Preparing Teachers with Core Content Expertise to Support Students with Moderate to Severe Disabilities

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors describe a teacher preparation program in the area of moderate to severe disabilities with an emphasis in academic instruction. They present a rationale for their increased focus on academics, a description of the program's design, and several challenges associated with its implementation. Further, they offer several considerations for iterative improvement of the program.

Preparing Teachers with Core Content Expertise to Support Students with Moderate/Severe Disabilities

Changes in legislation and an increased focus on academics by the research community have precipitated changes in the curriculum for students with moderate to severe disabilities (MSD) (Browder, Wakeman, Flowers, Rickelman, Pugalee, & Karvonen, 2007; Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012). Students with MSD are expected to make gains in the general education curriculum in addition to acquiring other skills related to independent functioning. These changes pose major challenges to the field of special education in that many special educators may have inadequate content knowledge in core academic areas (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Furthermore, much of the research in teaching academic content to students with MSD is recent and may not be accessible to practicing special education teachers (Browder, Jimenez, Spooner, Saunders, Hudson, & Bethune, 2012; Spooner, Knight, Browder, Jimenez, & DiBiase, 2011; Spooner, Knight, Browder, & Smith, 2011). This is troubling as data suggest that special and general education teachers do not consistently employ previously established evidence-based practices for students with disabilities (Agran & Alper, 2000; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2009; Cook & Schrimer, 2003). Teacher preparation programs must be responsive to these new demands set forth by the expanded expectations for students with MSD if they are to train resilient teachers who will remain in the field.

In 2014, three faculty members at the University of Louisville (UofL) submitted and were awarded a personnel preparation grant from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to fund the matriculation of 30 undergraduate level students (i.e., four cohorts) in the area of MSD. The faculty leveraged the grant entitled "Special Education Personnel with Enhanced Core Content Knowledge (SPECCK)" to enhance the existing dual certification program in MSD and Early Childhood Elementary Education. In this paper, we will briefly describe the program's emphasis on academic content, some the challenges associated with implementing the program, and future considerations for its iterative refinement.

Emphasis on Academics

In UofL's program, students across different certification areas (e.g. early childhood, learning/behavior disorders, MSD) matriculate through elementary education certification courses together. Each semester, students also take courses in their selected concentration areas. This simultaneous progression through coursework in multiple concentrations permits students the opportunity to consider

how field specific practices may be applied across contexts. Furthermore, the continuous delivery of courses in both concentrations was designed to keep students closely integrated with their future colleagues from different disciplines.

Students in the MSD certification area take 40 hours of special education coursework closely aligned with the Kentucky Teacher Standards and the Council for Exceptional Children's preparation standards. The MSD program's academic core, comprised of seven carefully sequenced courses (i.e., five didactic, two practicum) and taught by four faculty members, is rooted in current special education research literature and the field of applied behavior analysis. Students begin the sequence with two courses that target assessment and instructional methods for students with MSD (i.e., EDSP 520: Assessment of Students with Moderate/ Severe Disabilities, EDSP 443: Instructional Methods for Students with Moderate/Severe Disabilities). Within these courses, students learn to conduct a range of assessments (e.g., preference, ecological, academic) and implement core instructional procedures that serve as foundational to the delivery of academic instruction for learners with MSD (e.g., time delay, system of least prompts, incidental teaching). In this semester, the students also are enrolled in a 3.0 credit practicum in which they are required to conduct multiple assessments, collect data across targets, and demonstrate the proficient application of instructional procedures with learners with MSD during field placements within local schools. Didactic course and practicum instructors collaborate to ensure that students implement and receive direct feedback on course projects while in their practicum placements. Candidates are observed conducting assessments and implementing intervention procedures by their practicum supervisor and their placement's cooperating teacher. In addition, the course instructor observes students perform procedures via videotaped lessons. For example, in EDSP 443, the instructor observes students implement response prompting procedures and provides feedback on their fidelity of implementation. The successful completion of these courses provides candidates with prerequisite knowledge to proceed to the next set of courses.

In the next semester, students take instructional methods for teaching core content (EDSP 440: Moderate/Severe Disabilities Curriculum & Methods II) and building communication repertoires for students with MSD (EDSP 546: Behavior Analytic Approach to Communication). In EDSP 440, the faculty member prepares students to deliver grade aligned core content using practices derived from the most recent research in academic instruction for students with MSD (e.g., shared story reading, inquiry-based science). During a second 3.0 credit hour practicum, students are observed and assessed upon their performance in delivering academic lessons within their supervised field placements. In EDSP 546, the faculty member introduces students to instructional methods derived from the field of applied behavior analysis, specifically from the seminal text, *Verbal Behavior* (Skinner,

1957). Candidates learn to assess students' current level of communication functioning, identify potentially modes of communication, and deliver instruction in structured and naturalistic arrangements. Again, students are evaluated on their performance of skills within field placements during the practicum course. For example, they complete a communication assessment using the Verbal Behavior Milestone and Placement Program (VB-MAPP; Sundberg, 2011), and are observed implementing communication intervention strategies.

The academic sequence concludes with students' participation in a summer seminar (EDSP 397) that occurs within a program for students with disabilities in receipt of extended school year (ESY) services. During this intensive course, students meet 4 days a week for 4 weeks. During each week, a faculty member with expertise in an academic content area (e.g., reading, mathematics, writing) provides focused instruction. During each class meeting, students first receive instruction and then transition to work directly with students with MSD in the ESY program. While candidates work directly with students, faculty members conduct observations, and provide explicit feedback. At the end of the course session, candidates return to the classroom to discuss their experiences and seek additional feedback from faculty members and their classmates.

Challenges

During program implementation, faculty members faced several potential barriers. First, students often reported, during course meetings, frustration with the differences in theoretical perspectives across programs. For example, the special education and elementary education literacy faculty members often presented different and in some instances, conflicting approaches (e.g., direct instruction, whole language) to instruction across the five courses (i.e., 2 special education, 3 elementary). It is unclear as to whether exposure to these different approaches facilitate or hinder candidates' implementation of evidence-based practices in future settings. Furthermore, it is unknown whether interdisciplinary collaboration within their training program will result in stronger general and special education integration post-graduation.

In addition, program faculty members found it difficult to identify field placements with experienced teachers that consistently implemented the most current strategies in academic instruction for their students with MSD. This may have been attributed to the only recent emergence of new strategies and recommendations for teaching academics to students with more severe disabilities. Additionally, we found that teachers within the local school districts received training across a wide range of institutions and program curricula. Therefore, many teachers may not have received sufficient training in academic instruction.

Future Directions

Despite the challenges listed above, data reflect several positive features of the program. First, survey data indicate that students are satisfied with the program and perceive themselves as prepared to teach academics to their students. Second, a recent report by an independent external evaluator corroborated student satisfaction data and furthermore, found special education courses to be generally aligned with current and evidence-based practices in the field. Though these findings are generally positive, the program has identified areas for iterative improvement.

The first involves creating opportunities for stronger collaboration between faculty members from different disciplines within the college. Though faculty meet regularly to address administrative issues, they rarely engage in discourse around content. The program might benefit from cross departmental professional development so that faculty members can be responsive to the queries of their students surrounding how to differentiate newly acquired instructional strategies for all students.

The second involves the development of strong models of academic programming within field placements. The program's next step is to identify and/or develop "model classrooms" in which faculty provide ongoing support to teachers through continuous professional development and coaching. This will require that the program identifies resources to support faculty and mentor teachers in planning and in access materials to support an academic curriculum.

Conclusion

In summary, we have presented a path toward training teachers of students with MSD to provide high quality academic instruction. The program described above provides a strong academic core that is steeped in research for students with MSD but is also linked to those practices that are pervasive across general education classrooms. Despite, the program's progress, its faculty members acknowledge that further iterations are required, especially with a focus on bridging gaps across disciplines. This intractable work at building bridges speaks directly to the weight of our values toward inclusion and thus, an effort towards shaping a better educational experience for all students.

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