

# Partnering for the Clinical Preparation of Education Specialists

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**ABSTRACT:** NCATE's (2010) *Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel* calls for a shift toward clinical preparation and partnerships as a means of adequately preparing new teachers for the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. Looking at special education teacher preparation, there exist few model programs that have paved the road for others in implementing new clinical preparation programs for education specialist candidates. As such, partnerships between institutes of higher education and local schools are all the more critical, as is the sharing of program development across the field. The purpose of this paper is to share our newly restructured program by highlighting four key features: (a) school partnerships, (b) co-teaching, (c) pupil-centered practice and action research, and (d) multiple stakeholders and contexts.

*NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #2/A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; #3/Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; #7/A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration*

## Introduction

It is expected that teacher preparation programs lead in excellence, rigor, and high academic standards to prepare new teachers who demonstrate mastery in the classroom and meet the needs of all learners (Chandler et al., 2012). For example, Smith, Robb, West, and Tyler (2010) expressed, "today's teachers must meet more stringent standards and possess additional knowledge and skills. Clearly the supply of new, differently prepared general and special education teachers must increase" (p. 26). To address this, a clinical approach that embeds collaborative partnerships between institutions of higher education, school districts, teachers, and researchers is needed (<http://www.calstate.edu/teacherED/ca-alliance/>; Duchowski, Kutash, Sheffield, & Vaughn, 2006).

In 2010, NCATE published a report on "Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Preparation: A National Strategy to Prepare Effective Teachers" calling for a total shift toward clinical practice and partnerships, "turning the education of teachers upside down" (p. 2) by placing "practice at the center" (p. 3). In response, the College of Education at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) created a task force to conduct an analysis of our teacher education programs and partnerships and to identify any gaps between current practice and the recommended clinical preparation model. The Dean submitted a plan to the California Alliance for Teacher Preparation Partnerships (<http://www.calstate.edu/teacherED/ca-alliance/>), committing to establish demonstration sites using the recommended clinical preparation approach.

During this same time, the CSUF Department of Special Education was awarded an OSEP 325T grant to "restructure or

redesign" the special education teacher preparation program and to meet California's need of fully credentialed special education teachers (Evans et al., 2005). During the first-year, faculty members were trained in *Mentoring Teacher Candidates Through Co-Teaching* through the Academy for Co-Teaching and Collaboration, St. Cloud University, Minnesota (Bacharach & Heck, 2011). The timely intersection of these factors—the NCATE report, the California Alliance plan, the OSEP grant, the co-teaching training, along with the then newly adopted California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) education specialist standards (<http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/stds-prep-program.html>)—presented special education faculty with a prime opportunity to transform the existing teacher preparation program and launch into a new preparation model that answers NCATE's call for innovative clinical preparation and partnerships.

## Key Elements

Professional Development Partnerships (PDPs) are formed through collaborative efforts between teacher preparation programs and innovative district programs. Our newly restructured program established a network of partners with a focus on key elements that align with the Professional Development School (PDS) philosophy, serving to improve the clinical preparation of candidates; enhance professional development and instruction for teachers, administrators, and faculty; and increase student achievement. The key elements of this program include: (a) school partnerships, (b) co-teaching, (c) pupil-centered practice and action research, and (d) multiple stakeholders and contexts.

## School Partnerships

Candidates who are placed in a PDS during their student teaching experience can expect to: (a) learn from an expert teacher/mentor, (b) form collaborative relationships, (c) ask questions and receive immediate feedback, (d) contribute to the classroom, and (e) receive all the support that comes from participating in a PDS environment (Henry et al., 2012). To ensure candidates were placed in this context, faculty members from multiple departments were invited to present the new preparation model during the College's Advisory Board meetings as well as District Principal meetings. This resulted in district partnerships at the superintendent and school principal levels. Resources were shared to enable partnership activities, such as the development of the co-teaching teacher preparation model, demonstrating the school-university commitment to providing a meaningful preparation program (PDS Essential #2 & #7, NAPDS, 2008).

## Co-Teaching Clinical Preparation

Research supports that the co-teaching experience is effective at the pre-service level to engage both the special and general educators in meeting the needs of all students and to increase special educators' content knowledge (McHatton & Daniel, 2008). A co-teaching model for clinical preparation of teacher candidates was implemented, beginning with a one-day co-teaching training for PDS teachers (Bacharach & Heck, 2011). The post-training surveys reported that cooperating teachers (CTs) felt better prepared to support new teacher candidates (see Table 1) and desired additional trainings and other opportunities to share (see Table 2). Engaging in shared decision-making (PDS Essential #4, NAPDS, 2008), partners then worked together to determine the best pairing of CTs and teacher candidates for 10 weeks of co-teaching with a general educator and 10 weeks of co-teaching with a special educator.

## Pupil-Centered Practice and Action Research

The clinical preparation experience and coursework were designed to develop special education candidates as problem-solving teacher-researchers (e.g., Babkie & Provost, 2004). With a focus on pupil-centered practice, candidates were expected to identify at least four pupils from their student teaching placement with a variety of specific needs and gather data from multiple sources, identify various research-based solutions, collaborate with multiple stakeholders to devise a plan, help implement the plan, collect progress data, and communicate assessment results. In this way, theory and data-based practices were fused to support student learning (PDS Essential #3 & #4, NAPDS, 2008).

## Multiple Stakeholders and Contexts

In addition to working with general and special educators, the special education candidates were given opportunities to work

with PDS administrators (e.g., review school-wide positive behavior support practices), paraprofessionals (e.g., train in conducting task analyses and data collection), specialists (e.g., coordinate and co-teach), families (e.g., conduct home visits and MAPS meetings), and the community (PDS Essential #2, NAPDS, 2008). Partnering with community agencies helped supplement the program by providing fieldtrips to other model programs, such as full inclusion charter schools and supported employment sites for adults with moderate-severe disabilities.

## Next Steps

Both faculty and CTs agree that the role of the supervisor is a critical component that needs attention as the program develops. Though supervisors attended the co-teaching training alongside the CTs, there is a need for examining their roles more closely, specifically as it relates to CT-supervisor collaboration for the benefit of the candidates. Survey results indicate that 90% of the CTs view the role of the supervisor as *very important* and 82% indicated that it was *very important* to confer with the supervisor about the candidates' progress during weekly visits. Seeking to provide "a structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration" (PDS Essential #7, NAPDS, 2008, p. 9), university supervisors, faculty, and cooperating teachers are jointly re-examining the specific role of university supervisors within the PDS co-teaching model and developing communities of practice for university supervisors as a means of enhancing their skills.

## Conclusions

Regenerating teacher preparation leads to the regeneration of the field. With respect to special education in particular, there are unique challenges that make restructuring and redesigning these preparation programs especially difficult and there exists few model programs that have paved the road for others in implementing new clinical preparation programs for education specialist candidates. As such, partnerships are all the more critical (NAPDS, 2008).

In a day when teacher education is under greater scrutiny and called to greater accountability, when the needs of schools and students are intensifying and diversifying, and when budget-cuts are staggering, there is incredible need for innovative clinical preparation programs that involve school and community partners to work synergistically and to exponentially increase resources (e.g., expertise, materials, funding sources) as a means of supporting developing candidates and preparing them to be next year's teachers (Hardman, 2009; Pepper, Hartman, Blackwell, & Monroe, 2012; Scoy & Eldridge, 2012; Smith et al., 2010). It is our goal to produce high quality and reflective teachers who can competently, collaboratively, and creatively address the needs of all students, lead their campuses into new global frontiers, and become models for the next generation (Friend & Cook, 2010). SUP

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