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A Model for Inclusive Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

Providing a quality education for all students in inclusive settings has been identified as perhaps the most challenging, yet most important, issue in education. There is little doubt, however, that inclusivity, rather than exclusivity, will characterize the schools of the next century. To be ready for that future we must prepare teachers who can teach in settings that are inclusive, meeting the needs of all students. This will require a different model of teacher education. This article describes one such model that incorporates what we know about inclusive educational practices into the preservice preparation of special and general education teachers

The last decade has seen enormous changes in our public schools. One of the greatest changes is in the amount of diversity in the classroom. Teachers are being called upon to teach students with a wide range of abilities and needs. Perhaps the factor that has had the greatest impact on diversity is the movement toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Many writers have identified this as one of the most challenging, controversial and confusing issues in education today is (Putnam, Spiegel, and Bruininks, 1995; Stainback and Stainback, 1994; Ferguson, 1995). As Hallahan and Kauffman (1994) have observed,

The movement toward more integration (inclusion) has led to some of the bloodiest professional battles ever waged in the field of special education. The disputes between radical integrationists and those of a more conservative persuasion have threatened to rip apart the field of special education.." p. 46

Even the term "inclusion" itself is perplexing with much debate and discussion regarding its meaning. To some, inclusion is another word for mainstreaming, a familiar word that has been around for decades. But, while inclusion means different things to different people, it is fairly well established that it is fundamentally and philosophically different from mainstreaming. Under the concept of mainstreaming students with disabilities were taught in pull-out programs until their academic skills increased to the same, or very nearly the same, level as their same-age peers in the regular (general) classroom. The student with disabilities would then be "mainstreamed" back into the general education setting. Thus, the emphasis was on changing the child to better fit the "regular" system of education.

The concept of inclusion places the emphasis on changing the system rather than the child. Proponents of inclusion insist that it isn't necessary for a student with disabilities to be "at grade level" in order to receive instruction in the general education setting. The argument is that our educational system, structure and practices need to shift and become more flexible, more inclusive, and more collaborative

in order to better accommodate students with learning differences. This argument is based on several points:

1. Research indicates the relative ineffectiveness of pull-out programs as a viable approach to teaching children with disabilities (Will, 1986; Affleck, Madge, Adams, and Lowenbraum, 1988; Semmel, Gottlieb, and Robinson, 1979).
2. The current dual system results in fragmented, disjointed programming that minimizes communication between regular and special education teachers and harms education for students with disabilities and students without disabilities (Bilken and Zollers, 1986; Gartner and Lipsky, 1987; 1989; Lilly, 1987, 1988; Reynolds et al., 1987).
3. Legally, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities are to be educated in the "least restrictive environment. To many professionals, parents, advocates and consumers this means the general classroom. Increasingly, the courts, and federal and state education agencies are agreeing (Oberti v. Board of Education of Clementon School District ; Holland v. Sacramento City Unified School District; Mavis ex rel. Mavis v. Sobol; Daniel R.R. v. El Paso; Osborne and Dimattia, 1994).
4. Philosophically there is a movement toward a more inclusive society that does not separate and segregate individuals based on differences that are often misunderstood. Inclusion proponents argue that our schools must mirror this inclusive, diverse society (Bilken and Knoll, 1987; Gartner and Lipsky, 1987; Giangreco and Putnam, 1991).
5. Practices in many schools are demonstrating that teaching all students together in general education settings can be done successfully if appropriate practices and methods are used (Banerji and Daily, 1995; Bishop, 1995; Davis, 1995).

The perspective of many advocates of inclusion can be summarized by York-Barr, Schultz, Doyle, Kronberg and Crossett (1996),

Inclusive schooling is often thought of as the inclusion of all students, regardless of ability, into the same schools and classrooms with peers who are not considered to have disabilities. Inclusive schooling, however, extends far beyond mere physical proximity to providing students and adults the support required to belong and achieve in classroom and school communities. Inclusion is both a process for and outcome of understanding, acceptance, and valuing of differences among today's school children and youth. It is potentially both a process and an outcome for achieving social justice and equity in our society. (p. 92)

There are, of course, voices to be heard on the other side. These voices argue that doing away with special education as we have known it and teaching all children in the regular classroom is tantamount to "throwing out the baby with the bath water." These individuals point out that there are children who do not learn as well in the general education classroom as they would in a "pull-out" program, and to eliminate separate services would reduce options for children. Critics of inclusion also assert that general education teachers are unable to cope with the numerous and complex needs of children with disabilities (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1991; Kauffman, Gerber, and Semmel, 1988; Walker and Bullis, 1991).

The literature is replete with debate on virtually every aspect of inclusion (Morse and Santos, 1995; Fritz and Miller, 1995; McLesky and Weldron, 1995; Mather and Roberts, 1996; McLesky and Pugach, 1995; Kauffman, 1995; Grider, 1995). In reality, however, inclusion is not a black or white issue. It is not merely a matter of accepting or rejecting inclusion. The positions of those on both sides of the issue really fall along a continuum with those advocating "full inclusion" for every student on one end, and those individuals advocating the preservation of the current system on the other end. There are those at every point along the continuum encouraging various levels of inclusion while still maintaining some aspects of the segregated or "pull-out" program.

However, to address inclusion we must move beyond the rhetoric and the debate of moral, legal, and philosophical issues. Regardless of whether or not these issues are ever settled we must accept the fact that inclusion is here. It is a fact of life in our public schools and will remain so in the decades to come. As Hallahan and Kauffman conclude,

No matter whose point of view ultimately prevails, it is fair to say that there will be dramatic changes over the next few years in how, and especially where, we educate students with disabilities. (p. 46)

The focus now must center on how to implement inclusion successfully so that it results in improved educational quality for all students. We must explore and identify means and methods to establish more inclusive educational communities. As Stainback, Stainback, East, and Sapon-Shevin (1994) have noted,

...the goal of inclusion in schools is to create a world in which all people are knowledgeable about and supportive of all other people, and that goal is not achieved by some false image of homogeneity in the name of inclusion. Rather, we must look carefully at the ways schools have typically organized around individual differences and come up with alternatives. Typical models of special education services have involved identifying individual differences, labeling them, and then providing segregated services for people similarly labeled. The alternative to segregation is not dumping students in heterogeneous groups and ignoring their individual differences...We must find ways to build inclusive school communities that acknowledge student differences and meet students' needs yet do so within a common context. (p. 487)

An Inclusive Teacher Preparation Model

One of the greatest barriers to achieving this goal is the preparation teachers receive at the preservice level. Several researchers (Pugach and Allen-Meares, 1985; Baker and Zigmond, 1990; Schumm and Vaughn, 1995; Giancreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, and Schattman, 1993) have noted the lack of professional training in inclusive techniques and practices for general and special education teachers. And Welch (1996) also discussed the differences in philosophies and theories between general and special education at the preservice level. If teacher education programs are to prepare educators to be successful in the classrooms of the future they must reconceptualize and redesign their approach to preservice preparation of teachers.

Figure One illustrates a proposed model for developing and implementing an inclusive teacher preparation program.

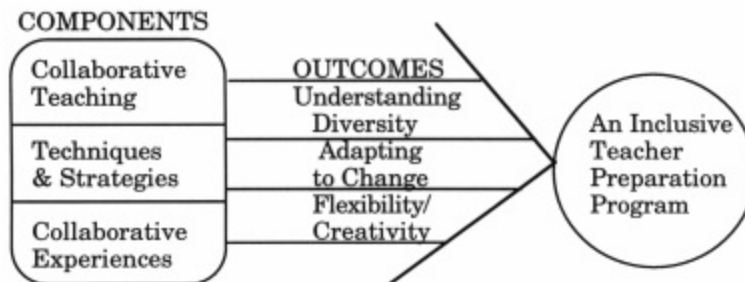


Figure One: An Inclusive Teacher Preparation Model

Figure One: An Inclusive Teacher Preparation Model

This model provides a framework for developing and implementing a teacher education program that will prepare teachers to teach in inclusive educational settings. There are two major dimensions of the model. One deals with the outcomes of the model and the other focuses on specific program components. Both of these dimensions will be discussed and then some ideas will be presented on the process for implementing this model within the context of the college/university environment.

Program Outcomes

To be effective an inclusive teacher preparation program must instill in the preservice teacher an understanding and appreciation of diversity. In general, most educators, and that includes teacher educators, have not had a great deal of experience in teaching students with diverse needs and abilities. That is because when we went to school, and when many of us taught in the public schools, these students were segregated from the general education setting. Many individuals coming into preservice training programs have had limited experiences with special needs children. Exposing preservice teacher candidates early and often to situations involving individuals who are uniquely abled and who have different learning styles and needs can assist with this. Teacher trainers also need to mirror inclusive practices and accommodate for diversity in their classrooms. Most teachers have a narrow range of diversity with which they feel comfortable. Expanding that comfort level is essential if teachers are to be successful in teaching to the wide range of diverse abilities present in today's classrooms.

Preservice teachers must also become comfortable with change and they must learn early in their preparation to be flexible and creative. Our K-12 classrooms have undergone tremendous changes and those changes will continue in the future. One of the biggest roadblocks to inclusion has been the inability of many educators to shift from one operational paradigm to another (Skrtic, 1986). Since we do not know for certain the types of situations and challenges that will face teachers in the coming decades, we must prepare them to deal with and adapt to change. To do this successfully they must also have the ability to be flexible and creative in meeting these challenges and solving problems. This can be accomplished by providing experiences that require prospective teachers to develop creative problem-solving skills and to view situations from different perspectives.

Components of an Inclusive Teacher Preparation Program

As illustrated in Figure One three major components constitute the supports for this model. The first, Collaborative Teaching, concerns the instructional approach used in the classroom. If we want to prepare teachers to teach collaboratively we must utilize that model in our preservice classes. As shown in Figure Two there are a number of ways this can be accomplished.

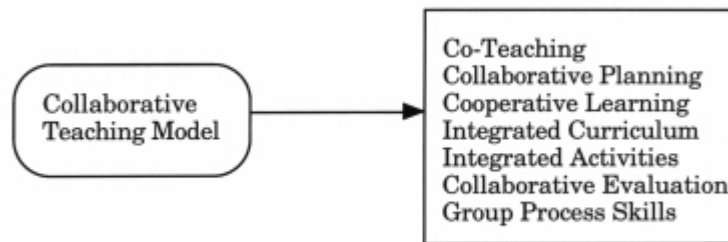


Figure Two: Using the Collaborative Teaching Model

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Teacher educators can co-teach classes, modeling for their students collaborative teaching skills. This can be done with general and special education faculty, as well as with faculty from other disciplines outside of education. Collaborative planning for classes and collaborative evaluation of students can also be used as a means of demonstrating how such practices can be done effectively. Such approaches as collaborative learning arrangements and activities requiring students to develop and practice group process skills can also be utilized in the classrooms. Finally, college teachers should integrate curriculum objectives as well as instructional activities across classes and across disciplines.

As shown in Figure Three, the second component involves Techniques and Strategies. Teachers who will be expected to teach in diverse settings must have the instructional tools to do so successfully.

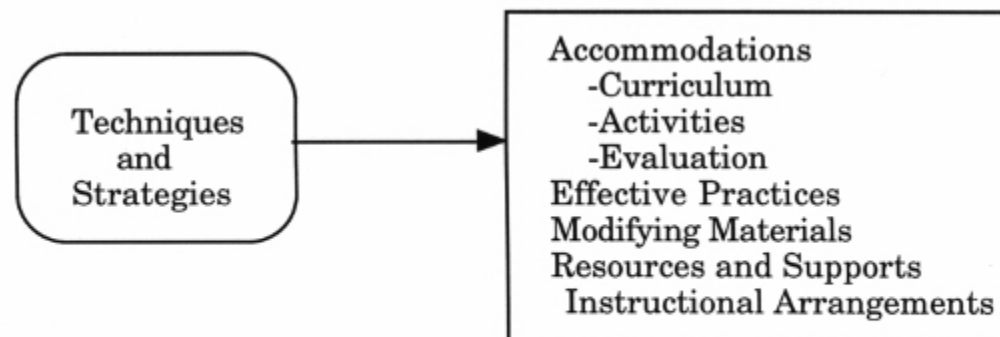


Figure Three: Techniques and Strategies for Inclusive Education

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Several researchers (Baker and Zigmond, 1990; Schumm and Vaughn, 1995; Giancreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, and Schattman, 1993) have noted the lack of professional training in inclusive techniques and practices for general and special education teachers. A tremendous amount of money is spent on inservice training to give teachers instructional skills to teach students with diverse needs. These resources could be directed elsewhere if teachers could emerge from their preservice training already possessing those skills.

Preservice preparation should address appropriate accommodations in curriculum, instructional activities and evaluation procedures, the modification of materials, and the effective identification, development and utilization of resources. In addition, the preservice program should prepare teachers to use various types of instructional arrangements such as multi-level teaching, cooperative learning and peer tutoring.

The third component of an inclusive teacher preparation model relates to Collaborative Experiences. The two previous components apply primarily to the classroom. This component relates to the field-based experiences of the prospective teacher.

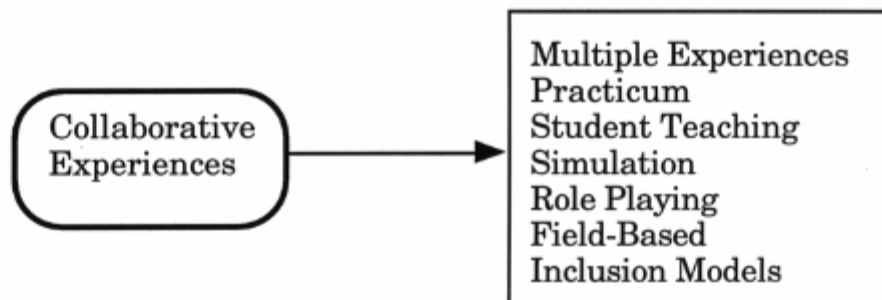


Figure Four: Providing Collaborative Experiences to Preservice Teacher

Figure Four: Providing Collaborative Experiences to Preservice Teacher

Some prior preparation can be given in the classroom through simulation and role-playing. But, beyond that, the prospective teacher should be given the opportunity to observe and work in collaborative, inclusive situations. This requires that the preservice preparation include multiple opportunities for the prospective teacher to observe and work in actual classrooms where inclusive practices are being implemented. More than this, preservice teachers should also participate in other activities in the school that promote inclusive practices. This includes collaborative planning and problem solving activities, as well as curriculum adaptations and modifications.

Implementation

If colleges and universities are to prepare teachers to teach in inclusive settings, they must mirror inclusive practices in their teacher preparation programs. That is not easy to do because higher education has traditionally been very discipline-driven and inflexible in its approach to teaching. Most

college professors enjoy a great deal of autonomy and are not used to teaching collaboratively or accommodating for students with differences. In addition, the environment of the university, being very competitive, does not lend itself well to collaborative and inclusive practices.

As with the implementation of inclusive practices in K-12 schools, it may be more successful to begin on a smaller basis with two or three faculty members leading the way for others. Collaboration might begin in a class or two and then expand to others. Once the effectiveness, desirability and potential of such practices have been demonstrated, the stage may be set for developing a more formal, comprehensive model.

Developing and implementing an inclusive teacher training program must follow the same path used to implement inclusive practices in K-12 schools. While administrative leadership is not as imperative as it is at the K-12 level, it is still helpful to secure such support. Since it may be necessary to reallocate resources, chairs or deans from education and other disciplines need to communicate and have a foundation for understanding and encouraging an inclusive approach to teacher preparation. There needs to be a commitment to such an approach and the institution should have a clear plan, or model, for how it is to be accomplished. Whether that model is the one described here or a different one, a specific structure must be cooperatively developed and put into practice.

The first step, then, is for faculty to cooperatively develop a model that contains a vision statement and the essential components for achieving that vision. The design of this plan should include faculty from education as well as from other disciplines. Once the model has been developed, specific steps for implementing the model should be designed, with activities within the classroom and in the field identified.

The specific steps of the model should then be implemented with responsibility assigned for monitoring the effectiveness of each activity. As with all inclusive models, regular and continuous communication and planning must take place among faculty members both before and during the implementation process. Planning should monitor effectiveness, identify and solve problems, and provide support for faculty and students.

Program Description

Project PRIME, at Abilene Christian University, is an attempt to prepare teachers for inclusive educational settings. Funded by the Texas State Board for Educator Certification, this project incorporates the components of an inclusive teacher preparation program described above. Project PRIME (Preparation, Recruitment, and Retention for Inclusive Multicultural Education) has the following features:

- 1) Instruction in the components of collaborative teaching;
- 2) Instruction in teaching strategies for inclusive settings;
- 3) Practicum experiences in inclusive settings;
- 4) Modeling of collaborative teaching by university professors;

- 5) Collaboration with practicing teachers regarding needed skills and experiences;
- 6) Utilization of experts and specialists on inclusive practices via distance learning;
- 7) The development of web-based courses;
- 8) The development of a support network for new teachers in inclusive settings.

In its first year, Project PRIME is seeking to demonstrating the effectiveness and value of preparing teachers for collaborative, inclusive educational settings.

Conclusion

Preparing teachers at the preservice level to teach in inclusive settings is essential if our schools are to truly teach all students in inclusive, collaborative, and diverse settings. To accomplish that we must start designing and building an atmosphere of collaboration and inclusiveness at the preservice level, as well as practices that demonstrate to prospective teachers the possibilities and promise of an inclusive world.

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