

**Preservice Teacher Education in Kansas:
Instruction about Students with Disabilities**

by

David Bateman

and

Hope Sullivan

Abstract

There is an increased emphasis on the education of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. However, regular education with its current resources, knowledge base, and personnel may not be equipped to serve the needs of students with disabilities. For regular education to be prepared, preservice training has to change. Given the disparity between the skills needed for education of students with disabilities in the regular classroom and the current methods used for training teachers, the purpose of the study was twofold: 1) to interview deans, associate deans, and professors in regular and special education in Kansas regarding the movement of institutions of higher education toward instructing preservice students about the education of students with disabilities, and 2) to determine how identified barriers can be removed so teachers will be prepared to support education in the least restrictive environment for all students.

The nature of education for children with special needs is currently in a state of transition, progressing in the direction of education for most students within the regular classroom (Sale & Carey, 1995; Wang, Walberg, & Reynolds, 1992),

often referred to as inclusion (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1998). The successful accomplishment of such an objective necessitates a significant degree of change and restructuring throughout education. Unfortunately, as educational systems initiate this process of transformation, special education and regular education teachers will invariably encounter many of the concomitant barriers intrinsic to such change (Bradley, 1994; Kearney & Durand, 1992; Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 1998). It is therefore incumbent upon teacher training institutions to lead the transition to education within a less restrictive environment while reducing the magnitude of the impediments to change. However, these obstacles are multidimensional (i.e., attitudinal, systemic, experiential, and monetary), and exist at various levels within the field, including teacher education programs, and the state-mandated teacher certification requirements. Finally, there is no federal requirement for preservice education about students with disabilities. As King-Sears (1995, p. 55) states,

Although federal legislation (Public Law 94-142, 99-457, and 101-476) requires that students with disabilities be educated with nondisabled students to the maximum extent appropriate, those mandates do not extend to teacher education programs. That is, teachers are typically prepared in separate programs dependent on the credentials the teacher is seeking (e.g., special education, general education).

Additionally (P.L. 105-17 [1997]), the recent reauthorization of the law does not include requirements about the education of students with disabilities for regular education teachers, although there is the expectation that

the teachers will now participate in the development of individualized education programs.

Very little has been written about how teacher education programs have been reformed to focus on greater interaction between general and special education (Henderson, 1998). There has been, however, some discussion of efforts to combine general and special early childhood education in two different states (Strayton & Miller, 1993). The rationale for combining efforts in early childhood education was based on the realization that inclusion of young children with disabilities in a range of early childhood programs is more likely if personnel preparation programs are also integrated (Bredenkamp, 1992; Burton, Hains, Hanline, McLean, & McCormick, 1992; Miller, 1992). When general and special early childhood education programs were combined they found issues related to administrative, curricular, faculty and student-related, and societal matters that clearly needed to be continually addressed as a part of implementation (Strayton & Miller, 1993).

Additionally, there has been very little written about preservice training for other individuals, such as principals, involved in education relating to issues in special education (Bateman, 1998). That does not mean there have not been changes recommended relating to the preparation of principals. There have been major changes in some institutions. In 1989 the National Policy Board for Educational Administration issued standards for insuring that principals receive nine basic standards of preparation (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1989). Of these nine, there were no specific recommendations relating to students with disabilities, and some questioned the recommendations because they called for a doctorate in education (Lunenberg, 1995). In addition

to the national effort, other individual programs have been designed to change the methods of preparation of principals. Programs such as those at Stanford University, the University of Colorado at Denver, East Texas State University, and the alliance of Brigham Young University, East Tennessee University, Florida State University, and Virginia Polytechnic University are also seeking to change the manner in which principals are prepared (cited in Lunenberg, 1995). Much of the preparation in those programs focuses on performance-based learning and problem-based programs. Again, the specifics about working with students with disabilities are not there. No wonder principals feel unprepared for their roles in the administration of special programs (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997).

The purpose of the present study was twofold: 1) To interview deans, associate deans, and professors in regular and special education in Kansas regarding the movement of institutions of higher education toward instructing preservice students about the education of students with disabilities; and 2) to determine how identified barriers could be removed so that teachers in both regular and special education can be prepared to support education in a less restrictive environment.

Method

Definitions

For the purposes of this analysis, the term *children with disabilities* is defined to refer to "all exceptional children except those identified as gifted" (Kansas State Board of Education, 1993, p. 12). This category includes children with autism, mental retardation, specific learning

disabilities, hearing impairments, language impairments, speech impairments, behavior disorders, physical impairments, other health impairments, severe multiple disabilities, deaf-blindness, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairments, and those eligible for early childhood special education services. The term *preparation* constitutes preservice teacher education within any teacher training program. Further, the teacher certification process referred to throughout this document pertains to the present method for certifying teachers as delineated by the Kansas State Department of Education. Currently, the State Department of Education issues guidelines for the basic qualifications necessary for teaching in the state of Kansas. Those teachers pursuing or renewing regular education endorsements for either elementary, middle, junior, or secondary levels must meet those requirements relevant to their specializations as outlined in the *Certification and Teacher Education Regulations* (Kansas State Board of Education, 1994, p. 19). With regard to knowledge of students with disabilities, all that is required is a two-credit-hour survey course or "other courses with equivalent content in the area of exceptional children" providing "knowledge of the major categories of exceptionality and the application of this knowledge to teaching" (Kansas State Board of Education, 1994). This one course is consistent with requirements in other states (Simpson, Whelan, & Zabel, 1993).

In contrast, special education competencies are geared specifically toward preparing teachers to function effectively in the context of working with students with disabilities. Such endorsements are highly specific to particular facets of special education (i.e., behavior disorders, early childhood handicapped, gifted, learning disabilities, physically impaired, etc.), and are obtained in

conjunction with the corresponding level of regular education certification. As a function of these guidelines for teacher certification, teacher education programs implement the coursework and training necessary for preservice preparation to meet these requirements.

Participants

Participants were chosen based on their knowledge of higher education matters in Kansas, their willingness to participate, and referrals from other participants. There were a total of twenty-one participants. Participants consisted of deans and associate deans ($n = 9$) and professors within the fields of teacher education and special education ($n = 8$). Participants represented either public universities (i.e., Emporia State University, Fort Hays State University, Kansas State University, The University of Kansas, and Wichita State University), or a private university (Ottawa University) ($n = 1$). Additionally, three other individuals who work in education service centers were also interviewed. The individuals from the education service centers were chosen to give an "outside voice" on preservice teacher preparation in Kansas. Their background was of individuals originally trained in regular education now serving in special education roles.

Procedure

A series of personal and telephone interviews were arranged so that each participant was contacted on an individual basis. During these interviews, each individual's perspective regarding barriers to education in a less restrictive environment were examined, and his or her recommendations for eliminating such obstacles were also obtained. An integrated approach consisting of both

structured and unstructured interview questions was employed to elicit information in a balanced fashion. Structured interview questions included the following: 1) What are the barriers to providing education about students with disabilities in regular education classrooms? 2) What are the barriers to providing preservice education relating to students with disabilities in regular education programs? and 3) What must change to remove these barriers? Unstructured interview questions were based on the responses to the prior questions.

Results

Table 1 presents comparative data concerning the significant barriers to education about students with disabilities in a less restrictive environment as identified by the participants. All of the deans/associate deans and eighty percent of the professors interviewed indicated greater integration is necessary between regular and special education coursework and experiences in teacher education programs. However, all respondents included noted that teacher-education programs are currently working toward such integration to the maximum extent possible, despite such difficulties as credit hour generation and curricular restrictions. Fifty-eight percent of the deans/associate deans and sixty percent of the professors considered the lack of availability and/or the inadequate utilization of resources and support within school systems to be a critical factor. Fifty-eight percent of the deans/associate deans and twenty percent of the professors also identified monetary issues and funding mechanisms as critical barriers to education in the least restrictive environment. Further, fifty-eight percent of the deans/associate deans and forty percent of the professors named inadequate provisions for

and lack of uniform specifications concerning continuing-education/staff development, insufficient clarity of roles for those involved (sixty percent of the professors), and attitudinal factors (sixty percent of the professors) among teachers, administrators, parents, and students to be barriers as well. Finally, the manner in which educational programs emphasizing inclusion are devised and implemented by individual school districts was identified as a potential barrier by fifteen percent of the deans/associate deans, and seventy-five percent of the professors. Additional barriers cited by both groups included the tendency to include students with disabilities in regular classes without proper consideration of special individual needs, the previous history of separate systems in terms of regular and special education, lack of individual teacher accountability, failure to recognize temporal factors in programmatic success, and the lack of cohesion and clear role definition by school professionals.

A majority of the participants stated that although university personnel might know explicit details about the best practices, few have had the opportunity to see their actual implementation. These practices often are seen as academic solutions to typical problems encountered in the classroom. Some of the faculty in institutions of higher education have not been teachers in many years. Faculty who have recently received the terminal degree necessary for teaching in higher education have received instruction in their doctoral programs, in turn, from those who have been out of the classroom for an even longer time. There exists a research knowledge base, but many individuals teach from experience, and if the experience with inclusion is not there it is often difficult to teach.

Fifty-eight percent of the deans/associate deans and forty percent of the professors failed to identify specific

policies in Kansas constituting significant barriers. Generally, they stated the problem would appear to be not of any particular policy, but rather the lack of a specific policy. There was consensus among the participants that the Kansas State Department of Education should take a much stronger leadership role in revising the certification and teacher-education regulations and in mandating staff development and continuing education requirements to align more closely preservice regular and special education curriculums. Currently, the state certification requirements support and maintain a separate system of special education. Greater clarity is needed regarding the state's expectations for education in the least restrictive environment and the concomitant shared responsibility for such education. The preponderance of the interview data across groups supported the premise that this is not a legislative issue but rather a regulatory one. For substantive, lasting, effective change, it is incumbent upon the appropriate regulatory agency (i.e., KSDE) to modify the teacher-certification and staff-development-requirements accordingly.

The representatives of the education service centers, though limited in number, validated the comments of the deans/associate deans and the professors. The three representatives of the education service centers stated unanimously that 1) there was inadequate programmatic integration; 2) there was a lack of necessary resources and support; 3) there were problems with funding patterns and monetary factors; 4) there was a lack of specificity regarding staff development requirements; 5) there was a lack of definitional clarity; and 6) there were attitudinal barriers preventing implementation. On the issue of the manner of implementation, they stated that the education of

students with disabilities in the general education classroom varied dramatically from school district to school district.

Programmatic Integration

All participants identified the lack of integration within teacher education programs between the special and regular education curricula as a critical barrier. The deans/associate deans indicated that these two preservice curriculums must be integrated so teacher education can become a more effective mechanism for preparing teachers to educate students with disabilities. Professors interviewed were more specific in their concerns regarding teacher preparation, indicating that training programs are not preparing preservice general-education teachers sufficiently for the realities of educating students with disabilities. They called for much greater integration of the regular and special education curricula, and concluded there are currently no exemplary models for preservice education to teach students with disabilities. However, many participants indicated it is the responsibility of preservice education to provide such models, both in terms of theory and practice. Several professors also asserted coursework needs to be more closely linked with field experiences. Additionally, many proposed including training in the use of broad problem-solving skills, allowing teachers to devise their own solutions to classroom difficulties rather than relying expressly on textbook solutions to stereotyped situations and challenges.

Resources and Support

The lack of availability of the proper resources and support in the classroom was identified as a barrier by a majority of the deans/associate deans and professors interviewed. In

the absence of the appropriate resources and support mechanisms, teachers are limited in what they can accomplish. "Resources" was broadly defined to include time and materials, while "support" encompassed both administrative backing and the availability of adjunct classroom personnel (e.g., paraprofessionals and aides). It was also asserted that even when such resources and support are available, teachers are frequently in need of training in their utilization so as to optimize their use in the classroom.

Funding Patterns and Monetary Issues

Monetary constraints and funding patterns were identified as a barrier by both the deans/associate deans and the professors. Consistently, educators observed that education in the least restrictive environment is an expensive endeavor when implemented properly. Educating students with disabilities in the regular classroom was described as being far from cost-effective, and a number of the professors interviewed perceived the present funding patterns as supportive of traditional pull-out models. Territorial issues were also described as a barrier between the legislature and funded services. The legislature determines the requirements for the services they will fund, and such decisions are often not based on the best interests of the students, generally resting solely upon fiscal considerations.

Staff Development Requirements

The deans/associate deans identified staff development and inservice teacher training as another barrier to education about students with disabilities. The rather arbitrary nature of in-service and staff development requirements

complicates and compromises the effective preparation of teachers for educating students in less restrictive settings. At present, there are no specific requirements relating to the content of continuing education other than a two-credit-hour survey-of-exceptionality course imposed by the Kansas State Department of Education (Kansas State Board of Education, 1994). All additional staff development activities are at the discretion of the individual teacher or school district and are not specifically mandated. It was proposed by some of the deans/associate deans that the Kansas State Department of Education should be much more prescriptive in terms of the staff development requirements, while teacher-education programs should provide the requisite continuing training. This proposal was supported by a number of the participating professors, who also identified the need for existing teachers to acquire more specific skills for teaching students with disabilities, including specialized training pertaining to methods of educating, motivating, and including exceptional students as opposed simply to housing them in a regular classroom. It was also asserted that training and licensure is not a static activity, but rather a dynamic process, one beginning with teacher training programs and extending throughout the professional career. Thus, teachers cannot be completely and permanently prepared by any teacher training program. Their education must extend beyond the university and be augmented by on-going growth and effective programs for professional development.

Definitional Clarity

There was strong consensus among the deans/associate deans regarding the necessity for greater definitional clarity of requirements. This group maintained there is a serious need for more cohesive understanding and consistency of

interpretation at both the state and federal levels regarding the legislation and requirements relevant to preservice education about students with disabilities. It was proposed that the intent of legislative mandates and regulatory requirements remains an issue open to interpretation for administrators, who often are often forced to make "educated guesses" as to when and for whom such directives apply. As such, an "all or nothing" administrative approach to education of students with disabilities may result, which is clearly inappropriate for the needs of some exceptional students. A recurrent, emphatic theme among the deans/associate deans was not that all students should be included in the regular classroom, but rather that this is an issue best determined on an individual basis with the intent of best serving each student's unique needs.

Attitudinal Factors

Several attitudinal factors were identified as barriers by both the deans and the professors participating in the current study. It was proposed by several participants that the crux of the problem lies in the attitudes of individual teachers and their unwillingness to change and adapt, to move beyond the traditional constricted roles and attempt new approaches in the classroom. Further, instead of seeing all children as equal and deserving of education, there is a persistent and pervasive tendency on the part of teachers, administrators, and parents alike to recognize those with special needs as different from "normal" students—a perspective that may encourage teachers to respond to exceptional students on the basis of skewed expectations as a function of degree of disability. Additionally, both the deans/associate deans and the professors called for a much greater degree of teacher

accountability, contending teachers must feel responsible for the success of all their students rather than considering the students with special needs to be "somebody else's problem." Without this sense of accountability and ownership of outcome by teachers, there will be no motivation to be innovative and effective in terms of one's efforts in the classroom.

Manner of Implementation

The deans/associate deans and professors identified the manner of implementation as a barrier to education about students with disabilities. The success of any intervention or strategy for change is dependent upon garnering both top-management and subordinate investment and support. In the absence of tangible commitment to change at the administrative level, it is unlikely teachers (the front-line implementors) will be invested in the effort. Additionally, the process of change necessarily entails some degree of insecurity and loss. At a minimum, job responsibilities will be redefined and performance expectations altered. The provision of thorough training and opportunities to participate in the planning and decision-making process is critical for allaying these concerns and preventing them from becoming serious impediments to success. Similarly, it is necessary for both teachers and administrators to recognize that effective, lasting change is a gradual process. Realistic expectations for the rate of change should be established to avoid overload and serve as a timetable for incremental progress. Thus, initiatives for educating students with disabilities in a less restrictive environment implemented in a hurried or otherwise less-than-complete manner are unlikely to be successful.

Discussion

The greatest degree of consensus among all participants relates to the lack of a single solution to the many barriers to preservice education about students with disabilities in a less restrictive environment. It was repeatedly characterized by the participants as a problem inherently systemic in nature, one necessitating a multi-disciplinary approach comprised of parallel efforts to produce change toward the provision of better services. Further, it is a problem arising from the interaction among historical, attitudinal, monetary, and organizational impediments in which the problematic whole is significantly more daunting than the sum of its parts.

Consistently, it was noted that the history of regular and special education as separate, parallel systems serves as an additional obstacle well-grounded in tradition. The extended history of advocacy and training as separate systems serves only to discourage a sense of personal accountability among teachers and places exceptional children within the jurisdiction of specialists. There was also considerable agreement among the participants regarding the need for the certification and teacher-education regulations to reflect the degree of integration between regular and special education competencies required for effective preservice education about students with disabilities. It is these certification standards that ultimately serve to drive and govern the direction of teacher education. Interviewees realize it is the responsibility of teacher-education programs to become more proactive in their efforts to prepare preservice teachers with the skills necessary for success. While it is incumbent upon teacher-training institutions and the preservice training they provide to lead the move to education of students with disabilities in a less restrictive environment, to the extent the state

board of education certification requirements perform such a critical role in controlling and governing this system, obstacles will continue to exist until change occurs at this level as well.

In many ways it is the interaction of the regulations that currently exist that create a *de facto* systemic barrier to change. The regulations, in their entirety, establish a standard of adequacy precluding any incentive for change or innovation. Additionally, several participants suggested barriers to education about students with disabilities were not a function of the regulations themselves, but rather of the interaction among the regulations, the requisite compliance procedures, and curricular policies. As such, barriers to education about students with disabilities may be based more on the interpretation of regulations and the perception of constraints than on any actual regulation itself. However, it would appear the Kansas State Department of Education is far from supporting and encouraging the efforts necessary for sustained and effective change. Furthermore, many of the certification and teacher-education regulations continue to promote a separate system for providing special education, rather than supporting the education of students with disabilities with students who are not disabled to the maximum extent possible.

The identification of the barriers that serve to impede teachers' abilities effectively to educate all students in the least restrictive environment is the first step in the direction of positive change. However, aggressive, proactive, multi-disciplinary efforts to this end are absolutely vital to ensure success.

Recommendations

These recommendations would prove most helpful if they were to be implemented within the next three years. They need to occur soon to assist as many teachers as possible in working with students who have disabilities:

1. Modification of the Kansas State Department of Education Certification and Teacher Education Requirements so that regular education and special education competencies are more closely aligned.
2. Provision of positive field-based training experiences within the context of teacher-training programs.
3. The use in teacher-training programs of teacher-educators who are knowledgeable and experienced with educating students with disabilities in a less restrictive environment.
4. The use of technologically advanced resources in the classroom to facilitate teaching and to allow students with disabilities to learn and participate on a more equal, less prohibitive basis with their peers.
5. Development of programs to retain contact with teachers following completion of preservice education for the purpose of tracking, support, and access to additional resources and training as needed.
6. Greater specificity regarding staff development and continuing-education requirements.
7. Increased definitional clarity regarding state and federal legislation relating to the education of

students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

8. The bringing together of local education agencies and institutions of higher education for planning program content.
9. Development of learning domains (or strands) and articulation of competencies to be attained and demonstrated by our aspiring teachers, and organization of instructional units or courses within the bureaucratic realities of the universities to do justice to the specified learning experiences and knowledge bases.

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Table 1
Comparison of Identified Barriers among
Selected Categories of Educational Personnel

Barrier	Personnel	
	Deans	Professors
Inadequate programmatic integration	100%	80%
Lack of necessary resources and support	58%	60%
Funding patterns and monetary factors	58%	20%
Lack of specific staff development requirements	58%	40%
Lack of definitional clarity	58%	60%
Attitudinal variables	58%	60%
Improper manner of implementation	15%	60%

David Bateman is a Professor in the Teacher Education Department at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania.

Hope Sullivan was a student at Emporia State University at the time of writing.