Thus, vocational preparation and transition planning remain key competencies for special educators, particularly at the secondary level.

Finally, vocational preparation has had a fairly consistent place in curriculum for years, but there are some who question the place of daily functioning. Daily functioning routines provide an important structure for all of us as well as a basis for learning, easing transitions, exercising choices, and increasing independence. While the view of functional skills has evolved over the years, the commitment toward addressing this essential area as a component of a comprehensive curriculum needs to remain strong.

Literacy, social, communication, and mobility as foundational skills. For students with significant disabilities, instruction needs to be explicit in foundational skills that provide the basis for interacting with people and information, navigating the tasks of living, solving problems, making contributions, all within an ethical framework. These include basic academic and cognitive skills, including reading, writing, basic math, expressive and receptive communication, thinking, and social and mobility skills. Most students without disabilities will learn these skills incidentally. Teachers need to learn to recognize opportunities throughout the day to teach reading, writing, and other foundational skills (e.g., social, communication, and motor skills) within regularly scheduled activities.

Teaching Methods

Teachers must adjust and refine their approaches until they determine an effective set of strategies for each student.

Leaving some room for applied behavioral analysis. Successful application of behavioral principles based on the work of Skinner proved that even students with the most profound disabilities could learn. Teachers need to understand the merits (e.g., explicitness, carefully planned steps over which a student can feel a sense of mastery) and influence of the behaviorist tradition within a humanistic context as well as the major criticisms of behavioral interventions.

Culturally responsive instruction. Culturally responsive teaching involves employing the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students in the teaching process. Culturally responsive teachers may or may not be racially/ethnically diverse themselves, but it is their values and beliefs regarding teaching, learning, and what their students bring to the learning environment that make them successful. Special educators must also understand their own values and perspectives, open their eyes to continuing institutional inequities, and learn to support students linguistically as well as culturally.

Authentic instruction and assessment. Authentic instruction stresses the importance of using real-life contexts and materials to learn new tasks in the school setting. Authentic measures of student growth and progress can be collected in student portfolios and used in parent-teacher conferences, which take on a new dimension when the discussion is around authentic artifacts from a student's portfolio.

Assistive technology and integrated therapies. An assistive technology device is equipment used to maximize the functional capabilities of a child with disabilities. Becoming thoughtful and creative with assistive technology is a practice all teachers and related service personnel must develop. They should employ these technologies in collaboration with the student, parents, and therapists.

Peer Connections and Support Systems

For students with behavioral challenges, facilitating friendships and other types of support circles often have a great importance. Teacher candidates need guided practice implementing behavioral and social support strategies during their programs.

Being Explicit about Curriculum Expertise and Getting Help from Well-Designed Materials

Curriculum clarity, like role clarity, is desperately needed in our special education teacher education programs. It is not unusual to examine university program outlines and course syllabi and find little about what curriculum expertise is expected of the candidates. Given little guidance except for the NBPTS standards with respect to curriculum knowledge in teaching standards documents, this paper presents explicit curriculum areas that should be prominent in teacher education programs for special educators of students with significant disabilities.

If designed well, curriculum guides and other materials can help teachers with the pressing matters of what to teach, how to teach it, and how to measure progress. Teacher educators know that candidates are resource hungry. We could do much more to help them find good teacher guides and curriculum materials. We could also increase our efforts toward collaborating with accomplished teachers to create and publish much-needed curricular products.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

The notion of teachers becoming allies with parents and working together to change systems has very strong roots in the professionalization of teaching students with significant disabilities.

Allies with Parents

Helping teachers understand the importance of reciprocal partnerships is a critical part of a teacher education program, e.g., through case studies. It is hard to imagine where the field would be without the strong parental voice that has pushed and shaped our work and needs to be heard throughout the teacher education program.

Student Voice

Today there is an increasing body of work about the importance of self-determination, e.g., students participate in their IEPs and transition planning. Truly understanding a student's preferences requires an extensive amount of give and take, active encouragement, and listening. Competencies with respect to student empowerment need to find their way into teacher education courses.

School Partnerships and Model Demonstration

Best practices in teaching students with significant disabilities are best taught through sustained involvement in a setting where these practices exist. Model demonstrations served the field of significant disabilities well in its early years and will continue to be important as districts and

universities work together to show that wide-scale implementation of promising practices is possible.

CAPACITY TO DEVELOP A SUFFICIENT NUMBER OF DIVERSE, COMMITTED AND TALENTED TEACHERS

Today the expectation is that students with significant disabilities will be served by certified special educators who will work in collaboration with regular educators, therapists, and paraprofessionals to meet the extensive needs of their assigned students.

Addressing Continuing Shortages

Populating schools with diverse and highly qualified special educators is a continuing challenge for our profession, especially in urban areas.

Alternative certification. The teacher shortage has led to many alternative and fast-track programs for post-baccalaureate students interested in becoming teachers. About 10 percent of beginning special educators complete their certification through an alternative route program. While many questions remain about the effectiveness of these programs, the programs have clearly been able to attract a more diverse pool of teacher candidates than traditional teacher education programs. About 38% of students in special education in our U.S. schools are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, yet only 14% of their teachers are from similar backgrounds. Many new teachers from alternative certification programs are choosing teaching as a mid-career path.

Non-categorical licensing. The shift toward non-categorical licensing makes sense in that 46% of beginning teachers work with students from two or three disability groups, and 31% serve students from four to six disability groups. As schools become more inclusive and create collaborative team structures with special educators as members, flexibility in the role of the special educator is highly desired.

Helping to Prepare Other Team Members: Regular Educators, Therapists, and Paraprofessionals

Special education faculty should work collaboratively with faculty who prepare other critical team members, including regular educators, other special educators, and therapists. In addition, special educator teacher candidates (and to some extent regular educators) will need to be prepared to work with paraprofessionals who are essential members of the team.

Following Teacher Education Graduates: Induction and Continued Professional Development

In an era of increased accountability, rather than resist accountability, a better response might be for teacher education faculty to decide which questions are reasonable to ask about their programs. Continued professional development should include mentoring, district-level curriculum study groups, and the development of new, practical curriculum materials.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The analysis presented in this paper offers a starting point to revisit practices and consider their value as we shape today's teacher education programs focused on students, with significant disabilities. Our recommendations include:

Focused Advocacy. Maintain a focus on significant disabilities, while continuing to push for inclusive structures; help teacher candidates recognize that advocacy is needed, not only because having a significant disability still makes one vulnerable in our society, but also because injustices related to race, ethnicity, and poverty exist for students with significant disabilities and require diligence and action.

Meaningful Outcomes. Join with others and play a leadership role in defining the outcomes desired for learners with significant disabilities; these outcomes should be inclusive, but not to the point that they no longer respect the unique and valued contributions we know are possible and necessary for students with significant disabilities.

Curriculum Guidance. Ensure that teacher education programs provide strong curriculum guidance in both the overlapping and the specialized content. A national consensus panel would go a long way toward helping to define the specialized content needed in teacher education programs for students with significant disabilities.

Partnerships. Create enduring partnerships with parents and individuals with significant disabilities so that teacher candidates hear their voices throughout the teacher education program. Create an interdependent relationship with school districts—one that is so powerful that teacher candidates feel that they are a part of this partnership.

Capacity for staffing schools with diverse and high quality teachers. Develop district-university councils that jointly plan, oversee, and seek innovative solutions to staffing needs. Take accountability seriously, and track the success of one's program, addressing and routinely reporting on issues related to capacity.

CONCLUSIONS

The professionalization of teaching and learning for students with significant disabilities emerged from a strong, grassroots advocacy movement that needs to be maintained as focused advocacy. In the inclusive school we envision a continuing role for a special educator who has unique expertise in supporting students with significant disabilities.