

# Effective Teaching Strategies for the Mildly Disabled Child: The Key to Post-Secondary Education

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## **Abstract**

Having worked both as an English teacher of general education students and a special education resource teacher of learning disabled students, it is evident to me that a thin line exists between the educational gains of the majority of general education students and students with mild learning disabilities. However, there exists a huge divide between the resources offered to these students and the teaching strategies of these students' teachers. Additionally, in both cases, students are subjected to standardized testing which in many cases determines such important educational decisions as promotion, graduation, and entry into post-secondary educational institutions.

This paper proposes to introduce a research methodology in which a collaborative partnership will be formed between general education and special education teachers to yield an exchange of teaching strategies and methods designed to help increase student achievement. It is the intent of the researcher to use the findings of this research as tools for professional development opportunities for educators. It is also the intent of the researcher to use the findings as a means to develop supplemental instruction activities and assessment strategies workshops for mildly disabled high school students. It is proposed that these combined efforts will increase student achievement and therefore raise the students' chances of pursuing and being accepted into post-secondary educational institutions.

## **Introduction**

My qualitative evaluative study will focus on the instructional strategies utilized by teachers of exceptional students with mild disabilities that enable these students to obtain a high school diploma and pursue post-secondary educational options. To facilitate the cooperation of research participants and increase the potential usefulness of research findings, the researcher is seeking funding for Albany State University's Project EXceptional College Educated Leaders, Project EXCEL. In collaboration with the research study, Project EXCEL will accomplish two major objectives designed to increase the number of students with mild disabilities entering into four-year institutions: sharpen the teaching strategies of teachers of exceptional students and sharpen the studying and test-taking skills of students with mild disabilities.

## **Background and Need for the Study**

As the admission standards for Georgia's public four-year institutions become increasingly demanding, Georgia's public school system has begun to increase its standards so as to prepare students for the college and university's demands. With the addition of more standardized testing measured by higher test scores, and increased curriculum demands in K-12 schools, students with mild disabilities, who traditionally have successfully struggled to meet the lesser admission policies for four-year institutions, have very bleak to no chance of completing the college preparatory or vocational curriculum in high schools or passing all components of the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Without meeting these high school criteria, exceptional students will qualify for a special education diploma, a document which is unacceptable for

entrance into Georgia's four-year colleges and universities. However, results from my study will accomplish two major objectives designed to increase the number of students with mild disabilities entering into four-year institutions: sharpen the teaching strategies of teachers of exceptional students and sharpen the studying and test-taking skills of students with mild disabilities.

To achieve success among mildly disabled students, a variety of strategies must be implemented. Special retention needs of high-risk students must be identified, and simultaneously institutions must be committed to providing both financial and academic support. In addition, social support through advising and counseling from family and peers is a necessary part of this equation (Feinberg, 1992; p. 178). However, whether in special or general education, there is growing evidence that the single most important school influence in a student's education is a well prepared, caring, and qualified teacher. The connections among the knowledge, skills, and ethics of teachers; the quality of students' educational experiences; and educational accomplishments are strong and undeniable (Baldwin, 1995). However, many new teachers report they are finding that they have not been prepared for the jobs that exist and are not qualified for the jobs they face. Additionally, significant numbers of veteran teachers feel their teaching strategies are outdated and they are having difficulty finding methods that successfully help them meet their students' academic and occupational needs. They are teachers of today stuck in yesterday's classrooms (Sorcinelli, 1992).

Educating children with special needs or abilities is a difficult challenge. Teachers who have accepted that challenge work in an exciting and rapidly changing field; a field in which extensive professional development is essential to helping students

master and exceed annual goals, as well as prepare them for post-secondary educational and occupational options. My study seeks to expose exceptional teachers to a variety of teaching techniques designed to more adequately prepare them to capture the importance of the subject matter under discussion, disseminate subject matter to the students, as well as appreciate student learning differences.

### **Procedures**

Prior to initiating the first phase of the study, the researcher will first obtain permission from the participating school systems, which include the southwest Georgia counties serviced by Albany State University. The first phase of my study will be the identification and enrollment of resource teachers from area high schools. Teachers will complete a self-study of their respective schools' programs for preparing students with mild disabilities for post-secondary education. Reports will identify both strengths and weaknesses of teaching strategies, numbers of exceptional students successfully entering and completing post-secondary educational institutions, and testing accommodations instituted for exceptional students. Self-study reports will be examined by the researcher and information validated by follow-up visits to schools, student surveys, parent surveys, and examination of compiled data.

Phase two of study will focus on identifying and later strengthening the noted weaknesses in informing and preparing students for post-secondary options and requirements, and providing successful testing accommodations noted in individual self-study plans. Teachers will engage in monthly professional development activities designed to improve upon present practice that will make use of simulation activities

utilizing special education majors, consultant presentations, workshops, and visits to identified schools experiencing success in transitioning students from high school to four-year institutions. If funded, Project EXCEL will provide release time for participants so as to decrease absences and encourage participation. Additionally, participating teachers will be given a monthly stipend for participation in the program.

To ensure knowledge and skills gained from professional development activities are utilized in respective classes, teachers will be required to submit lesson plans reflecting some component of the development exercise. Additionally, the researcher will periodically visit participating teachers' classrooms to observe activities. Further, if funded, Project EXCEL will provide teachers with resources needed to implement new teaching strategies and practices.

A large component of the teachers' programs will also be to make them aware of the increased admission policies for four-year institutions and to encourage them to inform their students and parents as early as possible. Another responsibility of teacher participants will be to share knowledge and skills gained from professional development activities with other teachers in their building, both special and general education teachers who work to prepare students with mild disabilities for post-secondary educational opportunities. To facilitate these goals, participating teachers, the researcher, and/or Project EXCEL's team members will develop brochures and host workshops for students, parents, and other teachers each semester. Additionally, a focus on creating more intensive transition plans for students, reflecting shifts from high school to post-secondary institutions, will be implemented in the creation of individualized educational plans.

The study's third phase will begin the identification and enrollment of student participants. Following this phase will be the implementation of student seminars designed to increase students' testing and study skills.

Participating teachers in respective schools will identify students with mild disabilities. Identified students will be given a survey to discern their post-secondary educational and occupational goals. Students considering post-secondary education and high school students already enrolled in college preparatory programs of study, and their parents, will be notified of the researcher's study and/or Project EXCEL and encouraged to participate. Parental consent will be obtained for student participants and students will move to next phase. Students will participate in monthly classes that will make use of simulated testing environments, testing and studying workshops, and field trips to colleges and universities to speak with coordinators of their Disabilities Accommodations Programs and/or students with disabilities who are successfully matriculating at the institutions.

The researcher and/or Project EXCEL team members will travel to assigned schools and conduct seminars that will occur during students' regularly assigned special education resource segments, preferably in classrooms of participating teachers. Additionally, special education majors or designated education majors will provide after-school tutoring for students experiencing academic difficulties in specific subject areas. Extensive test preparation for the Georgia High School Graduation Test and the Scholastic Aptitude Test will be afforded high school juniors and seniors. Upon Project EXCEL funding, students will be provided financial support for testing which requires

students to incur fees. Additionally, if funded, Project EXCEL will be responsible for the travel costs incurred for field trips and other outings.

Upon transitioning from high school to college, the researcher will ensure students are registered with the Disabilities Accommodations Programs at their respective institutions to receive appropriate modifications. Additionally, the researcher will conduct annual follow-up interviews with students to gauge their progress.

Ultimate successfulness of the research study and Project EXCEL will be measured in the increased number of student participants entering and completing post-secondary educational institutions. However, successfulness of both will also be measured by the attainment of students' annual goals, the number of students increasing standardized test scores or passing all or parts of the Georgia High School Graduation Test, exceptional students', parents', and teachers' increased knowledge of college entrance requirements, increased knowledge and use of current teaching and learning strategies, and greater exposure of exceptional students to more inclusive learning environments.

## **References**

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Sorcinelli, Mary. (1992). Developing new and junior faculty: New directions for teaching and learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.