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### **Including Students with Disabilities in Teacher Education: One Journey, Several Perspectives**

The growing acceptance of the philosophy of inclusive education has resulted in elementary and secondary school classrooms that are designed meet the instructional needs of all enrolled students in the class, both those with and those without identified disabilities. Associated with the inclusion movement in pre k–12 education have been parallel changes in college and universities. Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 began the imperative among colleges and universities to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. With federal legislation regarding individuals with disabilities in the workplace, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), colleges and universities have been charged with developing and implementing policies regarding accommodations. Colleges of Education, whose primary mission is to prepare professional educators, should be particularly concerned not only with accommodating students with disabilities but making them feel welcome in their chosen major and adequately prepared to face the challenges and joys that await them as they enter the teacher workforce.

Typically in the past, universities were unsure about the extent of accommodations needed and often relegated accommodations to physical changes in the campus, such as the addition of elevators, ramps, and accessible doorways. Gradually, however, universities began to address the instructional accommodations needed by students. University faculty was encouraged to make accommodations for students in courses and instructional accommodations were facilitated by a specific campus entity, such as an Office of Disability Services. Students with disabilities were provided adaptive equipment, tutorial/reader assistance, and advocacy as needed.

A combination of more accepting and accommodating campuses and an effort to establish an inclusive model of teacher preparation has resulted in increased enrollment of people with special needs into teacher education programs. While the physical environs of the university have been designed with people with disabilities in mind, a frequent challenge among faculty members, including those in colleges of education, is to examine their attitudes toward disability. This dilemma is described by Obiakor et al. (1995) as handicapism versus disability. A person may have a disability and not be handicapped. Informal collaboration frequently consists of individual faculty members seeking assistance from other faculty members knowledgeable about various types of disabilities. This collaboration is more likely to occur when there is encouragement from an administrator in the dean's office who is familiar with special needs students.

One group of students with disabilities, students with hearing loss, has lagged behind other groups of individuals with disabilities in matriculating into teacher preparation

programs in general education. The profession of teaching in general education has historically relied heavily on oral/aural communication. Perhaps because hearing is often not the primary avenue of communication for individuals with severe hearing loss and English is a non-native language for many Deaf American Sign Language (ASL) users, the acceptance of students who are deaf or hard of hearing into general education teacher preparation programs may have been delayed. This does not mean that deaf and hard of hearing individuals have not assumed teaching positions in the past. An examination of the past century of educating deaf and hard of hearing children shows the routine employment of teachers with hearing loss. Many state's certification requirements allowed such teachers to bypass certification in general education and independently become certified in deaf education. However, over the past 10 years state policies have dramatically changed. An ever-increasing number of state level certification offices and Colleges of Education, seeing and supporting the rapid move toward inclusive rather than segregated classrooms for students with disabilities, have required that special educators hold dual certification in general education and their special education specialty area. Deaf and hard of hearing candidates have not been exempted from these rules. Consequently, greater numbers of deaf and hard of hearing candidates will enter our teacher education programs in general education.

Teacher educators have suggested using the experiences of deaf teacher candidates to illustrate the differences in their experience in teacher preparation programs in contrast to that of hearing candidates (Compton, 1997; Harrison and Lemke, 1999). At the University of New Orleans general and special education faculty members have collaborated to provide accommodations that allowed deaf and hard of hearing students to successfully complete teacher certification programs in general education. Valuable lessons were learned as a result of the collaborative efforts of all those involved – the students, those who provided the accommodations, the special educators, and regular educators in the teacher education program.

During the late 1990's, two individuals with severe to profound hearing loss enrolled in the general education teacher preparation program at the University of New Orleans. The authors represent three different discipline areas in the field of education. Each came to the experience with a different background and assumed a different role. The professor in the area of deaf education provided liaison services for deaf and hard of hearing students, preparing new instructors to meet the educational needs of the deaf and hard of hearing teacher candidates and troubleshooting when something was amiss. She found that the success the teacher candidates experienced increased when instructors were well prepared prior to the entrance of the student with hearing loss. This was especially apparent when the instructor was well informed in regards to special seating and note taking needs of the teacher candidates with hearing loss, the use of interpreters and transcribers, and instructional instances that could be impacted by the students' hearing loss. The general education teacher educator, who was also a member of the College of Education administration, found that a willingness to be flexible in both instructional and administrative interactions with students with hearing loss created a learning environment conducive to optimal learning and instruction. The faculty member in special education noted the positive impact of including a student with a disability in teacher education

classes had on the future teachers without disabilities. Including teacher candidates with disabilities is especially important early in the non-disabled teacher candidate's career since a majority of teaching environments experience before and after now include a number of students with disabilities. Attitudes and dispositions are cemented early in teacher candidates training, therefore positive experiences with individuals with disabilities have far reaching effects later in teacher candidates' lives. The success their own students experience depends, in great part, on the attitudes developed during the teachers' preservice training years.

Administrators and faculty involved in teacher education should realize that it is not enough to comply with the letter of the law regarding accommodations. It is essential that a major goal of all teacher preparation programs be to adhere to the spirit of true inclusion – that is, providing all students with the least restrictive environment. Students with special needs, such as hearing loss, should be allowed to share in the decision-making regarding the most appropriate type of accommodations to be used. If the needs of the individual students are to be met, then teacher education programs cannot take a “one size fits all” approach to accommodating students with a particular type of disability. Education students, who are not classified as having a disability, can benefit from an opportunity to interact with and learn from peers who are classified as disabled. They will learn from each other, for diversity in the classroom is a value-added aspect of classroom interaction. This is true as much on the university level as it is on the elementary and secondary school levels. If educational institutions are to be truly inclusive, there is a need for regular and special educators to collaborate. They have much to learn from each other and about themselves as they discuss and reflect upon the rationale for their instructional practices. Finally, all preservice students should be provided with an opportunity to see teacher educators “practice what they preach” in terms of modeling best practices in accommodating for the needs of all individuals. Since much of the research tells us that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught, then it follows that preservice teachers will be more likely to engage in more inclusive practices in their own classrooms if they have had the opportunity to observe teacher educators who consistently provided effective and appropriate accommodations in university classrooms.

## References

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