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Curriculum Topics for Special Education Teacher Preparation

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This study compares the opinions of teacher educators, teachers, and state directors of special education with regard to curriculum topics they believe important for inclusion in teacher education programs. Teacher educators were represented by chairpersons in special education departments in colleges and universities. Teachers were represented by practicing special education classroom teachers and were randomly selected from a national pool. State directors were represented by the person holding the highest leadership post in special education within each state department of education in the various states. A rating instrument was constructed from concepts and topics found in the professional literature. The instrument covered 25 curriculum topics, with each topic rated for importance using a five point bipolar scale. Data analysis was completed by a Kruskal-Wallis Analysis of Variance of Ranks and by comparative rankings. Specific findings relative to the topics surveyed are discussed in the paper.

For some years now, special educators have considered and discussed a number of concepts such as mainstreaming (Berry, 1972; Kaufman, Gottlieb, Agard, and Kukic, 1975), noncategorical programming (Reynolds, 1979; Reynolds and Balow, 1972), and resource rooms (Hammill, 1972; Iano, 1972). The implications of these concepts for teacher education have also been examined (Blackhurst, Cross, Nelson, and Tawney, 1973; National Support Systems Project, 1980; Paul, Turnbull and Cruickshank, 1979; Reynolds, 1979) with a variety of suggestions and recommendations for teacher training being offered.

Hurley (1974), in a discussion of teacher preparation in special education, discusses four questions that need to be addressed in planning training programs. One of these questions is, "What are the areas of knowledge with which the teacher must be equipped?" Hurley answers this question by discussing two broad areas of knowledge that he refers to as "supportive knowledge" and "content knowledge." Hurley offers the opinion that these knowledge areas are essential for all special education teachers. Similar areas of essential knowledge have been referred to as "foundations" (Hanninen, Coleman, and Parres, 1977) and "generic" or "core" competencies (Lilly, 1979; Stamm, 1980). These core competencies would appear to be necessary regardless of whether a teacher is being trained categorically or noncategorically or is being trained for self-contained or resource service delivery.

For a number of years and particularly since the passage of Public Law 94-142, there has been much discussion about the content of teacher training programs. Several proposals have been made concerning the components that should be included in special

education teacher training programs (Corrigan, 1978; National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development (NACEPD), 1976; National Support Systems Project (NSSP), 1980; Shores, Cegelka, and Nelson, 1973; Ysseldyke and Algozzine, 1981). The curriculum components that have been suggested have ranged from various areas of academic instruction to values education. All of the suggestions that have appeared in the literature have been largely the opinions of teacher educators. Schofer and Lilly (1980) report that few papers on the components essential to special education preparation programs have been published in the professional literature. In addition, they report that of those that have addressed this issue, only about one-third have been supported by research. The purpose of this study was to compare the opinions of teacher educators, classroom teachers, and state directors of special education concerning the importance of certain topics in the preparation of special education teachers. This study's objective was to obtain a broader sample of opinion from teacher educators and compare their views with those of state directors and teachers in the field.

Method

Using the suggestions offered by Corrigan (1978), the NACEPD (1976), NSSP (1980), Shores et al. (1973), Stamm (1980), and Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1981), a survey instrument was constructed consisting of 25 topics. The various areas of knowledge suggested as important in special education teacher preparation by these sources were compiled and then edited to remove redundant items. The remaining 25 topics were then used to create a survey instrument (See Figure 1). Each item was followed by two, five-point, bi-polar rating scales,

where a rating of one was strongly disagree and a rating of five was strongly agree. One scale was for rating the item relative to undergraduate training programs, and the second scale was for rating the item relative to graduate programs.

Figure 1
Survey Topics Rated by Teacher Educators, Teachers, and State Directors

1. Litigation, legislation, regulations, and procedures in special education.
2. Parent support for and involvement in special education.
3. Individual and group processes.
4. Methods of teaching reading.
5. Methods of teaching math.
6. Methods of teaching language arts.
7. Language development and disorders.
8. Behavior modification of exceptional children.
9. Curriculum principles and structures.
10. Functional living skills, e.g., health consumerism, etc.
11. Vocational education.
12. Consultation, counseling/guidance skills.
13. Personal development, e.g., problem solving, values education, etc.
14. Learning strategies, e.g., notetaking, test-taking, thinking skills, etc.
15. Individual differences and individualized instruction.
16. Effective use of paraprofessionals.
17. Learning theory and its application to teaching.
18. Child development.
19. Research methods.
20. Music/art for the handicapped.
21. Principles of tests and measurement.
22. Educational assessment of exceptional children.
23. Early childhood education.
24. Educating the handicapped child in the least restrictive environment.
25. Classroom first-aid and emergency procedures.

Items in the survey instrument were stated in a general form for two reasons. First, a competency format would have necessitated breaking many of the topics down into numerous sub-components that would have resulted in an unwieldy instrument. Second, using a competency format would also increase the likelihood of disagreement about the analysis of the topics into subcomponents as well as the possibility of including conceptual or theoretical biases in the analysis. Thus, the use of generally stated topics was based on the assumption that these would generally be viewed as representing courses or major components of courses. These courses and components might be included in the curriculum regardless of what specific competencies a program faculty might choose to include or what professional orientation faculty may have toward the subject matter.

The subjects were given the following instructions:

Below you will find 25 topics that might be included in the *generic* portion of a special education teacher training program. Please rate the importance of each topic for inclusion in the curriculum that *all* special education teachers should go through. Each item has two scales. The upper scale relates to an undergraduate training program, and the lower scale to continuation and extension of the topic in a graduate program. Indicate your choice on each scale by circling the appropriate numeral.

A list of colleges and universities offering both undergraduate and graduate teacher training programs was compiled from guides to colleges and universities. One hundred institutions of higher education were then randomly selected from the list. The survey of curriculum topics was mailed to special education department chairpersons in the selected institutions. There were 66 replies from department chairpersons. The survey was also sent to the state director of special education in each of the 50 states. There were 25 replies from state directors.

In addition, a random list of 2,000 special education teachers, nationally, was obtained from a commercial firm that sells educational mailing lists to direct mail advertisers. A sample of 200 special education teachers was randomly selected from this pool and a

curriculum survey was mailed to them. There were 72 replies from teachers.

Results

The data analysis was done with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, and Bent, 1975). A test for homogeneity of variance failed; therefore, a non-parametric analysis, the Kruskal-Wallis One-Way Analysis of Variance of Ranks, was used to test for differences between the groups on each topic. The significance criterion used was .05 or better.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis indicated a high level of agreement among the three groups on the survey topics at the undergraduate level. There were only six topics where significant differences were indicated. Teacher educators rated litigation/legislation, parent support, learning theory, and child development (topics 1, 2, 17, and 18) significantly higher than did teachers. Teachers rated counseling skills (topic 12) significantly higher than did teacher educators. Finally, state directors rated math methods (topic 5) significantly higher than did teacher educators.

The analysis indicated somewhat less agreement among the three groups on the survey topics at the graduate level. Twelve of the 25 topics were significantly different at the graduate level. Teacher educators rated litigation/legislation, parent support, language development, individualization, learning theory, child development, research methods, assessment, early childhood education, and least restrictive environment (topics 1, 2, 7, 15, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, and 24) significantly higher than did teachers. Teacher educators rated litigation/legislation, reading methods, language development, and classroom first aid (topics 1, 4, 7, and 25) significantly higher than did state directors. Thus, teacher educators rated litigation/legislation and language development significantly higher than both teachers and state directors.

While the Kruskal-Wallis provides information on how the three groups differ from one another relative to the 25 topics, it would also be of interest to look at areas of agreement as well.

To determine agreement, a table was constructed in which the topics were rank ordered relative to each group and at each program level.¹ The table was divided at the eleventh rank, or at approximately the middle. Those topics ranked eleventh or above were classified as relatively high or important. These topics ranked twelfth or below were classified as relatively low or unimportant. Further, agreement was defined as placement of a topic in the high or low classifications by at least two of the three groups. Using this table, a set of items was derived that represents the majority opinion on the relative need for inclusion of various topics in the generic component of a special education curriculum.

At the undergraduate level, agreement on importance was found for four topics. These include methods of teaching math, methods of teaching language arts, functional living skills, and child development (topics 5, 6, 10, and 18). At the graduate level, agreement on importance was found for six topics: litigation/legislation, curriculum principles, counseling skills, learning theory, research methods, and principles of tests and measurement (topics 1, 9, 12, 17, 19, and 21). Agreement on importance at both levels was found on eight topics: parent support, reading methods, language development, behavior modification, vocational education, individualization, educational assessment, and least restrictive environment (Topics 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 15, 22, and 24).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare the opinions of teacher educators, teachers, and state directors on the relative importance of the inclusion of various generic curriculum topics in special education teacher training programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The Kruskal-Wallis results highlight the points of difference. In summary, there were more significant differences between teacher educators and teachers than between teacher educators and state directors or between teachers and state directors. Relative to the two program levels, there were more differences at the graduate level than at the undergraduate.

One can only speculate as to why there are differences of opinion on some of these 25 topics. However, in most cases, teachers rate a topic significantly lower than teacher educators do. Perhaps the teachers' low opinion of some of these items can be attributed, at least in part, to teacher educators' failure clearly to relate such topics as research methods to instructional problems faced by classroom teachers. In any event, teachers would appear to have a somewhat different curriculum emphasis for special education teacher education programs than would teacher educators, particularly at the graduate level. This conflict needs to be resolved if the most effective curriculum is to be planned. Perhaps experienced teachers need to provide more input into curriculum planning in teacher education programs, and teacher educators need to do a better job of making a case to teachers for including certain topics in the curriculum.

The ranked comparison of topics highlights the agreements. Using this data, it is possible to arrive at a consensus concerning which generic topics should be included in the special education teacher training curriculum and which appear to be of secondary importance.

There is agreement that some topics should be included in the undergraduate curriculum and expanded at the graduate level. These topics include parent support, reading methods, language development, behavior modification, vocational education, individualization, educational assessment, and education in the least restrictive environment.

At the undergraduate level, there is agreement that math methods, language arts methods, functional living skills, and child development should be added to the list. At the graduate level, there is agreement that litigation/legislation in special education, curriculum principles, counseling skills, learning theory, research methods, and principles of tests and measurement should be added to the topics common to both levels.

The topics upon which there is agreement at both program levels reflect several current priorities in special education. This is clearly the case for parent involvement, vocational education,

and education in the least restrictive environment. The remaining topics in this category reflect an emphasis upon commonly recognized instructional problems in special education: the highly heterogeneous nature of handicapped students (i.e., individual differences and individualization), common academic deficits in handicapped students (i.e., reading and language development), IEP development and instructional planning, and evaluation of instruction.

Finally, seven topics were ranked relatively low at both the undergraduate and graduate levels by all groups. These topics include individual and group processes, personal development, learning strategies, use of paraprofessionals, music/art for the handicapped, early childhood education, and classroom first-aid and emergency procedures. While all of these topics have been suggested by one professional writer or another as being important to the special education curriculum, there appears to be relatively little support among the respondents to this survey for their inclusion in preparation programs.

One significant limitation to the study is the possibility of bias in the responses obtained. It would be useful to know how representative of the various specializations within special education the respondents were. Unfortunately, this data cannot be retrieved. However, the sample surveyed was randomly selected (except state directors, $N = 50$). Further we assume that the respondents were somewhat representative because we know of no evidence that would suggest that one specialization area in special education is more likely to respond to such a survey than another.

Footnotes

¹This table is available from the authors upon request. Drawer 5365, Mississippi State, MS 39762.

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