

# Dual Certification in General and Special Education: What is the Role of Field Experience in Preservice Teacher Preparation?

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a field component that was merged with a new teacher preparation curriculum so that at the completion of the program the undergraduate candidates could be recommended for both K–6 general and special education certification. An examination of the data reveals that the program is challenging to implement, especially in terms of scheduling logistics, but beneficial to the preparation of new teachers. The intense field experiences allowed preservice teachers to face the challenges of meeting a diverse population of students in the areas of academics, culture, and socioeconomic status. Candidates were completing the program in an authentic context with a practical view of the realities of teaching in classrooms today.*

## **Preservice Teacher Preparation**

To prepare new teachers to embark on a journey into the world of teaching, it is imperative to provide them with the most critical information that will contribute to their potential as highly effective teachers (Imig & Imig, 2006). The purpose of this study was to determine how undergraduate elementary teacher education candidates adapted to a new curriculum leading to recommendation for both K–6 general and special education certification. Teacher preparation programs offer structured opportunities for preservice teachers to complete a rigorous initial phase of learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2003) that will equip them with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for teaching students with different needs (Cooper, Kurtts, Baber, & Vallecorsa, 2008; Richards, 2010). Generally, new teachers learn and acquire content knowledge; study the learning process and students' cultural backgrounds; and learn how to plan, instruct, and assess students' learning needs. Once they begin teaching, however, new teachers are faced with numerous challenges for which they may not be prepared.

A concerted effort by colleges of education is required to meet these challenges. Moreover, it is also important to consider that typical elementary classrooms are filled with students who have an array of learning skills, academic achievements, physical challenges, and social variations. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching will not work (Stotsky, 2006). Too many teacher education programs prepare beginning teachers for a classroom of homogenous students that simply does not exist. Today's schools have classrooms full of diverse students with different cultural backgrounds and a variety of needs, and while these programs may prepare teachers to reach some students successfully, they fall woefully short in preparing teachers to reach all students.

### **Preservice Teacher Development**

It is important that preservice teachers develop the skills and strategies to ensure that students of all ability levels achieve success in the classroom (Cooper, et al., 2008; Gay, 2002). There is unanimous agreement among educators that in order to be an effective teacher, one must be a master of content knowledge and pedagogical skills. An important part of this knowledge is the understanding of the different cultural characteristics and needs of every learner in the classroom. It is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to help new teachers begin their teaching careers capable of embracing those cherished moments that happen when students ask deep, thoughtful questions that prove the academic content has triggered a connection with a real-world event (Imig & Imig, 2006).

Imig and Imig (2006) consider teacher development as having two basic options: the just and unjust. The “just” path is where the teacher and students are connected through learning. The new teacher is teaching the students valuable and meaningful information while learning with them and embracing the notion that both parties are teachers and learners. Though the “just” path recognizes the value of standards-based instruction, the value of student interests is also considered. Teachers on this path work to keep educational gains tightly connected to student engagement. Arguably as important, the just path allows teachers to be agents of change as today’s classrooms are constantly evolving with students of varying needs and abilities. A new teacher must be able to adjust continuously to meet the individual needs of each student.

The “unjust” path is, unfortunately, commonplace for far too many new teachers (Imig & Imig, 2006). Here, teachers do not grow and thrive along with their students. Teachers on the unjust path are often overwhelmed by challenges that arise and are unable to meet the needs of their students. Rather, they tend to shift into survival mode and give their students’ recited facts and information without motivating or inspiring them to higher levels of learning.

Colleges of education must prepare new teachers to be both teachers and learners. They also need to understand the need to prepare highly qualified teachers who work hard to motivate, inspire, and create appropriate learning environments for every learner.

### **Inclusive Classrooms**

The inclusion revolution began in the United States three quarters of a century ago in the years leading up to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Inclusion became a reality in public schools in 1990 when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) became law (Torreno, 2012). *Inclusion* is defined as placing students with special needs in a general classroom setting to receive academic instruction (Tilton, 1996). However, Snyder, Garriot, and Aylor (2001) found that many teachers have a negative perception of inclusion, citing reasons such as a lack of appropriate learning material and the presence of increased disruptive behavior as contributing to their lack of confidence in inclusion. In addition, many teachers feel they are inadequately prepared for teaching in an inclusive setting (Cipkin & Rizza, 2000; Snyder, Garriot, & Aylor, 2001). Being ill prepared to meet the needs of students included in the general education classroom who have been identified as having special learning needs can be daunting. It is postulated that novice teachers’ lack of adequate preparation for the realities of today’s classrooms contributes to nearly half of American teachers leaving the profession during their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2001; 2003).

Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs play an important role in the success of any classroom, especially an inclusive classroom. It is vital for teachers to be positive and confident that they can facilitate success for their students (Beacham & Rouse, 2012). In a study by Beacham and Rouse (2012), student teachers

reported that having a course focused on providing the knowledge, skills, and values needed to teach all children, regardless of impairment or learning difficulties, was beneficial and necessary. A learning environment within the inclusive classroom communities is one with peer tutoring, clearly defined areas of interest, meaningful content, and recognition of all students' abilities and talents (Blessing, Levitz, & Levitz, 2003). These elements, when incorporated correctly and positively, maximize every student's potential in the classroom while also providing an excellent environment for inclusion. It is important for teachers to celebrate diversity in the classroom and to embed differentiation of instruction into their teaching so that every student succeeds simultaneously. The fact remains, however, that many teachers have not acquired the requisite skills and experiences to be fully prepared. They do not have an understanding of the importance of diversity in the classroom and the correct ways to incorporate inclusive elements into regularly planned lessons.

General and special education teachers must work together to create a successful inclusive environment (Cipkin & Rizza, 2000). It is necessary for general education preservice teachers to acquire the experience and observation of special education teaching that is vital in today's classroom. Simply stated, teacher preparation programs must focus their efforts on adequately preparing new teachers to teach diverse learners in inclusive classrooms.

### **Importance of Deep, Rich Clinical Field Experiences**

Generally, preservice teachers must experience a wide range of learning opportunities during their preparation program or they report feeling underprepared to manage their classroom when they begin teaching (Küster, Bain, Milbrandt, & Newton, 2010). It is common practice for elementary education teacher preparation programs to require one special education survey course. Though, admittedly, one course is better than not addressing special education at all, it is evident that one course is simply not adequate to impart the fundamental knowledge or develop the skills needed to work effectively with special education students who are part of the general education classroom.

Likewise, preservice teachers who are not preparing to be special student educators feel overwhelmed trying to understand the diagnostic terminologies of various special needs categories, and they are besieged by the range of abilities that each special needs student exhibits (Gerber & Guay, 2006). Though one may argue that is impossible to prepare teacher candidates for every type of disability they may encounter, it is certainly plausible that the more time candidates spend engaged in meaningful field experiences, the better they will be able to adapt to the situations they will encounter. Bain and Hasio (2011) found that authentic experiences in classrooms with special needs students helped preservice teachers examine their own belief systems about working with these students. These teachers in training also learned how to work with diverse groups of students, be flexible, exercise patience, and differentiate their instruction for students learning at different levels and rates.

### **University Programs**

Some universities are making concerted efforts to prepare their graduates to work with special education students, specifically those included in the general education classroom. For example, Central Michigan University designed an inclusion course for both their graduate and undergraduate candidates in an effort to model appropriate practice in inclusive education (Snyder, Garriot, & Aylor, 2001). Arthaud, Aram, Breck, Doelling, and Bushrow (2007) developed a Teacher Preparation Program Collaborative Seminar. The seminar focused on structuring opportunities for general and special education teacher candidates to collaborate, discuss federal and state special education mandates,

discuss local implications within general education contexts, and apply knowledge of the IDEA regulations from the perspective of both general and special education (Arthaud et al., 2007). A study by Spandagou, Evans, and Little (2008) supports the notion that if provided the opportunity to learn how to work with a diverse population of students, preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their perceptions of their preparation to teach in diverse classrooms improves. Though redesigning coursework to focus on inclusion is undeniably a step in the right direction, a connection must also be made to the fieldwork required of candidates.

The role of field experiences that preservice teachers engage in during their respective programs is critical in preparing them for inclusive classrooms (Kent, Giles, & Hibberts, 2013; O'Brian, Stoner, Appel, & House, 2007). Research points to the power of coupling coursework on inclusion and field experience with special education students, resulting in a more positive attitude regarding teaching in an inclusive setting (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Leyser, Kapperman, & Keller, 1994). Preservice teachers should be given opportunities to practice differentiating instruction for special needs students so they learn how to teach to the unique capabilities of every child (Bain & Hasio, 2011). Considering the premise that teachers' self-efficacy has been linked to student achievement, motivation, and students' own self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), the results of a study by Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi (2011) revealed that candidates with experience with special needs students had significantly higher self-efficacy than candidates without the experience. Preparing preservice teachers to meet the needs of all students, ranging from those who are academically challenged to those who are gifted hinges upon the quality and opportunities of their field experiences (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Gentry, 2012).

### Method

One university in the southeast United States attempted to address the problem by reorganizing the elementary and special education curricula at the undergraduate level. As a result, all candidates seeking K–6 teacher certification would meet the requirements for obtaining teaching certificates in both general and special education. The study employed a mixed-method research design, including multiple data sources. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the *field component* of the newly designed curriculum.

Specifically, the research questions for this study were:

1. What is the relationship between university coursework during the two semesters of intensive field experience and classroom practice in special education and general education as perceived by:
  - a. teacher education candidates?
  - b. cooperating teachers?
2. What are the perceptions of a K–6 teacher education candidate with respect to:
  - a. the role of a teacher?
  - b. the challenges of teaching?
  - c. meeting the needs of a diverse population of students?
  - d. differentiating instruction?
3. What are the challenges of implementing a comprehensive K–6 Teacher Education program as perceived by:
  - a. university supervisors?
  - b. cooperating teachers?

- c. teacher education candidates?
- d. principals?

### Research Study

In response to the need as presented in the global research and local data, the university innovatively restructured their undergraduate teacher preparation programs to merge elementary and special education into a single preparation program. These changes occurred as state certification standards significantly expanded and in the midst of the increasing demands for teachers prepared to work in inclusive classrooms.

In the beginning semester, students preparing to be teachers at the K–6 level were admitted to this new curriculum, the K–6 Teacher Education Program. The program leads to dual certification in elementary (K– 6) and collaborative special education (K–6) without lengthening the time for degree completion or adding additional credit hours.

The restructured curriculum includes both special education and general education standards in some courses, while allowing other courses to remain purely special or general education. The merging of the curriculum also allowed for the elimination of some courses entirely. Although candidates may focus more heavily on general education or special education through field hours, the mantra of the new merged curriculum is the preparation of preservice teachers for an inclusive classroom.

Critical to the new program was the change in the field requirements. College of Education and school district administrators met to discuss the new program, specifically the field requirements. These meetings resulted in the joint selection of 18 participating schools in two local districts. School selection was based on the quality of the school administrators, the capacity of the school faculty to mentor new teachers, and the presence of special education students. Following meetings with the district administrators, the program was explained in depth to school principals. Specifically:

- the role of the general education teacher and how a candidate no longer “belonged” just to a single teacher, rather the teacher was part of a mentoring and induction team;
- the fact that special education teachers played a critical role in the process and would have to mentor multiple candidates during the same semester; and
- the role that was needed for the remainder of the faculty to engage in the team approach to mentoring and induction.

The principals were then invited to participate with the opportunity to accept or decline the invitation.

In addition, the university supervisors’ roles changed. They had to embrace a model of tiered supervision, supervising all K–6 students within a school, regardless of where they were in the program, with the premise that the supervisor becomes well known and is a full partner in the school. Supervisors took on the role of mentors, coaches, and evaluators as they regularly conferenced with candidates, observed and evaluated candidates informally and formally, engaged in model teaching, and collaborated with the cooperating teachers. They also communicated with school administration to ensure that the candidates, cooperating teachers, and children’s learning needs were being met.

There was also a learning curve in terms of content knowledge for the supervisors. Previously, they had engaged in supervision in their primary area of expertise. Now, each had to engage in professional development in either special education or general education. Their colleagues within the college provided some of this professional development; the public school personnel provided some

professional development; and some individual supervisors engaged in professional research and readings.

**Program Requirements**

After achieving candidacy (full admission to the teacher preparation program), candidates complete 450 field experience hours in the two semesters they are enrolled in their methods courses prior to student teaching (Table 1: Tier 2 + Tier 3). Then, they complete 525 field experience hours in a third semester of student teaching (Table 1: Tier 4). The 450 hours prior to student teaching are partitioned: 150 hours in general education, 150 hours in special education, and 150 hours in the candidates’ area of greater interest or the school’s greatest need. Candidates complete the field requirement in a single school, with placement changes within the school. Candidates are assigned both special education and general education cooperating teachers every semester. Table 1 presents an overview of the course and field program requirements.

Table 1  
*K-6 Course Progression by Tiers*

| Program Level                             | Courses  | Field Experience |
|---|--|------------------|
| Tier 1 (18 hours)                         | Microcomputing Systems in Education<br>Education in a Diverse Society<br>Human Growth and Development<br>Evaluation of Teach and Learning<br>Health and Movement Education<br>Arts in the Elementary Classroom | 20 hours         |
| Tier 2 (17 hours)<br>Introductory Methods | K-6 Education<br>Foundations of Reading Instruction<br>Teaching Social Studies<br>Learning and Behavioral Disorders<br>Behavioral Management<br>Classroom Management 1(1 hr.)<br>Field Experience (1 cr. hr.)  | 200 hours        |
| Tier 3 (17 hours)<br>Advanced Methods     | Teaching Mathematics<br>Teaching Science<br>Teaching Reading<br>Partnerships in Special Education<br>Intellectual and Physical Disabilities<br>Classroom Management 2 (1 hr.)<br>Field Experience (1 hr.)      | 250 hours        |
| Tier 4 (12 hours)<br>Internship           | Student Teaching EEC (6 hrs.)<br>Student Teaching Collaborative K-6 (6 hrs.)   | 525 hours        |

From Kent, A. M., Giles, R. M., & Hibberts, M. (2013). Preparing elementary educators to teach reading: An exploratory study of preservice teachers’ evolving sense of reading efficacy. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7(2), 1-16.

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## Materials and Data Sources

To obtain a comprehensive picture of the initial implementation of the K–6 Teacher Education program, multiple sources of data were collected from candidates, cooperating teachers, principals, and university supervisors as detailed below.

### Electronic Surveys

**Candidates.** An eleven-item electronic survey regarding the connection between theory taught at the university and expected classroom practice was administered to the candidates at the completion of the program. Three of the eleven items were open response items, and eight items had a Likert-like response scale. Two additional items relating to the preparation of teaching a diverse population of students exploring socioeconomic status and ethnicity were also included. Candidates had the opportunity to provide a narrative explanation of their answers. Sixty-one candidates responded to the survey.

**Cooperating teachers.** A nine-item electronic survey was administered to 27 general education ( $n = 27$ ) and 4 special education ( $n = 4$ ) cooperating teachers at the completion of the candidates' program regarding the expectations of the assignments that were to be implemented in their classrooms. There were seven Likert-type items, with two allowing for further explanation and two open response items.

### Focus Groups

**Candidates.** At the midpoint of the three semesters of field experience, candidates ( $n = 23$ ) engaged in a focus group meeting facilitated by the field supervisors and the primary instructor of the field experience course.

**Principals.** At the end of each of the three field experience semesters, principals ( $n = 7$ ) engaged in a focus group meeting facilitated by the Director of Field Services, the Associate Dean, and Dean of the College.

**University supervisors.** At the conclusion of the three-semester experience, a focus group meeting with the supervisors ( $n = 7$ ) was conducted by the Director of Field Services to obtain feedback on what went well and what changes needed to be implemented.

### Unstructured Interviews

**University supervisors.** Throughout the semester, the Director of Field Services conducted unstructured interviews with the university supervisors based on their observations and conversations with the cooperating teachers, principals, and candidates.

## Results

Results are presented in relation to the research questions.

1. *What is the relationship between university coursework and classroom practice in special education and general education as perceived by:*
  - a. *teacher education candidates?* In analyzing the data using descriptive statistics, the classroom management course was the most highly correlated course between university coursework and field experiences. The course encompassed both special education and general education strategies. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the respondents on the electronic survey reported the course to be highly correlated. The *Foundations of Teaching Reading* course, which also encompassed both special and general education standards, was highly

correlated to the field experience as reported by 48% (n = 10) of the respondents. However, 19% of the candidates reported the same course as poorly correlated with the field experience. The *Methods of Teaching Social Studies* course was reported to be the least correlated course to the field with 26% of candidates reporting it to be either fairly or poorly correlated.

- b. *cooperating teachers?* Of the 27 cooperating teachers surveyed, 48% reported that the field requirements of the candidates matched what they were doing in the classroom. Approximately 38% reported the requirements to be somewhat correlated, 10% reported them to be fairly correlated, and 3% reported them to be poorly correlated.
2. *What are the perceptions of K–6 teacher education candidates with respect to:*
- a. *the role of a teacher?* At the completion of the program, the patterns in the qualitative data revealed that the candidates see the role of the teacher in multiple facets. The patterns clustered around:
    - meeting the academic needs of students,
    - serving as a role model for the students, and
    - providing support, guidance, and structure for the students.
  - b. *the challenges of teaching?* At the completion of the program, the patterns in the qualitative data revealed that the candidates perceive that the challenges teachers face as:
    - classroom management,
    - attitudes of students in relation to motivation, and
    - differentiating instruction for a wide range of academic needs.
  - c. *meeting the needs of a diverse population of students?* A qualitative data analysis of candidates' perceptions of teaching a diverse population of students indicated:
    - there was a fear of the unknown, especially at the beginning of the program;
    - there was a recognition of the definite differences between themselves and some of the students they worked with in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status;
    - the field experiences and teachers they worked with helped make candidates more comfortable and learn more about the culture of the students they taught; and
    - the candidates expressed concerns about the vast number of types of disabilities and their personal teaching ability to meet all of the students' needs, specifically in self-contained special education classrooms.
- Participants were asked if their field placements were in a school with students from differing socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds than their own. Of the 61 responses, 53% reported they were placed in a school with students of different socioeconomic status than themselves, and 34% reported completing their field experience primarily with students of different ethnic backgrounds than themselves. Participants were also asked if they were prepared to meet the needs of these students. Of the 47 responses, six students reported that the coursework did not prepare them for teaching diverse students, qualifying their response by saying what they learned while in the field helped them learn how to meet the needs of the diverse population.
- d. *differentiating instruction?* At the completion of the program, the patterns in the qualitative data revealed that the candidates' perceptions of differentiating instruction:
    - is necessary for both general education and special education students;

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- must be determined on a case-by-case basis, individualized education plans dictate how this is done for special education students, and classroom assessments guide the instruction for general education students; and
  - is an overwhelming and daunting task because there is a wide range of abilities to consider. Further, candidates cited their field experiences as responsible for increased confidence in their ability to differentiate instruction for general education students and high incident special education students, but recognized their lack of ability, especially for the low-incident disabilities.
3. *What are the challenges of implementing a comprehensive K–6 Teacher Education program as perceived by:*

- a. *university supervisors?* The challenges reported by the university supervisors fell into three categories. The first category was in relation to organizing the field hours. At a minimum, 75 hours for two semesters (150 total) had to be spent under the tutelage of a general education teacher, and 75 hours for two semesters (150 total) had to be spent with a special education teacher. Creating a schedule for the special education hours was a significant challenge, especially since a single special education teacher was mentoring multiple candidates. The candidates in grades K–1 often did not have identified special education students included in their general education class. As candidates progressed to the student teaching semester (Tier 4), the scheduling continued to be challenging as the participants were required to “solo teach” for 10 consecutive days in general education and 10 days in special education.

The second category related to the professional dispositions of the candidates. Though they were strong academically, they repeatedly complained about the workload and required hours: essentially 5 days a week, 7 hours a day for both coursework and field experience during the two consecutive semesters prior to student teaching. The negative attitude caused disruption in productivity and loss of focus for some students. The dispositions of the candidates, however, improved during the student teaching semester, as the participants felt well prepared to be in the schools full time.

The final category related to preparing candidates for the severe population of special needs students. Though the field experiences coupled with the coursework seemed to better prepare candidates for high incident special education students as well as for the inclusive classroom, there was less emphasis placed on preparing candidates to meet the needs of those students in self-contained special education classrooms.

- b. *cooperating teachers?* The cooperating teacher data revealed that the greatest challenges for program implementation were logistical, such as the teachers’ lack of knowledge of field assignments, changes that were made to field hours, how to meet the standards in the field, and a lack of understanding of the overall program. Again, there were some patterns of concern related to scheduling the field hours as the movement of the candidates often became confusing. Cooperating teachers in both general and special education expressed concern of being able to provide adequate mentoring and induction into the disciplines as the time had to be split between both classrooms.

Much of the data revealed a very positive experience for the teachers. With the exception of one candidate, the teachers reported that the candidates were focused on learning and being involved with the general education and special education students.

- c. *teacher education candidates?* The candidate data revealed that the greatest implementation challenges in the beginning of the program were learning how to manage course assignments, time in the field, and responsibilities outside of the program. As the program progressed, however, the candidates felt more prepared for what they faced in the subsequent semesters.

The candidates also revealed anxiety over being prepared to meet the demands of the classroom, both in an inclusive setting and in self-contained special education classes. Though they gained more confidence as the program progressed, they felt that there were constantly new obstacles faced in meeting the needs of all students and in their own self-concept of being able to successfully differentiate instruction. Many questioned their own ability as a teacher.

- d. *principals?* The focus group data from principals revealed an extremely positive view of the beginning implementation of the program. The challenge some principals faced was internal; keeping teachers motivated and excited about working with university students as mentoring is often perceived as a lot of extra work. This was especially true of some of the special education teachers as they were assigned multiple university candidates simultaneously in a program that traditionally did not have many students.

Some of the principals reported the success of embracing the team approach to mentoring and inducting the preservice teachers. Specifically, engaging the building-based instructional coaches and media center specialists had a tremendous impact in the success of the program in their schools. In addition, the overall theme of the principal focus groups was that the preservice teachers were graduating better prepared to meet the challenges they would face as first year teachers. Many of the principals were excited to use the intense field experience as a “three semester job interview” and were hoping to be able to hire many of the candidates or recommend them to their principal colleagues for positions in other schools.

In addition, one principal expressed concern regarding whether the candidates were receiving the depth of experience needed in both the general education and special education areas. This principal reported that the demand on the teachers, especially in special education, proved to be a tremendous hardship on their ability to meet the needs of their own students.

### **Discussion**

An examination of the data reveals that the program is challenging to implement, especially in terms of scheduling logistics, but beneficial to the preparation of new teachers. The intense field experiences allowed preservice teachers to face the challenges of working with a diverse population of students, especially as related to academics, culture, and socioeconomic status. Those who felt their coursework did not prepare them for the challenges reported that their time in the field was most beneficial.

Candidates also had a practical view of the realities of teaching in classrooms. There were highs and lows presented in the focus group data regarding overall teaching efficacy that can be attributed to the demanding schedule placed on the preservice teachers, the notion of being “scared” to teach special education, and being faced with the realities of the challenges that both general education and special education teachers face on a daily basis. Preparation in classroom management and differentiating

instruction emerged as two strong areas of the program, which are typically areas of weakness in many teacher preparation programs.

The intense program also resulted in a demanding schedule for the participants. Unlike many college students, the participants in this program were required to commit 35–40 hours a week for three semesters in university classes or in the field, in addition to time spent outside of class in planning, preparation, and completing assignments. Though this schedule provided a realistic view of the schedule of a “real teacher,” it was often difficult for the candidates to manage their responsibilities outside of teacher preparation.

As colleges of education attempt to design innovations, it is imperative that they consider the multifaceted challenges that will arise. Programs must not become so diluted that graduates are not well prepared in general education or in special education. State certification standards, program hours, and demands of students must also be considered as program revisions are made. Logistical issues regarding scheduling, the number of special education and general education teachers available to mentor, and the core philosophy of school-based administrators are all central to the success of innovations implemented by higher education. Ultimately, teacher education programs must rise to the challenge of preparing teachers to meet the needs of all students through developing positive attitudes, strong partnerships between home and school, use of appropriate interventions, and meaningful adaptations and modifications to the curriculum to effectively differentiate instruction.

### **Limitations**

As in all studies, there are some limitations that should be acknowledged. Participants were a convenience sample of the first group of candidates who were part of this new program. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalizable to all teacher education programs.

The questionnaire used to collect data was a survey instrument completed through participants’ self-reporting. As such, participants could have misrepresented their actual perceptions. In addition, the researcher who developed the questionnaire and the questions themselves may not have encompassed the totality of the experience. Also, the focus group data may not reflect participants’ actual feelings as sharing in a group may have impeded the discussion of their actual perceptions.

### **Further Research**

Though research supports that quality field experiences play a critical role in learning to teach (Maloch, Fine, & Flint, 2003), Anders, Hoffman, and Duffy (2000) caution that there is little research available that describes the actual components of effective field experiences. Likewise, this research did not identify specific field elements beneficial to the preservice teacher candidates. Therefore, further research should be conducted to determine the specific field elements that contribute to preparing candidates for teaching in inclusive settings.

This research revealed the impact of the field component on teacher preparation, specifically for inclusive classrooms. Follow-up research should be conducted, focusing more on the impact of the program on specific disabilities and differentiating between high-incidence and low-incidence special education students.

The present study examined the impact of the field component as perceived by preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, school administrators, and university supervisors. Additional research should be conducted on the programmatic impact of teacher candidates on student achievement.

### Implications

Federal mandates such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002) have directed state education departments and local education agencies to address the pedagogical needs of special education students in least-restrictive environments (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). However, one of the most problematic and stressful challenges facing public school administrators today is to provide appropriate education by well-prepared educators in evidence-based instructional strategies for students with moderate and severe disabilities, alongside nondisabled students in general education inclusive classrooms (Goodman & Williams, 2007). In addition to the increasing number of students identified with special education needs, there simply are not enough new teachers graduating in the area of special education. The result is a compelling need to improve the preparation of special education and general education teachers required to teach all students in inclusive classrooms (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Downing & Pekham-Hardin, 2007).

The National Research Council (2001), as well as experienced and new general education teachers, have reported that they (the teachers) lack adequate preparation to teach children with moderate to severe disabilities in inclusive settings, and 61% of these teachers have advocated for proper training and tools to competently co-teach all students in the inclusive settings classroom (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004). As a result, many universities are beginning to carefully scrutinize their teacher preparation programs in attempt to improve the preparation of prospective teachers in inclusive classrooms (Van Laarhoven, Munk, Lynch, Bosma, & Rouse, 2007).

Teachers today face different challenges than they encountered only a few years ago. Traditionally, colleges of education have prepared teachers to teach in a general education classroom full of “regular students.” There has been a classroom evolution, however, where teachers must be able to meet the multidimensional needs of all of the students they teach. It is a simple fact that in our global classrooms, students do not fit in neat categories and cannot be taught using a one-size-fits-all approach. Though inclusion has been a part of many classrooms for nearly two decades, the number of students with diagnosed disabilities has increased, and research has continued to report the lack of preparation of teachers to meet the needs of all students. The future success of educating students identified with disabilities, as well as nondisabled students with varying ability levels, is contingent upon how well prepared educators are in the pedagogies of differentiating instruction. Teacher preparation programs must be willing to design and implement innovations to traditional programs to enable all educators to meet these challenges.

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