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## **Perspectives of teacher training for Special Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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Educators are well aware of the increasingly diverse student population in the schools. It is also widely accepted that instruction of students with disabilities is no longer equated with separate, “pull-out” programs. The move toward inclusion entails changes in schools, in curriculum, in instruction, in the roles of the teachers and in the manner in which teachers are prepared.

Placement of special needs children in the regular class in general education affected the role of the special education teacher in these inclusive schools. A study by Klinger and Vaughn (2002) illustrates clearly these changes. For a period of six years the researchers followed up Joyce who was a special education teacher in a self-contained classroom solely with LD students and had to adapt to teaching in an inclusive setting. “What did we learn? Joyce’s role as an inclusion teacher for students with LD was complex and multifaceted and depended largely on her successful interpersonal and communication skills. Much of the knowledge and skills she required was a blend of (a) special education assessment and intervention skills, (b) the ability of creatively adapt and accommodate instructional lessons and assignments to meet the needs of students with LD in a whole-class setting, (c) and understanding of the general education curriculum and goals, (d) the ability to collaborate and co-plan with GE teachers, and (e) commitment and dedication” (p. 29).

One of the first issues to look into has to do with the necessary knowledge base for special educators. In the second edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* York and Reynolds (1996) present the recommendations made by the CEC in 1992 as to the necessary knowledge base for special educators: Philosophical, historical and legal foundations of special education; Characteristics of learners;

Assessment; diagnosis and evaluation; Instructional content and practice; Planning and managing the teaching and learning environment; Managing student behavior and social interaction skills; Communication with collaborative partnerships; Professionalism and ethical practices. As can be seen, collaboration and learning environments are new topics introduced following implementation of inclusion. The authors also point out the fact that more "mainstreaming" textbooks are written for use in pre-service general education in response to the growing numbers of special needs children included in the general class.

Fisher, Frey & Thousand (2003) reported what teachers in two inclusive schools answered when asked to identify the skills and knowledge required of all teachers in their schools – Collaborative teaming and teaching; Curricular and instructional modifications and accommodations; Assistive technology, Positive behavioral support, Personal support; Literacy and content instruction.

One can safely conclude that the necessary knowledge base for training special educators has to include curricular adaptations and collaborative measure to be incorporated in theory and in field experiences.

There is great concern among educators and special education scholars with regard to teacher preparation. In Great Britain, Philip Garner (2000) is very concerned about "the conceptual and practical unpreparedness of many newly qualified teachers. They...will be increasingly expected to form the vanguard of inclusion initiatives in education" (p. 111). Reflecting on twenty years of preparing special educators faculty members (Bauer, Johnson & Sapona, 2004) of the College of Education in the University of Cincinnati conclude: "We continue to grow as a field and teacher education programs are vastly superior to those of 20 years ago. However, we have not come far enough, and it is critical that we go further" (p. 244). Reviewing the contributions made for the Mittler & Daunt (1995) description of teacher education for special needs in Europe, one cannot fail to notice the important issues raised in teacher education for inclusive settings: What should be the demands on general teachers in inclusive schools? Is there a role for the special education teacher in inclusive settings? Should they continue with direct teaching in segregated classes or should they focus on supporting teachers in general classes to respond to the individual learning needs of the special needs students?

Stayton and McCollun (2002) suggest considering three existing models for preparing teachers for inclusive settings: (a) **Additional Model:** This model is characterized by

adding special education courses to general education training programs and adding some field experiences with students with disabilities; (b) **Infusion Model**: This model is characterized by an infusion of general and special education content in the same courses and set of field experiences. These courses are often team taught from the two disciplines and field experiences jointly supervised; (c) **Unification Model**: This model is constructed to unify the higher education general and special education curricula. A unified training program combines all of the recommended personnel standards from the respective general education and special education program into a newly conceptualized curriculum. The underlying premise is that when comparing the policies, practices and theoretical basis for the two fields, more commonalities than differences could be identified. Indeed, I gathered a random sample of descriptions of thirteen teacher-training programs across the United States<sup>1</sup> and found they all changed their focus towards collaboration and inclusive schooling. Of these, seven programs were unified offering a dual major in Elementary and Special Education; One program incorporated a series of special education courses into the core courses of all education majors; One put an emphasis on collaborative field experiences and the rest made necessary accommodations in the traditional Special Education program.

An eye-opener with regard to the training of future special educators is offered by Brownwell, Ross, Colon & McCallun (2005). They suggested looking for critical features of Special Education teacher preparation by way of comparing it with general teacher education. The framework used was based on two studies (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Koppich, 2000; For references see Brownell et al, 2005) across which the following features of effective (general) teacher education programs emerged: (1) A coherent program vision; (2) A conscious blending of theory, disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and practice; (3) Carefully crafted field experiences; (4) Standards for quality teaching; (5) Active pedagogy; (6) A focus on diverse student population and (7) Faculty collaboration. Sixty-four publications of program descriptions and evaluation in special education (Published between 1990-2003) were reviewed and revealed five major program characteristics as follows: (1)

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PT<sup>1</sup> TP Griffin & Pugach, 1997; Lovingfoss, Molloy, Harris & Graham, 2001; Ford, Pugach, Otis & Wilburn, 2001; Lombardi & Hunke, 2001; Ruhl & Hall, 2002.

Extensive field experiences; (2) Collaboration; (3) Evaluation of the impact of the training program; (4) A focus on inclusion and cultural diversity and (5) Maintaining a positive constructivist orientation toward teacher training. The authors concluded that "the special education programs in the literature that we reviewed share features with programs considered exemplary in general education. In both fields teacher education is labor intensive, carefully crafted, focused on connecting theory and practice, collaborative and invested in creating teachers who can respond to the needs of children and youth, particularly those with diverse needs" (p. 247).

In summation, teacher training for special educators is diversified and as much as the special education scene is. Some institutions of higher learning have abolished special education training altogether and offer merged or unified programs, others have kept both general education and special education programs but exert much efforts into collaboration of faculty, programs and field experiences. So far there is not enough research evidence as to the advantages of one training model over the other. I am of the opinion that one should be very cautious with regard to unified programs. As mentioned earlier, special education is not just better, more individualized instruction that is good for every child but it is an area of expertise and professionalism that caters to specific learning difficulties.

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