

**An In-Depth Review of the Current Practica, Associated with Early Childhood through
Twelfth Grade Special Education Programs, for the Benefit of Higher Education
Programs, with an Emphasis in Obtaining a M.Ed. in Special Education**

Dr. Jennifer Cady, Ph.D.

Peer Edited

by

Dr. Marsha Beckwith-Howard

September 2010

Southwestern College

Abstract

In order to guide organizational growth in the Master's in Education with an emphasis in Special Education program, offered at Southwestern College, an in-depth qualitative study was conducted with participants from three specific realms located in the state of Kansas. Participants from the Kansas State Department of Education, Southwestern College, and the Wichita, KS area were interviewed and provided with questionnaires on the topic of special education. In addition, the current curriculum offered at Southwestern College was superficially compared to the curriculum offered at three other specific colleges in the state of Kansas. The data was then analyzed for possible gaps in the current M.Ed. in Special Education program offered at Southwestern College and used to guide feedback to the Director of Education, with regards to the current program curriculum compared to the current needs in the field of special education.

Key Words: *special education, graduate programs, inclusion, whole-child*

Introduction

Continual growth within an organization requires vested stake holders, within the organization, to possess a conscientious drive to perform on-going organizational reviews in order to ensure that the organization maintains up-to-date practices reflective of the demands required by the targeted clientele. For the purpose of this study the researcher investigated only a marginal fraction of an organization in order to determine the following:

- What currently exists within the scope of the specific organizational area?
- What should exist according to literature/research?
- How might the organization close the gap between what is and what should be?

The organization in this particular equation was Southwestern College. Southwestern College is a Division II college located approximately 40 miles south of Wichita, KS in the quaint town of Winfield, KS. The college is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission, and a member of the North Central Association. Southwestern College, like many other colleges across the United States, offers learners the option to acquire an on-line degree through one of the seven professional studies sites, known as Southwestern College Professional Studies (SCPS), or through a combination of attending classes in-person at one of the SCPS sites coupled with on-line course offerings. Learners may also opt to learn through the traditional route by attending the main campus – in Winfield, KS.

With regard to this particular study the vested stakeholders began with the Director of Teacher Education, Dr. David Hofmeister, and extended beyond to faculty, learners, and direct recipients of the educational services provided by Southwestern College learners (e.g., special

education and regular education students in schools across the United States, but particularly in the State of Kansas).

Methods

There must be a method to a journey's madness if the destination is to be deemed worthwhile.

A qualitative research method was selected for this study; therefore, the researcher could conduct the research in a natural setting, using multiple methods of interactive data collection tools, and with the ability to adjust the data collection process as needed (Creswell, 2003). Furthermore, the qualitative research method was selected in order to allow for data interpretation, through a holistic approach, using a variety of strategies (Creswell, 2003).

Project Description

There is no mountain too high to climb, no river too wide to cross, and no journey too complex to tackle.

The quote above seemed concretely sound before taking on the task of analyzing Southwestern College's Master's in Education (M.Ed.) with an emphasis in Special Education program. To attempt such a task, the researcher had to determine an organized plan of action for conquering the monstrous mountain that stood in the pathway to the answers that peacefully rested beyond the highest peak.

First, the researcher established a packing checklist for the journey. The list included the following items: proper submission of documentation to the Internal Review Board at Southwestern College; a collection of all M.Ed. in Special Education course requirements, descriptions, and syllabi associated with the program; determining participants in the study;

designing a questionnaire to distribute to the participants; designing specific interview questions to distribute to the participants; researching current literature to determine best practices in special education; and researching three other M.Ed. in Special Education programs in the state of Kansas.

Delimitations

As is evident with any travel – the traveler cannot possibly see, nor conquer all terrain along the excursion; therefore, the scope of the journey must be narrowed in order to accomplish the trip. The delimitations associated with this study included: the study was confined to interviewing and observing a marginal group of participants, connected on some level, to the field of special education in the state of Kansas; the study focused on the surface level of the course content through a thorough review of each syllabi and/or course description according to the college catalog and/or website; the study consisted of four Kansas colleges.

Limitations

As an individual sets forth to experience the unknown - the mind, body, and soul risk the threat of weakness throughout the process. The limitations associated with this particular study included the following. The study incorporated four Kansas colleges; therefore, decreasing generalizability to colleges in other states. At the time the study was conducted, the researcher worked as an adjunct faculty member for Southwestern College. Thus, the researcher knew some of the participants on a professional level. As a result of using a social networking outlet to obtain participants (i.e., Facebook), the researcher also knew some of the participants on a more personal level.

Participants

A journey taken alone is a journey sustained in silence, but a journey traveled with companions is a journey in which connections beyond self blossom.

The participants in the study included Kansas State Department of Education employees, Southwestern College faculty, learners (both in attendance and alumni from a period of the past three years from origination date of the research study), and individuals located in or around the Wichita, KS area – to include those connected in some capacity to the field of special education (e.g., teachers, specialists, parents of learners with special needs, so on and so forth). Although it would have been much more simplistic to opt for one group of participants, the researcher wanted to collect data from a broad scope of participants, which clearly made the research plan much more complex (Hendricks, 2009).

Participants from the Kansas State Department of Education were solicited via a mass email in which all email addresses were kept confidential via blind carbon copy. The email addresses were obtained from the Kansas State Department of Education's website.

Participants from Southwestern College were solicited via a similar route in which a mass email was sent, via blind carbon copy, to learners in the M.Ed. in Special Education program as well as recent graduates from the same program from the last three years. Emails were sent to current learners in the program because often times those obtaining their Master's degrees are already in the field of education. It was assumed that such learners would have special education knowledge. The emails were sent via an employee of Southwestern College Professional Studies; therefore, the researcher had no real knowledge as to the full list of recipients. The employee of

SCPS, however, had on-going access to the data base as part of his/her position within the organization.

In addition to the above, a phone interview was conducted with one individual from the Southwestern College participants. The individual contacted the researcher of his/her own free-will to provide insightful data into the current phenomena associated with the field of special education. The interviewee was not known in any capacity by the researcher.

According to Hendricks (2009), "...a participant is anyone who can contribute in any way to your study" (p. 74). Participants from Wichita, and the surrounding areas, were solicited through email, an on-line social network (Facebook), and the researcher's professional connections in the educational arena via a convenience sampling (Creswell, 2003). Although a random sample is more desirable (Creswell, 2003), the researcher had to take into consideration personal resources and time constraints for the third pool of participants.

From the Wichita (and surrounding areas) participant pool, three personal interviews and one observation was conducted in which the researcher visited face-to-face with two individuals who work in the field of education. As well, the researcher met a third participant in his/her environment in order to interview him/her and observe his/her child with special needs. The observations occurred in both a relaxed setting, and in a therapeutic setting in which the child underwent hyperbaric oxygen therapy for cerebral palsy.

In addition to the above participants, the researcher had to gather data to compare and contrast to the current curriculum within the M.Ed. in Special Education program offered at Southwestern College and through SCPS. Therefore, the researcher selected three Kansas colleges that offer a M.Ed. in Special Education. The data was collected via each of the college's

on-line websites. No personal contact was made between the researcher and the institutions; therefore, IRB approval was not obtained for this particular portion of the research. The three colleges selected for this portion of the study were Pittsburg State University, Emporia State University, and Fort Hays State University. The colleges were selected based on their approximate size, and the assumption that others located within the state of Kansas would have basic knowledge of the colleges' locations and status within the learning communities. Thus, providing the reader with a comparison base between Southwestern College and each college selected.

Instrumentation

A successful journey begins and ends with the proper tools while acknowledging that the supplies may dwindle in the process.

The researcher opted to gather data through a triangulated approach (i.e., interviews, questionnaires, and observations) in order to strengthen the findings, and provide a basis from which the results could be generalized throughout the state of Kansas. In addition, the researcher conducted an in-depth literature review to determine current best practices in the field of education – with an emphasis in special education.

The following instruments were used to collect data:

1. Observations – The strengths of using observations include, but are not limited to participant firsthand knowledge, ability to record data as it transpires, ability to identify aspects that might not be obtained through other outlets of instrumentation, and the capacity to investigate topics that might otherwise be too uncomfortable for participants to discuss. The weaknesses associated with observations include, but are

- not limited to the possibility of being viewed as intrusive, inability to report private data, researcher's lack of observational skills, and inability to gain rapport amongst participants (Creswell, 2003).
2. Interviews – The strengths associated with interviews include, but are not limited to the ability to implement when participants cannot be observed directly, historical data provided, and ability for researcher to control the line of questioning. The weaknesses include, but are not limited to a filtered view of interviewee's responses, information may be obtained in a designated location instead of the natural setting, the researcher's presence may bias the responses, and individuals are not always equally perceptive (Creswell, 2003).
 3. Documents – The strengths include, but are not limited to the convenience of data collection for the researcher, it is often times an unobtrusive form of data collection, eliminates the need for the researcher to transcribe, and collected data is reflective of participant's language (Creswell, 2003).

Findings

While enduring a journey the master traveler will often times gather pertinent collectibles along the path in order to share with those who were not able to embark upon the same journey.

First, one must define special education. Siegel (2005), states that special education is a “broad term used to describe the educational system of children with disabilities” (p. 2). In addition, special education refers to the portion of a child's “...school system that provides special services and programs for children with disabilities” (p. 2). Students with disabilities are

protected by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); both of which are federally mandated (Russo, 2004).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that individuals with a disability will not be excluded from participation, denied benefits, or subjected to discrimination from any program or activity receiving federal funds (Russo, 2004). IDEA, on the other hand, requires “states, through local educational agencies or school boards, to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities (p. 863). Furthermore, this includes those in non-public schools – despite the severity of the disability (Russo, 2004).

Students with disabilities not only have federal laws protecting their educational rights, but they also have strong advocates in the field of research. Therefore, gone are the days when students with disabilities were placed in classrooms away from their peers without disabilities – and rightfully so. As noted by Russo (2004), the law requires that schools educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The ultimate goal for those with special needs is to be educated according to what federal law deems full inclusion in the regular educational setting (Russo, 2004). However, if such option is not in the student’s best interest then partial inclusion with assistance is selected (Russo, 2004). Yet, if inclusion does not meet the needs of the student then partial inclusion coupled with partial resource room may be selected (Russo, 2004). The next option would be self-contained within the home school followed by the most restrictive which would be a placement outside of the school (e.g., special day school, hospital, so on and so forth) (Russo, 2004).

Special education is not merely for those learners with disabilities. It is also inclusive of those students that are identified as gifted/talented. Therefore, professionals in the field of special

education have to be well prepared to deal with a wide array of intellectual levels as well as a plethora of varied physical, emotional, social, and/or behavioral issues. As a result of the responsibilities placed upon those in the field of education, specifically special education, it becomes crucial to ensure an on-going process, within college preparation programs, to properly prepare learners for the professional tasks that await them.

For the focus of this study, the researcher's goal in conducting the literature review was to determine a helpful foundation from which to ensure that college preparation programs, in the state of Kansas, particularly Southwestern College, prepare special educators for beginning or continued success despite the least restrictive environment and/or the label given to each student.

Knowing that special education students receive Individualized Education Programs (IEP) that are based upon individualized needs, the researcher took a practical approach throughout the literature review process in order to ensure that best practices remain the focus despite the learning environment. According to Weinfeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler, and Roffman Shevitz (2006), the most important educational component for learners with special needs is to provide each student with rigorous instruction based upon his/her area of strength. Keeping this in mind, the researcher set out to embark upon an intellectual journey that would provide a foundation of knowledge that is beneficial to the educational process of success for both special education students, as well as regular education students, since more often than not, inclusion within the regular classroom is the norm.

According to Byrnes (2005), "Special education teachers often report their lack of knowledge about the general education curriculum, whereas general education teachers often report their lack of knowledge about individualizing instruction" (p. 188). If a gap of knowledge exists

amongst the individuals responsible for educating students, then high quality learning becomes challenging to obtain and even maintain. When invested parties (i.e. regular educators and special educators), are able to collaborate with one another, over a period of time, “both report greater knowledge and comfort” (p. 188). Furthermore, after on-going collaboration, such stakeholders in the educational process realize that similar instructional strategies are used in both the regular educational setting and in the inclusive educational setting (Byrnes, 2005).

The instructional strategies identified through collaboration included, but were not limited to “cooperative learning, hands-on learning, peer and cross-age tutoring and support models, instruction based on students’ multiple intelligences, classroom technology, and paraprofessionals and classroom assistance” (p. 188). Such findings guided the focus of this particular research study so that the results might benefit a larger population of students and teachers alike.

Literature Review

To set sail on a journey without knowledge can either be mistaken as ignorance or deemed the definition of faith.

Although there are various reasons to undertake a literature review, for the purpose of this study the researcher wanted to investigate the current best practices in the field of education, with an emphasis on special education, in order to identify whether or not Southwestern College’s M.Ed. in Special Education offered an education based on current best practices. While embarking in the research process, the researcher held tight to the notion that: children with special needs are kids first (Stowe, 2005). Furthermore, the researcher went about the review of literature with the idea that although learners with special needs possess challenges –

they still have the basic needs as all learners. Learners with special needs want to “be part of a group, to have friends, to play, to feel successful” (Stowe, 2005).

The literature review was conducted in order to relate the researcher’s current study to the larger on-going dialogue found within the context of current literature (Creswell, 2003). The researcher conducted the literature review with the notion that if a variety of literature was reviewed then eventually a reoccurring theme would arise.

After conducting an in-depth review of literature the following seven categories were established as the guiding themes for best practices in the field of education: Bloom’s Taxonomy; Cooperative Learning; Individualized Education Program; Multiple Intelligences; Parental Support; Proactive Classroom Management; and Self-Esteem.

Rief and Heimburge (2006) bring light to the notion that in order to be an effective teacher one must be aware and knowledgeable of the academic, behavioral, and the social and emotional difficulties of some students. Furthermore, Rief and Heimburge (2006) reveal that in today’s classrooms teachers will inevitably have learners with special needs. Such awareness creates a pressure on all educators to house the ability to teach and adapt instruction for varied levels of learning. This same standard should exist for special educators working with a variety of disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

According to Rief and Heimburge (2006), “Teachers need to learn the instructional strategies, structure, environmental modifications, curriculum adaptations and support that will allow all students, those with and without special needs, to achieve” (p. 35). However, it takes a skilled educator to meet such demands. In reviewing the varied literature, the researcher was able to establish that educators must know and understand how to incorporate Bloom’s taxonomy,

cooperative learning strategies, Individualized Education Programs, Multiple Intelligences, parental support, proactive classroom management, as well as how to increase all students' self-esteems in order to promote learning both in the regular education classroom and in the special education setting.

It is not enough for educators to simply know and understand the factors that play into a solid education. Teachers must take such knowledge and understanding and implement it within the context of the learning environment if they are to ensure success for all students. As noted by Breaux and Whitaker (2006), "The most effective teachers refuse to believe that there is any such thing as a student not capable of succeeding and achieving" (p. 48).

Therefore, in order to ensure success for all, teachers must teach at the individualized level that meets each student's particular needs (Breaux & Whitaker, 2006). For the purpose of this research project only seven specific themes for assisting educators with such a daunting task will be addressed. The themes house the capability to be molded to both special and regular education. This approach was taken in order to benefit both regular educators, responsible for educating learners with special needs, as well as special educators, responsible for meeting the needs of such a diverse population of students.

Bloom's Taxonomy

If a traveler is unable to question their surroundings or have those in their surroundings question them – everyone winds up lost.

One particular theme that existed throughout the research driven literature was the importance of integrating Bloom's taxonomy into the curriculum. Benjamin Bloom's (1956) well know taxonomy is far from new to the field of education. "Bloom's taxonomy is a means of

categorizing the cognitive skills students use when achieving learning targets” (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2010, p. 57). Since all students, particularly those in special education, have varied levels of cognitive skills, Bloom’s taxonomy becomes crucial to integrate if educators are to ensure that the highest levels of cognitive skills are engaged during learning opportunities.

Although some of the learners with special needs will not be able to function at the highest level, according to Bloom’s taxonomy, the ability to integrate this learning resource ensures that the educator has a variety of tools to engage learners – cognitively. The implementation of Bloom’s taxonomy provides a wide-range of cognitive demands, throughout each lesson, thus, ensuring that knowledge is acquired, at some point during the lesson, by all students regardless of intellectual level (Turnbull et al., 2010).

Bloom’s taxonomy comfortably assists the teaching style of differentiated instruction in that varied levels of questioning mesh well with learning that occurs via a plethora of avenues. For example, teachers that integrate the arts into the curriculum can successfully integrate Bloom’s taxonomy by allowing students to “generate their own questions and to respond to any art form” (Cornett, 2011, p. 147). As noted by Cornett (2011), the goal of using Bloom’s taxonomy is to entice students into thinking beyond the literal level in order to engage higher order thinking skills as a means to solving problems.

The understanding that differentiated instruction is proactive, qualitative in nature, assessment rooted, student centered, organic, and a blend of varied instruction (e.g., individual, pair, small group, and whole-group learning) allows educators vast opportunities to provide

leveled questioning (Tomlinson, 2001). With such opportunities, it is far more likely that an educator will reach all students, on some level, despite individual exceptionalities – high or low.

When educators incorporate Bloom's taxonomy, the following six levels of cognitive opportunities exist: knowledge; comprehension; application; analysis; evaluation; and synthesis (Heacox, 2002; Tate, 2003). Using different verbs to guide thinking processes, students of all levels are afforded a better chance of retaining new knowledge or confirming existing knowledge at some point throughout the learning process.

Research shows that questions are a major tool in assisting students with what they already know (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Teachers, in both special and regular education, who understand the reality that higher level questioning leads to a more in-depth learning experience (Marzano et al., 2001) are often times more apt to engage learners with higher level questioning – according to student ability level – than those teachers without such knowledge.

Cooperative Learning

In all travels – we must know and understand our specific duties if we are to accomplish the journey with little regret.

According to Sagor (2003), cooperative learning originated in the late 1970's when Slavin and his colleagues developed instructional strategies based on team competition. The group likened cooperative learning to a pickup softball game in which each team has the same number of stars, journeymen, and beginners (Sagor, 2003). The ultimate success derives from each member contributing his/her best efforts. The strong members of the group assist those that are not as strong in order to gradually enhance learning overall. In this effort, the teams

eventually celebrate their successes together – knowing that it took the entire team to arrive at the desired outcomes.

Turnbull et al. (2010), stress the importance of integrating cooperative learning strategies with exceptional learners in the general curriculum. Cooperative learning varies from other grouping structures in that although learners are working together, to hold the team accountable, each learner is also independently responsible for a specific task (Tate, 2003; Turnbull et al., 2010). Such grouping works well with exceptional learners because the demands of each group member can vary in depth and length. The key is that everyone in the classroom shares in the overall outcome of the learning process – no matter the individual load.

According to Society for Developmental Education, “we learn 90% of what we teach to others” (Tate, 2003, p. 80). When working in cooperative teams, students are responsible for assisting one another throughout the learning process. This is why cooperative learning works well for all levels of students (Ciaccio, 2004). Students learn to compensate for one another’s shortcomings. Cooperative learning not only increases learning, but it also prepares learners for the real-world work environment (Ciaccio, 2004; Tate, 2003).

When working with learners that have special needs, cooperative learning may be an area of needed growth. The concept alone is challenging for individuals without exceptionalities so when implementing cooperative learning within the classroom it is particularly important to work with all students in order to ensure that positive group interactions are occurring in order to promote friendships within the learning environment. By doing so, research indicates that the end result will be higher levels of achievement (Ciaccio, 2004).

Research indicates that relationship building takes on different stages throughout our lives (Kutscher, 2005). If educators strive to incorporate cooperative learning throughout the learning process, students begin to learn how to interact with one another in order to meet their individual as well as group needs. Without cooperative learning opportunities, students with special needs might struggle in areas beyond the classroom (e.g., recess, lunch, and during transportation). Such struggles would transfer into adolescence and adulthood if not combated early on in the elementary education setting. According to Balik (1999), as cited in Cornett (2011), “understanding is rarely, if ever, a solo enterprise” (p. 13).

Heacox (2002) reveals that the heart of differentiated instruction is found through the use of flexible student groups. Such groups require the ability to work well with one another in order to accomplish academic tasks. Flexible grouping is beneficial in that it is “...intended to provide a better instructional match between students and their individual needs” (p. 85). Thus, regular educators are afforded the opportunity to group exceptional learners with non-exceptional learners in order to meet instructional objectives.

The use of flexible grouping allows students to “feel more involved, engaged, and confident when they’re involved in activities tailored to their learning needs and preferences” (p. 85). Not only does this type of grouping allow for lower level learners to succeed, but it also provides the opportunity for gifted learners to thrive because they can be challenged. Although this type of grouping is categorized differently than cooperative grouping, educators can combine the two concepts in order to meet the desired outcomes from both. To do so, establish cooperative groups based on specific instructional needs. Then, provide each team member with a specific task in order to enhance positive interdependence (Turnbull et al., 2010).

Educators can use a variety of ways in which to group learners for cooperative learning, but the following three ways can act as a guide in order to ensure varied group experiences: informal; formal; and base groups (Marzano et al., 2001). Learners with special needs are afforded a plethora of opportunities with their peers when such grouping is made available. In such instances, it is the educator's responsibility to ensure that positive character education is in place so that learners with special needs are not targeted as the outcasts – rather integrated as a beneficial contributor to the learning process.

If research has determined that “teachers working collaboratively will significantly raise their productivity and the quality of their work” (Wong & Wong, 2009, p. 334), then one might assume that the transfer of such knowledge also holds true for learners working collaboratively within the classroom. The point being that when given the opportunity to work in a cooperative environment all individuals are afforded the same opportunity in which to thrive. Research shows that students who are taught to successfully work in cooperative groups demonstrate better reading comprehension, problem solving, and understanding of science (Danielson, 2002). Brandt (1998) reiterates the importance of learning through social interactions. If the brain is a “social brain” (p. 8) and learning transpires through cooperative interactions – both special educators and regular educators should ensure that they use the cooperative learning strategy in order to promote success among all students.

Individualized Education Program

There are times our observations and common sense warrant successful outcomes, but then there are times that travelers must have a road map in order to ensure a safe arrival.

For the purpose of this particular research the Individualized Education Program (IEP) was briefly addressed, instead of covered in great detail, because the researcher assumed that interested readers would already be well aware of the processes and procedures outlined within the IEP.

The Individualized Education Program guides the learning process for individuals with exceptionalities – ages 3 through 21 (Turnbull et al., 2010). A frequent misconception is that the IEP is in fact the legally binding document. In actuality, the IEP is the educational program in its entirety. The document is a required part of the IEP process, but the full perspective of the IEP includes meetings, documentation, and a detailed description of each student's entire individualized educational program (Siegel, 2005). By law, parents must be an active part of the entire process – and rightfully so. This is why it becomes necessary for all educators to know and understand how to effectively communicate with parents in order to increase parental support.

As indicated by the Federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), IEPs must contain several components. An IEP must describe the learner's present educational performance, list annual goals and short term objectives, contain the specific services received, identify the extent to which the learner will participate in the general education arena, provide the date services begin and the duration for each, and indicate the criteria required for evaluating whether or not the learner is achieving specified goals (Russo, 2004; Sorrells, Rieth, & Siegel, 2005; Sindelar, 2004; Stowe, 2005). Moreover, IEPs must also indicate how each learner's disability impacts his/her ability to be fully involved in the inclusive setting. In addition, IEPs must state modifications needed to allow learners to participate in general education (Russo, 2004; Sindelar, 2005; Sorrells et al., 2004; Stowe, 2005).

IEPs must be followed by all vested parties in the educational arena. Although special educators are trained in the field of special education, regular educators may lack the specific knowledge often times needed when working with those in special education. This is why it is critical for educators to design dynamic classrooms where all students can thrive – despite the varied levels of ability. Such a classroom takes careful analysis, planning, and thoughtful implementation (Weinfeld et al., 2006).

Research reflective of the IEP/IFSP indicates that the IEP generally involves a paperwork process in which problem-solving and teamwork fall by the wayside (Turnbull et al., 2010). Clearly, the IEP is a crucial component to successfully educating learners with special needs, but without proper parental support and input coupled with the successful integration of best practices and researched based strategies, that assist all learners, the IEP process will be weakened.

Multiple Intelligences

Successful travelers come in all shapes and sizes, but what matters the most is that each traveler uses his/her ability to problem solve each step of the way.

Considering that each human being was made in a unique fashion it is no surprise that Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences are well known in the academic arena. According to Gardner, there are eight specific intelligences: logical/mathematical; verbal/linguistic; visual/spatial; musical/rhythmic; naturalist; interpersonal; and bodily/kinesthetic (Ciacco, 2004; Connell, 2005; Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001).

Considering that most assessments and schoolwork are created with only two of the eight intelligences in mind (Ciacco, 2004) it is no wonder so many students find themselves bored, or

worse, unsuccessful at school. When educators plan lessons using all of the multiple intelligences, the learning is sure to reach each student – despite the varied learning abilities that exist in each classroom (Heacox, 2002).

Research indicates that every student has specific strengths regarding thinking and learning (Heacox, 2002; Rief & Heimburge, 2006). Brandt (1998) stresses the fact that individuals learn differently. Although with practice all areas of the multiple intelligences (MI) can be developed and enhanced it remains true that students are better able to learn when individualized strengths are used (Heacox, 2002). The reality that schools continue to focus on a narrow scope of the intelligences places many learners at risk (including learners with special needs).

During her research endeavors, Hannaford (1995) found that in the schools she studied, the learners that scored strong in the logical dominance area, or left brained, were more often labeled gifted and talented compared to their counterparts that scored high in gestalt dominance, or right brained, and were often labeled as learning disabled. The difference between the two can easily be explained with art.

Learners who house right brained strengths are more apt to understand the details of the techniques used in art such as the notes, timing, and technique to music (Hannaford, 1995). Whereas, left brained learners are better apt to feel emotional connections, learn through movement, and house strong creative tendencies (Hannaford, 1995). Educators should strive to implement lessons that include both strengths so that all learners can feel a sense of academic satisfaction.

One way to reach all learners, and engage various intelligences, is through the integration of the arts – to include literature, visual art, drama, dance, and music (Cornett, 2011). With the integration of the arts into the core curriculum, a wider range of students are able to express their learning through visible outlets (Cornett, 2011). Moreover, Brandt (1998) indicates that schools can enhance student learning by providing different ways of learning. The arts are merely one such way.

Jensen (2001) also supports the integration of the arts through his indication that the “arts are not only fundamental to success in our demanding, highly technical, fast moving world, but they are what make us most human, most complete as people” (p. vii). Among the musical arts alone the following important areas of learning transpire: “...performance, listening, composing, arranging, analysis, singing, improvisation, and song writing” (pp. 6-7). According to Bloom’s taxonomy, analysis involves higher level thinking skills. Therefore, it is not enough for regular educators, or special educators, to focus on the traditional methods of learning if true learning is to transpire.

Although comical in nature, but research driven, Tate (2003) stated it best when indicating that “Worksheets Don’t Grow Dendrites!” (p. xi). If educators are to truly impact the learning process of all students, they must find ways in which to support all of the intelligences. When teachers understand that learning transpires at the greatest levels when it is personally meaningful, emotionally enticing, and connected to previous learning – all students benefit from the learning environment (Tomlinson, 1999).

Parental Support

Parents are the key component to teaching children how to journey to success. Successful journeys often times begin with a packed lunch – especially made from the loving hands of a mother.

First and foremost, educators would not have careers without the parents producing on-going clientele. With that said, educators should seek ways in which to form collaborative bonds from home to school and vice versa. Parental involvement can be compared to the research process in that it is strengthened through the integration of triangulation just as the educational process is strengthened when educators, parents, and students form collaborative bonds.

The law requires parents to be informed and involved in the special education process (Overton, 2003; Russo, 2004), but an effective educator seeks ways in which to form home to school bonds – despite the laws (Byrnes, 2005). The partnership between educators and parents is vital because for the most part, parents are well informed of their child's specific needs (Tomlinson, 1999; Weinfeld et al., 2006). On the other hand, educators, for the most part, are trained to effectively understand how to work with students in ways that parents may not be (Tomlinson, 1999). The flow of information from the professional to the parents and vice versa sets the stage for student academic gains.

Although educators can often times find themselves intimidated by parental involvement (Breux & Whitaker, 2006) it is important to overcome such fears in order to forge ahead for the benefit of the students. According to Breux and Whitaker (2006), "The very best teachers keep in constant contact with the parents of their students" (p. 74). Furthermore, effective teachers

know and understand that despite all obstacles they share the same goal with parents regarding students – eventual success in all areas.

A much more complex relationship rests among special educators and parents because there are often times issues and concerns at hand. Problem solving through effective communication becomes vital in circumstances where there are learners with special needs. Siegel (2005) suggests that parents of learners with special needs join parent organizations. Such groups not only provide informative information and parental support, but they can also have tremendous impact on educational programs. Educators that are confident in their skills and want to strengthen parental knowledge should seek to invite parents to join such groups because the better informed everyone in the community is – the better the academic outcomes for the students.

Tomlinson (1999) suggests that educators make parents active volunteers in the classroom. In doing so, parents can support the learning that is transpiring within the classroom. As well, Tomlinson (1999) indicates that parent involvement is highly important in differentiated classrooms. This is particularly important so that teachers can ensure parents know and understand the effective practices of the differentiated classroom – as they are much different from the traditional route of learning that many parents are accustomed to (Tomlinson, 2001).

Funk (2005) provides insight into combating issues with parents. Simply put, he reveals the importance of communicating with parents in a way that shows purpose. One way to do this is to send home a note informing parents of change before the change is implemented (Funk, 2005; Heacox, 2002). When parents are informed, they are less likely to become irate because they know and understand what is transpiring in the educational environment.

According to Turnbull et al. (2010), three decades of research support the positive outcomes associated with parental involvement in the education of a child – to include fewer referrals to special education at the early childhood level. Not only did the research reveal increased academics with early childhood, elementary school, and middle/high school, but it also revealed that partnerships between home and school increase the likelihood that students attend post-secondary education (Turnbull et al., 2010).

Another longitudinal study based on family involvement in the education process of learners with disabilities at the secondary level found that parental involvement increased reading levels, grades, and participation in organized groups (Turnbull et al., 2010). Not only does family involvement increase academics (Danielson, 2002), but it also enhances the quality of family life (Turnbull et al., 2010). Turnbull et al., (2010) recommend understanding how learners with exceptionalities impact their families before embarking upon the family-professional partnership. The ability to “walk in their shoes” will increase understanding and enhance the partnership (Turnbull et al., 2010).

Proactive Classroom Management

Those who journey afar must be disciplined if they anticipate returning home safely.

Wong and Wong (2009) provide insight into the reality that effective teachers have positive expectations for all students, and that they are solid classroom managers. Learners with special needs can display behavior issues within the educational environment, as can their peers without exceptionalities. Therefore, the proactive teacher must establish procedures and routines for all learners in order to ensure a safe learning environment (Breux & Whitaker, 2006; Wong

& Wong, 2009). Both special educators and regular educators can benefit from having rules, consequences, and rewards for behavior.

The definition of proactive classroom management, according to Breaux and Whitaker (2006) is the ability to anticipate typical issues in order to eliminate them before they have a chance to occur. Harmin and Toth (2006) reiterate this notion by stating that the best way to handle misbehavior is to prevent it. Furthermore, they stress three ways in which to combat behavior issues. First, educators should create lessons and organize the classroom so that learning is attractive and engaging. Second, educators should establish a climate that keeps anxiety at a low so that participation is welcomed. Third, educators should establish classrooms that thrive on cooperation (Harmin & Toth, 2006).

Byrnes (2005) reiterates the importance of being proactive when stating that, “interventions that are least restrictive and least intrusive are those that can be implemented earliest in a pattern of behaviors leading to more serious misconduct” (p. 115). Byrnes (2005) further indicates that educators should step in early, act proactively, and implement a more positive assertiveness in order to avert maladaptive behavior patterns by predicting them rather than waiting for them to occur.

Cornett (2011) reveals that one of the best teaching practices for the integration of the arts is the ability to manage behavior, time, and materials. In order to do so, the educator must have clear expectations, set limits, and have predictable routines (Cornett, 2011).

Heacox (2002) provides a practical approach to classroom management as it pertains to the differentiated environment. She stresses the importance of establishing behavior guidelines,

making the guidelines available to students, discussing such guidelines with the students, and being consistent.

Ciaccio, (2004) also encourages educators to be proactive in that misbehaving students should be identified during the first week of class. To work on issues, Ciaccio (2004) suggests that all students do something positive each day and that the educator provide authentic feedback regarding the positive behavior. Regarding learners who are at-risk, Ciaccio (2004) stresses the importance of keeping every response in a positive context. This practice may in fact be easiest to adhere to if behavior prevention is a part of the classroom environment. Breaux and Whitaker (2006) state that ineffective teachers spend their time putting out fires, while effective teachers practice fire prevention.

Discipline, according to Turnbull et al., (2010) begins with the notion that learners with special needs receive an appropriate education, in a safe environment, according to established laws. First, learners with special needs must receive the same equal discipline as their counterparts that do not have exceptionalities (Turnbull et al., 2010). The consequences may not involve expelling the learner for more than 10 school days (Turnbull et al., 2010). If a school decides to discipline a learner with special needs for more than 10 days, the school must determine if the student's behavior is a manifestation of the disability (Turnbull et al., 2010). Funk (2005) stresses the importance of including the student in the behavior plan; therefore, that it is more effective as a result of buy-in. If the school determines that the actions are a result of the exceptionality, the school must take immediate action to remedy the IEP, conduct a functional behavioral assessment, and develop a behavior plan (Turnbull et al., 2010). Services may also be provided in an alternative setting if the learner has a weapon, drugs, or injures another student (Turnbull et al., 2010).

Behavioral success can be a reality if schools seek to establish a positive climate in which classrooms are built upon a planned, warm, polite, inclusive, and physically and emotionally safe environment where all learners belong and can be successful (Rief & Heimburge, 2006).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the end result of personal success. It occurs during the moment we end one journey and begin the next.

Research has identified students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with learning disabilities, emotional problems, and physical impairments as the most at-risk for low self-esteem (Jensen, 2001). On the other hand, “The most motivated students are those whose participation at school has been accompanied by credible feedback on their skillfulness” (Sagor, 2003). Therefore, it is the duty of the educator to enable all students to experience positive feelings in the classroom (Rief & Heimburge, 2006). In order to build self-esteem, teachers must consciously seek to provide an environment where all learners feel cared for, valued, and respected (Brandt, 1998; Rief & Heimburge, 2006).

Ways in which to increase self-esteem include, but are not limited to, providing job opportunities in which learners can gain a sense of responsibility, encourage social recognition among classmates, acknowledge when students have strengths, and provide recognition for students (Rief & Heimburge, 2006).

One of the most interesting ways in which to build self-esteem is through the integration of movement in the curriculum (Jensen, 2001). According to Jensen (2001), research links physical education to self-esteem. When chemicals such as dopamine and serotonin are released within the body an immediate increase in feeling better occurs (Jensen, 2001). Movement is

something all educators can implement within the classroom to increase self-esteem. Initiatives to expand student self-esteems should also expand out of the classroom and into the school-wide climate.

The integration of art also builds student confidence. According to the results of a two year study, students who struggled in the regular classrooms were often successful in the arts (Cornett, 2011). “As art offers new ways for students to manage emotions, images, and their environment, they gain a sense of self-confidence” (p. 147).

Connell (2005) provides readers with the following three key elements regarding the impact of emotions on education. Our emotions and our intellect are intertwined. The neural connections between our emotions and our intellect influence our ability to pay attention and to make decisions. Students benefit in a classroom environment that is perceived as safe, joyful, and challenging (pp. 140-143). Such findings indicate that if students lack self-esteem their learning will in fact be impacted (Brandt, 1998).

According to Funk (2005), individuals with a healthy sense of self-worth exhibit fewer discipline issues than those with an unhealthy sense of self-worth. Moreover, students that want to divert attention away from personal weaknesses often times display extreme behavior (Funk, 2005). This knowledge should allow educators to approach learners with special needs in a more delicate manner – seeking to avoid the destruction of self-esteem.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provides yet another area in the educational arena in which students can have their self-esteems impacted negatively. Thus, it becomes important to remove all testing anxiety from the learning environment. Ciaccio (2004) suggests that educators establish a plan to combat negative attitudes towards testing in addition to holding extra help

sessions for at-risk students. Such opportunities seek to assist with decreasing testing anxiety which in turn should strengthen test scores.

The literature review provided solid insight into seven specific areas that can clearly guide the learning environment for learners with special needs in both the regular education setting and in the alternative educational settings (i.e. pull out environments). When educators and college preparation programs develop a solid foundation in the areas of Bloom's Taxonomy, Cooperative Learning, Individualized Education Programs, Multiple Intelligences, parental support, proactive classroom management, and student self-esteem building they begin to work towards a healthy educational environment that provides outlets and opportunities for all learners to learn – regardless of disability.

Participant Interview and Questionnaire Results

Those who stop along their journey to ask for assistance, when lost, eventually arrive at the final destination.

In addition to the literature review, research was conducted with participants from Southwestern College, the Kansas State Department of Education, and in and around the Wichita, KS area in order to gain a deeper understanding of what exists in both the college preparation program(s) as well as to determine perspectives on issues in the field of special education. The knowledge obtained will be used to determine and drive the overall M.Ed. in Special Education offered through Southwestern College.

All of the participants were asked to place the following twelve items in sequential order according to the most important to the least important: the ability to work well with learners with special needs; the ability to create an effective Individualized Education Program (IEP); the

ability to effectively carry out the requirements in an IEP; knowledge of specific laws pertaining to special education; the ability to modify grade level curriculum; the dedication to on-going professional development in the field of special education; specific knowledge of the varied disorders and/or attributes of giftedness; the ability to write measureable goals; the ability to effectively carry out the agreed upon goals; the ability to effectively communicate with the proper professionals regarding learners in special education; knowledge of the varied assessment tools used to assess learners with special needs; and the ability to effectively communicate with parents throughout the special education process.

Twenty-three individuals were kind enough to participate in the overall study. Although the researcher had hoped to obtain a larger pool of participants, of those that participated, a foundation from which to expand research regarding this particular topic was established. As a result of the twenty-three participants, the following data was collected. The three most important skills out of the list of twelve presented items were: first, the ability to work well with SPED students; two, the ability to effectively communicate with parents; and three, the ability to create an effective Individualized Education Program. The three least important skills out of the list of twelve presented items were: knowledge of assessment tools; knowledge of special education laws; and dedication to professional development. When asked if colleges were properly preparing special educators the following was found: 57% responded no; 30% responded yes; 9% responded with yes and no; and 4% were unsure.

Kansas State Department of Education

Participant One

With more than 20 years of experience in the field of education, one particular research participant from the Kansas State Department of Education stated that recent graduates were not properly prepared to meet the demands required of them in the special education profession. Furthermore, individuals in the field of special education do not receive enough on-going professional development. Participant One indicated that special education is far more than the Individualized Education Program. Specifically, the research participant indicated that, "...special education is a service and not a place" (Anonymous, 2010).

The goal of special education, according to this participant, is to "identify instructional strategies, supplementary aids and supports necessary for students to participate in the general education curriculum, in the general education environment with their chronologically age appropriate nondisabled peers" (Anonymous 2010). Individuals entering into the field of special education, "...need to understand there is much more to education than how to implement and write IEP goals and objectives" (Anonymous, 2010).

To reiterate the above, when provided with a set of twelve items to place in order of importance, the participant selected *the ability to work well with learners with special needs* as being the most important. In contrast, the participant selected *the ability to effectively communicate with the proper professionals regarding learners in special education* as the least important. An indication was made that the twelve items were difficult to complete because they focused primarily on the Individualized Education Program.

Participant One stressed the importance for colleges to properly prepare educators in the field of special education so that state agencies might begin to come away from doing so during the first year, for recent graduates, in the profession because such training should not rest upon state agencies ~ rather on the college preparation programs. Alarming, the participant indicated that college program expectations have decreased and that there was an increase in grade inflation to the point that it was providing an injustice to the profession.

When asked to determine the main weakness in special education, Participant One stressed the lack of differentiated instruction for diverse learners within the inclusive environment. Yet, the participant found strength in the multi-tiered system of supports for both academics and behavior, although this model was not implemented statewide at the time of the study. To combat issues within the field of special education, according to this particular research participant, colleges should: strengthen the depth of the curriculum; require adequate field experiences; assist educators in understanding general education (e.g., models, pedagogy, curricula, etc.); know and understand how to obtain and analyze data in order to make informed program decisions; and prepare professionals in the realm of collaboration.

To combat issues within the field of special education, according to this particular research participant, districts should: educate administrators; build on expertise of others; collaborate to provide best instructional strategies in order to increase student performance; analyze data in order to make meaningful decisions; increase parental involvement; engage students in programs; and involve the community.

Participant Two

Research Participant Two has also worked in the field of education for over twenty years. In agreement with Participant One, Participant Two also felt that recent graduates were not properly prepared to meet the demands required of those in the field of special education. Both participants do not feel there is a noticeable difference of professionalism between recent graduates and experienced professionals.

Again, like Participant One, Participant Two agreed that there was not enough on-going professional development once graduates enter the field of special education. Participant Two also felt that special educators need the same professional development that general educators receive so that there is a firm understanding of standards and how to teach academics.

When given the same set of twelve items to place in chronological order of importance Participant Two selected the most important skill for special educators as needing the ability to be able to modify grade level curriculum. This particular participant did not number every item, but out of the five items that were numbered the last (or least important) item selected was the ability to create an effective Individualized Education Program (IEP).

When asked to determine the main weakness in special education Participant Two stated that teachers need knowledge on teaching academics to students with disabilities. In addition, Participant Two indicated that special education teachers have not been given proper knowledge of standards and how to assess students in order to use the data collection to drive instruction. Regarding strengths the participant stated that special educators were flexible and possessed the ability to look at diverse situations.

To combat issues within the field of special education, according to Participant Two, colleges should teach academics (e.g., math and reading) and familiarize learners with standards and how to teach to the standards. To combat issues within the field of special education, according to Participant Two, districts should: teach educators how to “unpack standards” (Anonymous, 2010); include special educators with regular educators during trainings; promote involvement within community; and provide proper core content training.

Participant Two made an impactful statement on the current condition of special education in the State of Kansas. “Students are being left behind because teachers are being taught what is *special* in special education” (Anonymous, 2010).

Southwestern College Participants

Fifty-seven percent of the research participants were affiliates of Southwestern College (e.g., currently in the M.Ed. in Special Education program, recent graduates, or faculty). When analyzing the data collected from the thirteen participants, solicited from Southwestern College, data was categorized first by those who believe recent graduates entering the field of special education were prepared, secondly by those who believe that recent graduates were not prepared to meet the demands required in the field of special education, and third by those who indicated both responses.

Believed Recent Graduates Were Prepared

Forty-six percent of the participants from the Southwestern College response pool believe that recent graduates were prepared to meet the demands required in the field of special education. Eighty-three percent of the respondents in this category teach in the field of special education whereas, 17% of the respondents were paraeducators in the field of special education.

According to the respondents, when looking specifically at the identifiable weaknesses in special education the following was found: students take advantage of individual modifications (to include not taking study skills classes seriously); as a result of paraeducators doing too much the students become dependent instead of independent; lack of training for paraeducators; lack of time to train paraeducators; students fear leaving special education even though they are prepared to do so; there was a lack of communication between educators as students age; special educators have been excluded from team meetings and discussions about learners with special needs; the students need to be challenged more; and there was not a cohesive goal or concept map for students, only standards, which can be interpreted differently by each educator. One participant even felt that behavior disorder students should be put into proper facilities.

On the other hand, when assessing the strengths in special education the following was indicated: there was evidence of increased interaction with regular education students; inclusion in the regular education classroom was more evident (to include special education students wanting to stay in the regular education room); more cohesive special education staff; better IEPs and goals led to success for students; special education information has gotten better; there was more sensitivity toward the learners than in the past; and the educators love and want what is best for the students (to include the realization that special education students are humans instead of outcasts).

Believed Recent Graduates Were Not Prepared

Fifty-four percent of the respondents believe that recent graduates were not properly prepared to meet the demands required of those in special education. Of the respondents, 100%

were currently working in the field of special education or have worked in the field of special education.

When looking at specific weaknesses in the field of special education, according to these participants, the following was found: students were being placed in small groups according to grade level instead of specific individualized needs; collaboration between regular educators and special educators was lacking; regular educators disliked modification of assignments; there was a lack of technology; there were not enough qualified special educators to fill the positions; some of the educators were simply in special education because they could not obtain regular education jobs; there was not adequate training; and there was a lack of manpower to handle the assigned caseloads.

When looking at specific strengths in the field of special education, according to these participants, the following was found to be true: there were dedicated and caring individuals on behalf of those in the educational environment; flexibility was a part of the overall equation; educators were creative; students were identified at-risk much sooner; students with severe needs move along the continuum first; the technology available was beneficial; collaboration was present; schools were moving towards inclusion; district support was solid; and the utilization of tiered instruction (MTSS) was beneficial for special education.

Wichita Participants

When analyzing the data collected from eight total participants solicited from individuals (e.g., teachers, specialists, Para-educators, and/or parents of learners with special needs) in or directly around the Wichita area (e.g., Haysville, Derby, Goddard, Valley Center), data was categorized first by those who believe recent graduates entering the field of special education

were prepared, by those who believe that recent graduates were not prepared to meet the demands required in the field of special education, and by one individual that was not sure if recent graduates were properly prepared to meet the demands required of those in the field of special education.

Believed Recent Graduates Were Prepared

Thirteen percent of the participants from in or around the Wichita, KS area felt that recent graduates were prepared to meet the demands required of them in the field of education. When asked to identify the weaknesses witnessed in the field of special education, in the past three years, the participants mentioned that there was a lack of parent contact when changes were made to the IEP of the students. When asked to identify strengths participants indicated that all of the service providers gave input at the IEP meetings. From this particular percentage, participants had a dual perspective regarding the feedback given in that the participants were parents of exceptional children and teachers in special education.

Believed Recent Graduates Were Not Prepared

Seventy-five percent of the participants felt that recent graduates were not prepared to meet the demands in the field of special education. When asked about the weaknesses the following items were indicated: shortage of special education teachers; some families do not understand their rights fully; meetings are too quick and formal; overall lack of support for families; lack of training for dealing with autistic students; not enough resources available to help parents understand special needs; there were not enough student teaching hours; and new educators do not spend enough in the classroom for hands on training.

From this particular category the participants ranged greatly in that some were social workers. Others were parents of students with exceptionalities. While others were special educators and some were both parents of exceptional students and administrators in special education. This particular response pool offered a diverse outlook from a wide variety of backgrounds.

When looking at the specific strengths identified by this group the following were found: it was believed that more teachers entering the field of education enter the workforce with an endorsement in special education; with the right setting and group there was identifiable power through teaming and it benefited families and students; once trust was gained by the students they were more apt to admit they needed help; educators wanted to watch students learn and succeed; there was more follow-up training available for experienced professionals; there was more varied hands-on experiences with different special education needs; and there was more flexibility for students with special needs.

Unsure of Whether or Not Graduates Were Prepared

One of the eight participants from the Wichita area was unsure if recent graduates were prepared to meet the demands in the field of special education. It is important to notate that this individual did not work in the field of education rather she had a child in the field of special education. What made this participant unique from all others was the fact that he/she had experience with the field of special education in both California and Kansas.

One of the weaknesses noted was that for a classroom with ten children, of which five were in wheelchairs, only two paraeducators were present. The lack of manpower to handle the caseload was rightfully indicated. The individual also stated that funding and daily

communication with parents ranked in the weakness category. When comparing California to Kansas, the individual stated that Kansas was more apt to use inclusion as the least restrictive environment. Regarding strengths, this individual stated that the teachers were generally good, the students were treated like they did not have special needs, and technology was prevalent in California.

The researcher also conducted in-person observations with this particular participant in order to gain a deeper insight into the daily functions of those families with exceptional children. Three different observations were conducted. Two of the three observations were conducted while the individuals were in Kansas City at an intense hyperbolic therapy. The therapy consisted of placing the child with cerebral palsy (CP) into a dive tank in which the child wore a helmet that provided heightened levels of oxygen once the dive tank reached a certain depth. The child had made measurable gains from the first observation to the third. The therapy was a month long in duration and costly, but it was evident that drastic gains were made regarding the child's ability to sit up, crawl, and walk. Prior to the therapy the child was unable to crawl properly, walk properly, or sit up straight without support. After one month of therapy the child was able to walk with a walker, crawl across an entire room, and sit up to watch television without any support.

The following was found to be true of this individual family. The family dynamics revolved around the child with the exceptionality. One parent worked full time while the other stayed at home to care for the eleven year old child with special needs. The state provided funding to assist the child with exceptional needs, but the parent who stayed at home was unable to acquire a job beyond part-time if funding was to resume. Other family members assisted periodically in the process of treatment and caring for the exceptional child. The parent that

stayed home to care for the exceptional child invested the full day ensuring that specific needs were met for the child (beyond the other children in the home without exceptionalities). During the duration of the day the parent who stayed home had to transport the child from place to place by lifting the child without assistance. The child had to be changed by the parent several times throughout the day. The parent consistently encouraged the child to work towards mastery of simple tasks such as moving as much as possible to the items the child desired. Aside from the apparent differences among the children in the family the parent treated all children equally.

Overall, the observations of this particular family reaffirmed the researcher's prior knowledge of the vast amount of energy and dedication it takes to raise a child with a disability. The researcher's prior knowledge was grounded in the fact that her stepbrother was a victim of brain damage due to being underwater for twenty-two minutes at the young age of five. The researcher's mother was the nurse of the exceptional child from the age of seven to the age of thirteen when his body stopped functioning properly and he passed away during his sleep. Although the family that was observed had a child that could talk; the researcher's stepbrother was not able to talk. He had to communicate with his eyes. In both family circumstances the child with the exceptionality was the core of the family and the disability guided the day-to-day transactions.

Important Skills

Aside from the strengths and weaknesses the participants were also asked to place the following twelve items in chronological order: the ability to work well with learners with special needs; the ability to create an effective Individualized Program (IEP); the ability to effectively carry out the requirements in an IEP; knowledge of specific laws pertaining to special education;

the ability to modify grade level curriculum; the dedication to on-going professional development in the field of special education; specific knowledge of the varied disorders and/or attributes of giftedness; the ability to write measurable goals; the ability to effectively carry out the agreed upon goals; the ability to effectively communicate with the proper professionals regarding learners with special needs; knowledge of varied assessments tools used to assess learners with special needs; and the ability to effectively communicate with parents throughout the special education process.

Kansas State Department of Education Important Skills Results

Of the data collected, only one of the two participants fully numbered the twelve items on number seven of the questionnaire. Of the numbered items, the only visible comparisons were found with skill one and skill two. Both participants rated these skills one number apart (e.g., 4 and 5).

Participant One indicated the ability to work well with learners with special needs as number one. Participant Two, on the other hand, felt that the ability to modify grade level curriculum was the most important of the twelve. Since Participant Two did not complete the full numbering process, no additional comparisons could be made.

Southwestern College Important Skills Results

Twelve participants completed number seven on the questionnaire. Of those twelve responses the following results were revealed. Eighty-three percent listed the ability to work well with learners with special needs as the most important of the twelve items. This skill was selected equally by those who believe recent graduates are prepared for the demands of

special education when compared with those who believe that recent graduates were not prepared for the demands of special education.

When trying to validate which skill ranked the least important of the twelve both knowledge of specific laws pertaining to special education and knowledge of the varied assessment tools used to assess special needs learners were selected 25% of the time.

Of those who believed that recent graduates were prepared for the field of special education - 67% believed that knowledge of the specific laws pertaining to special education ranked least important. Of those who believed that recent graduates were not prepared for the field of special education, 67% believed that knowledge of the varied assessment tools used to assess special needs learners was the least important of the twelve items.

Wichita Important Skills Results

When analyzing the data from the eight Wichita participants, 38% selected the ability to work well with learners with special needs as the most vital skill for educators to possess in the special education. Of the three individuals who ranked this as number one, 67% believed that recent graduates were not prepared for the field of special education. Thirty-three percent evolved from one participant who was not sure whether or not recent graduates were prepared for special education. It is vital to notate that this individual was a parent of a child with a special need. Such knowledge limits his/her ability to assess certain educational aspects. He/she felt best not responding to whether or not the recent graduates were prepared because he/she did not have the proper tools to assess such a question.

The least important skill, according to the Wichita participants, was knowledge of specific laws pertaining to special education by 38%. Sixty-seven percent were from those

individuals who believed that recent graduates were not prepared for special education. However, 33% came from the same individual who felt that he/she was not equipped to assess recent graduates.

Important Skills Results Overall

When looking at the data collected all together (e.g., not separated out by data collection locations), the following was established: 64% percent felt that the ability to work well with learners with special needs was the most vital of the twelve listed items; 64% percent believed that recent graduates were not prepared for special education; 36% percent believed that recent graduates were prepared for special education; 27% percent felt that knowledge of specific laws pertaining to special education were the least important of the twelve listed skills; 60% percent believed that recent graduates were not prepared for demands of special education; 40% percent believed that recent graduates were prepared for the demands of special education; and 10% percent felt inapt to respond to how recent graduates compare in the field of special education.

College Preparation

When asked if colleges were properly training individuals for the field of special education the following results were determined. Of the yes responses, 86% were affiliates of Southwestern and 14% were special educators working in the Wichita school district. Of the no responses, 15% were Kansas State Department of Education employees, 46% were Southwestern College learners from the M.Ed. in Special Education program, 7% were Southwestern College faculty members, and 38% were participants in or around the Wichita area (e.g., social worker, parents of children with exceptionalities, regular educator, special educator, and paraeducator).

According to one KSDE employee, “students are getting a watered down version of coursework” (Anonymous, 2010). Furthermore, this individual participant felt that learners were not getting adequate field experiences before graduation. On the other hand, another KSDE employee indicated that “students are being left behind because teachers are being taught what is *special* in education” (Anonymous, 2010). A Southwestern College learner stressed that “special education is just like general education.” because “no matter how many courses one takes, or how many books one reads there is no way to be prepared without just jumping in” (Anonymous, 2010). The participant further indicated that “perhaps the answer is to have more practicum hours or to require more volunteer hours in the school system, but I’m not so sure. It seems like parenthood to me. You might think you know what it’s going to be like, but really, you have no idea” (Anonymous, 2010).

When asked how colleges might better prepare professionals for the field of special education the following was established. Offer college refresher courses for experienced educators in order to bring educators up to date on new procedures. Provide additional IEP training. Require more student teaching hours/practicum. Provide additional training for those lacking in specific areas. Offer courses that are not limited just to educators (i.e. for those in areas such as social work). Provide practice in differentiation. Provide practice with direct instruction. Provide practice with classroom management techniques. Provide more in-depth course learning (e.g., strategies to work with specific differences, educating parents, staff members, and administrators). Provide more specific training on understanding the IEP process. Ensure that regular educators and special educators are able to blend the curriculum. Work with local school districts to ensure new hires have solid mentors. Provide additional knowledge of

how to teach academics, additional knowledge of how to interpret standards, and additional knowledge on how to teach to the standards.

One particular participant stated, “For me, the ‘people part’ of education is the most important. Paperwork can be learned. An IEP can be rewritten, but there are no do-overs in the bond with a student” (Anonymous, 2010).

Discussion

The art of the experienced traveler is the ability to communicate intentions during each stage of the process – from preplanning to reflections on the end destination.

Three original guiding questions guided this particular study. What currently exists within the scope of the specific organizational area? What should exist according to literature/research? How might the organization close the gap between what is and what should be?

What Currently Exists

According to an on-line article provided by Phi Delta Kappan (2008), the supply of quality special educators has been an on-going issue for decades. Specifically, this shortage was detrimental enough to the quality of American education that it was highlighted in A Nation at Risk in 1983 (Phi Delta Kappan, 2008). It was indicated that only .86 of the educators were actually prepared for each of the positions in special education (Phi Delta Kappan, 2008). This knowledge led to the realization that positions in the field of special education had to be filled; therefore, they were filled with those individuals not fully licensed in the area of special education (Phi Delta Kappan, 2008). Southwestern College provides the option for learners to

apply for full licensure after the completion of just 33 out of the 39 required hours in conjunction with passing the required ETS Praxis assessments.

Alarming, learners in the M.Ed. in Special Education program can apply for a provisional license after successfully completing a minimum of 12 credit hours. The researcher found this KSDE option to be part of the overall problem with the quality of education in the realm of special education. Further studies would have to be conducted to determine the connection between this provision and the actual outcomes of this study, but logically speaking, if individuals are not fully educated in the field they are hired to work in there are going to be gaps and areas of concern.

In addition to the requirements for licensure it was determined that there are many opinions about the reality of what is transpiring in the field of special education – both in college preparation work and in the actual field. It was also determined that Southwestern College's M.Ed. in Special Education requirements, for the most part, were comparable to the other three colleges that were reviewed.

When reviewing the course requirements the following major differences were found to exist. One out of the four of the colleges offered an IEP driven course. Although the IEP process was woven into the curriculum, Southwestern College was the only one to offer a course directly focused on the IEP. There was variation amongst the four colleges with regard to the practicum requirements although each of the four required at least one practicum in order to graduate. Only two of the four colleges required a legal course (Southwestern College being one of the four). Only two of the four colleges required a language course (Southwestern being one of the four). Only two of the four colleges required a course in transitions (Southwestern being one of the

four). Only two of the four colleges required a course in cultural diversity (Southwestern included). Only two of the four colleges offered seminars in educational topics (Southwestern included). One of the four colleges offered a thesis option in the research realm. Southwestern College was unique in that it offered an Action Research course and a Field-Based Research Block course.

Over 50% of the participants felt that colleges were not properly preparing special educators. These results included the Kansas State Department of Education employees, learners from the M.Ed. in Special Education program at Southwestern College, parents of students with exceptionalities, and professionals in the field of education. It was determined that varied participants felt that there were numerous challenges in the field of special education. These included, but were not limited to the lack of support, the lack of behavior management skills, the lack of funding, the lack of resources, the lack of understanding standards and how to meet the needs of each exceptional learner, and the lack of communication skills with the staff and parents. Moreover, there was a lack of on-going professional development for special educators once in the field.

What Should Exist?

The results of the research revealed that colleges should offer additional requirements regarding practicum in the field of special education. As well, the curriculum within each course should extend beyond the surface level and provide learners with in-depth wisdom not only in the intended content, but also in other specific areas such as the important areas indicated in the literature review (e.g., Bloom's Taxonomy, Cooperative Learning, Individual Education

Program, Multiple Intelligences, parental support, proactive classroom management, and self-esteem).

Overall, the research participants identified twenty-two important abilities that special educators should have in order to effectively work in the field of special education. The items were placed in order of how many research participants selected the same items – from most to least. The results were 39% of the participants felt that patience was one of the top three important abilities that special educators should possess. Thirty percent of the participants felt that the ability to communicate effectively was a needed ability/skill necessary in the field of special education. Twenty-two percent of the participants felt that the ability to write an effective Individualized Education Program was among the top three important skills to possess. Seventeen percent of the participants felt that a true passion for the students (and parents) was one of the top three attributes of a successful special educator. Seventeen percent of the participants felt that the ability to plan and modify curriculum for exceptional learners was among the top three skills necessary for special educators. Thirteen percent of the participants felt that each of the following items were one of the top three important skills that special educators should possess: knowledge of the specific laws in special education; organizational skills; positive learning environment (where self-worth is established); and classroom management skills. Nine percent of the participants felt that each of the following items were one of the top three important attributes of an educator in special education: knowledge of varied strategies; ability to collect/analyze data to make decisions; flexibility to adapt to changes; dedication to the overall process; disposition to work with exceptional learners; specific knowledge of varied exceptionalities; and willingness to continue learning (professional development). Four percent of the participants felt that each of the following items were among

the top three important skills required of special educators: knowledge of specific programs; sense of humor; skills to implement everything; assessment and goal writing skills; ability to actually teach specific skills not just units, and the ability to obtain administrative support.

Recommendations

How Can Southwestern College Close the Gaps?

In order to close the gaps between what exists and what should exist the following should be done. The college should seek to align current best practices with what is taught in the program. Increase the requirements from two practicums to three or require more in-depth wisdom to be obtained during the two required practicums. Either combine the two research courses currently offered into one longer course (18 weeks/one set fee) to ensure adequate opportunities to truly gain knowledge in the field of research, data collection, and analysis or revamp the two courses that currently exist to focus more on relevant issues and topics in the field of special education while ensuring that the same instructor teaches both sections so that the overall process is more meaningful and coherent.

Southwestern College should also provide electives based on the items covered in the literature review and/or responses from participants regarding what is most important in the field of special education. As well, SC should maintain the IEP course (EDUC 514), but extend it out to 3 hours to include more field based opportunities or intertwine the IEP process throughout each of the required courses. SC should ensure that EDUC 555 includes relevant topics as indicated in the findings of this study (e.g., behavior management, collaboration, and instructional strategies for diverse learners). SC should also require the items covered in EDUC

534 to become a part of each course. This action would free up room to create another course in order to offer additional field work and/or specific knowledge in another area of weakness.

SC should also consider creating a course with EDUC 514, 524, and 534 in which learners are required to engage in field work to enhance wisdom in the specific topics. Again, this would free up room to design new courses or ensure added practicums. It should be a requirement that instructors integrate the knowledge from EDUC 549 into all courses. Then, the course could be removed and additional space freed up for the design of another course.

As well, the college should seek to hold learners accountable for an on-line electronic portfolio in which the state standards are addressed throughout the entire program (e.g., Weebly.com). Southwestern College should update the EDUC 511 Research Methodologies documents online to reflect that EDUC 512 Action Research has taken its place. In addition to requiring all instructors to integrate each of the eight state standards into every course taught. Specifically, hold each instructor accountable for ensuring that every assignment is labeled with the specific state standard(s). This will move the program from the current state standard success rate of 41%-71%, in each of the eight standards, to a more accurate 100% for each state standard; therefore, increasing the overall learning within the program.

Closing organizational gaps is not an easy process. It is recommended that the gaps be closed over a set duration of time and that the data collection process branch out to include instructor/course evaluation information in order to guide the depth of the course content restructuring. It is also advised that the instructors teaching the courses meet periodically to discuss current and future goals of the program to ensure effective collaboration throughout the program – even if this means incurring the costs of travel for on-line instructors.

This study was conducted over a five month period. Further analysis and data collection could certainly aid in additional understanding to the overall process of closing the gaps within the M.Ed. in Special Education program offered at Southwestern College. The research process of any given task is transformational and fluid in that the data can always be analyzed to form new findings. For the purpose of this study, the data contained within this report will provide a mere basis from which to continue forward.

Considering that the world is round the expert traveler fully understands that he will eventually end up where he once began. Therefore, it isn't the destination's start or finish that matter...it is the journey in between.

References

- A field at risk: The teacher shortage in special education* (2008, April, 01). Retrieved August 29, 2010, from http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-7766876/A-field-at-risk-the.html
- Brandt, R. (1998). *Powerful learning*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Breaux, A., & Whitaker, T. (2006). *Seven simple secrets: What the best teachers know and do*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc.
- Byrnes, M.A. (2005). *Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial issues in special education* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, Iowa: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Ciaccio, J. (2004). *Totally positive teaching: A five-stage approach to energizing students and teachers*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Connell, D. (2005). *Brain-based strategies to reach every learner*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.
- Cornett, C. (2011). *Creating meaning through literature and the arts: Art integration for classroom teachers*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Danielson, C. (2002). *Enhancing student achievement: A framework for school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Hannaford, C. (1995). *Smart moves: Why learning is not all in your head*. Atlanta, GA: Great Ocean Publishers.
- Harmin, M. & Toth, M. (2006). *Inspiring active learning: A complete handbook for today's teachers*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Heacox, D. (2002). *Differentiating instruction in the regular classroom: How to reach and teach*

- all learners, grades 3-13*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.
- Hendricks, C. (2009). *Improving schools through action research: A comprehensive guide for educators*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Jensen, E. (2001). *Arts with the brain in mind*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Kutscher, M. L. (2005). *Kids in the syndrome mix of ADHD, LD, asperger's, tourette's, bipolar, and more: The one stop guide for parents, teachers, and other professionals*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria: VA, ASCD.
- Overton, T. (2003). *Assessing learners with special needs: An applied approach* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Rief, S. & Heimburge, J. (2006). *How to reach and teach all children in the inclusive classroom: Practical strategies, lessons, and activities* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Russo, C. J. (2004). *Reutter's the law of public education* (5th ed.). New York: Foundation Press.
- Sagor, R. (2003). *Motivating students and teachers in an era of standards*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Siegel, L. (2005). *The complete IEP guide: How to advocate for your Special Ed child* (4th ed.). Berkley, CA: Nolo.
- Sorrells, A., Rieth, H., & Sindelar, P. (2004). *Crucial issues in special education: Access, diversity, and accountability*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Stowe, C. (2005). *Understanding special education: A helpful handbook for classroom teachers*. NY: Scholastic Inc.
- Tate, M. (2003). *Worksheets don't grow dendrites: Instructional strategies that engage the*

brain. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Company.

Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*.

Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed ability classrooms* (2nd ed.).

Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Turnbull, A., Turnbull, R., & Wehmeyer, M. (2010). *Exceptional lives: Special education in*

today's schools (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Weinfeld, R., Barnes-Robinson, L., Jeweler, S., & Shevitz, B. (2006). *Smart kids with learning*

difficulties: Overcoming obstacles and realizing potential. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press

Inc.

Wong, H., & Wong, R. (2009). *The first days of school: How to be an effective teacher*.

Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications, Inc.