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FORGING AND SUSTAINING SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN RURAL SCHOOLS

The topic of developing clinically rich field placements within rural schools is important to the field of special education teacher preparation. By providing teacher candidates with rural high quality field experiences, they are more likely to seek employment in rural school districts. This paper describes one rural teacher preparation program's efforts supported by a federally funded grant to extend rural school-university partnerships and increase student learning outcomes. It is hoped that this case study will demonstrate the process of how partnerships were enhanced with our local school districts in western New York State.

Clinically Rich Field Placements

One of the primary recommendations from the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships (2010) was that teacher educators must form and sustain meaningful partnerships for the purpose of improving student learning. No Child Left Behind (2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (2004) have provided the federal impetus requiring student achievement be reported for both students with and without disabilities. In addition, New York State rural schools are implementing the Common Core Curriculum Standards, Response-to-Intervention (RtI), and Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR).

Recent changes in APPR procedures in New York State due to Race to the Top (2011) funding now allocates up to 40% of annual teacher evaluations to growth in student learning outcomes for all school districts including rural school districts (Education Law 3012-c, 2012). While school-university partnerships were always important factors in teacher preparation, the emphasis on improving student learning outcomes was never made so explicit teacher preparation programs.

This paper describes one rural higher education teacher preparation program's journey to navigate the multitude of challenges confronting teacher educators, classroom teachers, and school leaders. These efforts were assisted in large part by a 325T federal US Department of Education five-year grant entitled *Project Redesigning and Improving Special Education - Undergraduate Program* (*RAISE-UP*).

To set the context, a brief historical description is provided of our rural teacher education program and implementing clinically rich experiences with local schools. We then describe a series of grant-related activities undertaken over the past three years to forge more meaningful partnerships with local rural schools.

Teacher Education at SUNY Fredonia

The State University of New York (SUNY) Fredonia has a long history in teacher preparation. The comprehensive college started as a normal school almost 150 years ago. SUNY Fredonia is located in western New York State approximately 50 miles south of Buffalo, near the Pennsylvania state line in a rural setting surrounded by grape vineyards and dairy farms

The Childhood Inclusive program is a "merged" undergraduate general and special education teacher preparation program addressing the needs of elementary students with high incidence disabilities as described by Blanton, Pugach and Florian (2011). Approximately 55 dually certified teacher candidates graduate from this program each year.

The higher education institution prepared only general education teachers at the elementary and secondary levels until 2007 when a dual certification program was established at the elementary level (i.e., Grades 1-6 childhood and childhood with disabilities). One unique aspect of SUNY Fredonia's teacher education program is that special education faculty members were always included full time in general education programs and curricula. There was never a separate special education program. Of the 24 current faculty members, seven have terminal degrees in special education and many have taught core general education courses and at times supervised field-based experiences (for more complete program descriptions see Maheady, Harper, Karnes, & Mallette, 1999; Maheady, Harper, Mallette, & Karnes, 1993; Maheady, Jabot, Rey, & Michielli-Pendl, 2007).

In 2009, SUNY Fredonia and Bank Street College were each awarded five-year, 325T program improvement grants from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U. S. Department of Education. SUNY Fredonia's grant focused on meeting the needs of rural school districts while Bank Street focused on New York City schools. The primary goal of 325T grants was to graduate highly qualified special education teachers who could meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Grant personnel at SUNY Fredonia worked closely with rural schools to build stronger collaborations between special education teacher candidates and area rural school districts.

Over the next two years, seven additional 325T grants were awarded to New York State and these institutions (Canisius College, College of St. Rose, Fordham University, Pace University, SUNY Cortland, SUNY New Paltz, and the University at Albany) have worked collaboratively to varying degrees on program development at the elementary and secondary levels. All nine 325T grants include a specific focus on clinically rich experiences and forming meaningful partnerships with schools.

Challenges Associated with Clinically Rich Experiences

Implementing clinically rich experiences require sweeping changes in how teacher educators design, implement, monitor, evaluate, staff, and fund their preparation programs (NCATE, 2010). Significant among these many challenges are: (a) the implementation of more rigorous accountability procedures that link teacher education to teaching practice and the improvement of student learning, (b) more selective and diverse candidate recruitment and

placement practices, (c) the fundamental redesign of teacher education curricula, and (d) expanding the knowledge and research bases on what makes clinical preparation effective.

SUNY Fredonia had a number of things working in its favor when designing clinically rich experiences. *First*, the institution has a long and positive history of collaborative relationships with area schools that includes the development, implementation, and evaluation of extensive early field experience.

Second, the program had an existing infrastructure for integrating and distributing clinically rich experiences throughout candidates' preparation experiences. Undergraduate teacher candidates complete a minimum of five structured field experiences prior to graduation, often in rural settings.

Third, some university faculty members had already focused program attention on the measurement of teaching practice and student learning and published findings regarding these efforts (e.g., Maheady et al., 2007; Maheady, Mallette, & Harper, 1996).

325T Grant-Related Activities

Three specific, grant-related activities are presented here to highlight activities and outcomes during the first three years of implementation: (a) syllabi review project, (b) developing criteria for high quality rural inclusive placements, and (c) forging and maintaining dialogue and partnerships with rural school districts.

Syllabi review. As result of completing the syllabi review process for 16 courses during Year 1 of the grant, SUNY Fredonia faculty dialogued about infusing evidence-based practices throughout the curriculum. These discussions occurred during College of Education extended meetings and retreats.

SUNY Fredonia grant personnel came up with the acronym IEP for the LRE (least restrictive environment) to summarize our syllabi review. The IEP stood for *Inclusiveness, Evidence-Based Practices, and Partnerships*. The *Inclusiveness* indicated that all teachers, including special education teachers, should be responsive to the diversity of students in their classrooms. Next, *Evidence-Based Practices* should be systematically incorporated into teacher candidate practices to promote increased student learning outcomes. Lastly, *Partnerships* in which our teacher candidates work with families and schools to promote positive student learning especially through clinically rich field experiences.

Course syllabi enhancements at SUNY Fredonia have led to more focused discussions on field-based courses. A College of Education field-based work group has emerged at SUNY Fredonia to sustain these enhancements after Project RAISE-UP sunsets. These proceedings will focus on the high quality inclusive placements and the partnerships with local rural school districts.

Developing criteria for high quality inclusive placements. During Year 2, Project RAISE-UP grant personnel to broaden their focus from teacher preparation curricula to the nature and functions of clinical experiences. The intent was to work collaboratively with school

partners to develop criteria for identifying high quality inclusive placements. It was assumed that once these rural settings were identified they might be used to: (a) better prepare teacher candidates, (b) support practicing teachers, and (c) delineate critical roles and responsibilities for general and special educators in inclusive settings.

Enhancing school-university partnerships: Throughout the grant process and most noticeably during Year 3 of the grant, higher education faculty and rural schools have engaged in numerous information-sharing activities to map out directions for extending and sustaining partnerships. Notable among these endeavors were: (a) poster presentations and panel discussions, (b) informal and formal surveys and interviews, (c) on-site visits to rural schools by our faculty, and (d) a mentor teacher advisory work group.

The first 325T institute was held at SUNY Fredonia and focused on higher education faculty. A group consisting of six faculty and staff planned and implemented a two-day session to foster discussions among teacher educators. The purpose of this initial meeting was to summarize project goals, review the evaluation plan, discuss implications for participants, and elicit input for possible directions. Small group discussions were then held among teacher education faculty and support staff to outline future grant-related endeavors.

During Year 2 of the grant another institute was also held at the SUNY Fredonia. The general theme was university-school collaborations to promote inclusion. A rural school superintendent and a long-time collaborator with SUNY Fredonia spoke to teacher educators as well as rural special and general education teachers. The superintendent highlighted the challenges of doing differentiation well, made constructive suggestions for redesigning clinical experiences, and asked for university assistance in doing meaningful data analysis. Twenty teachers (10 pairs) from various rural schools presented posters describing their use of evidence-based practices. Later a panel of those same rural teachers shared ideas for improving our teacher preparation program. Two specific recommendations were to align the student teaching seminar more closely with daily school needs and to increase feedback on how candidates can best assist teachers during student teaching. A small rural mentor teacher advisory work group was formed from this institute.

The third academic institute held later during Year 3 of the grant featured a panel of rural school administrator who responded to prepared questions involving what types of clinical experiences would be most likely to improve student learning and how they might be delivered and evaluated. Administrators highlighted the need to better align SUNY Fredonia's preparation curriculum with the Common Core Curriculum and Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) requirements. The institute was followed up with visits to three rural school districts on how the university could work more closely with school personnel to enhance clinically rich field experiences.

A fourth institute in the beginning of Year 4 of Project RAISE-UP highlighted current and future initiatives to strengthen relations across universities and rural settings. The center piece of the day was when teams of higher education faculty and rural school teachers presented partnership posters on various collaborations SUNY Fredonia has with nine schools in the

surrounding area. It was a wonderful opportunity to celebrate our evolving school-university partnerships.

In addition to institutes, Project RAISE-UP grant personnel conducted formal surveys and interviews with rural teachers, school administrators, and higher education faculty members over the past three years. All professional interactions focused on two basic questions; what are your most notable instructional challenges and how can our teacher candidates help to meet them?. Noteworthy survey recommendations included: (a) offer more college courses in rural schools and increase use of clinical faculty from these settings, (b) refocus the nature of clinical experiences by providing teaching strategies that improve student learning and produce evidence to support that, (c) use rural teacher evaluation tools during pre-service preparation and expose candidates to APPR realities.

Lessons Learned

The criteria for high quality inclusive placements project taught SUNY Fredonia faculty to listen to our rural school district partners when they describe student learning outcomes, discuss their primary instructional challenges, and suggest teacher educators might be most helpful during clinical experiences. Our school partners stressed the importance of good collaborative relationships with parents and families.

Recognizing the accountability of teachers as part of Race to the Top (2011), the infusion of evidence-based practices is necessary in teacher preparation programs to help future teachers provide support to students. Over the past three years we believe we have truly enhanced our program to prepare our teacher candidates to meet the No Child Left Behind highly qualified special education teacher requirements and effectively serve students with disabilities. It is our hope that the information shared will assist our colleagues in other teacher education programs in enhancing their classroom practices and programs.

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PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH TO SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

As small, rural, Appalachian communities strive to comply with the state mandates that make free, appropriate public education available for every 4-year old, some issues have emerged with which teachers feel they need more training and support. One of those issues is that of social-emotional development. While many typically developing young children may begin to use social and emotional skills soon after they are exposed to situations with other young persons, some children with disabilities may need additional scaffolding of support and guidance for a longer period of time and to a greater extent.

More and more states are joining the movement to provide preschool education to all young children. In rural settings, a preschool teacher may be the only one in her building that works with young children. She may not have the support of others going through the same challenges. It is even more important for her to have strategies in place to help her children become independent problem solvers as early as possible.

Many beginning teachers, as well as more experienced ones, have expressed a continued desire to have more strategies to help with classroom management. They indicate that they need additional techniques for encouraging social and emotional development of young children in ways that promote internal self regulation and problem solving. Using these methods, children are taught to form positive relationships, resolve conflicts, learn self-discipline, and show respect for others.

Special Education in Rural and Urban Schools is still adjusting to full inclusion with typically developing peers. This is especially true for preschool classrooms, where inclusion is defined as educating all children of the same age, regardless of ability or disability, in the same classroom. They share in a social and learning environment, which is a blending of recommended practices from the fields of early childhood and early childhood special needs. The classroom uses a Universal design, considering the diverse needs of all students, and making needed accommodations so that all children participate in all activities.

Many of these children are developmentally delayed in their social and emotional development, and may require scaffolding of assistance in learning to work together with other children. They have not yet developed the skills to solve disputes and conflicts without violence. Teachers need as many “tools” in their strategy toolbox as they can get to help meet the

challenges they may face. Problem-solving techniques, when properly implemented, enhance teachers' ability to respond with warmth, authenticity, understanding, and individuality.

The philosophies behind the Problem Solving Approach emphasize that humans have an innate ability to solve their problems by calling on inner resources. The goal of this approach is to help children learn to solve their own problems in a respectful, mutually satisfying way, based on mutual respect for the child and teacher alike. Problem solving provides a moral framework by teaching children to take responsibility for their actions and to show respect for the ideas and feelings of other people, based on studies conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984). The process presumes a link between freedom and responsibility and assumes that power and control belong to children as well as to adults. When we think about alternatives to discipline, we may envision children who are either spoiled or demanding, or who are aggressive bullies. Problem solving condones neither extreme; it enables children to use their power and control to enhance their lives and relationships. Lawrence Kohlberg wrote extensively on moral development. He proposed three stages of moral development 1. The pre-conventional stage is characterized by moral development in which behavior is controlled by rewards and punishment dispensed by authority figures. 2. The conventional stage of moral development is characterized by behavior which conforms to norms of laws and rules in order to preserve the societal order. 3. The final stage is the post-conventional level. Kohlberg believed at this stage individuals define that which is moral to be behavior that supports the universal principles of social justice. If we are to guide children to the third level of moral development then taking responsibility for one's own behaviors, and showing respect for the ideas and feelings of others seem to be key in arriving at a universal commitment to social justice.

Five major procedures of problem solving are: active listening, negotiation, setting limits, modifying the environment, and affirmation.

Active listening describes the first step of many problem-solving interactions. Active listening is the teacher's tool for interpreting a child's feelings and reflecting them back to the child. The child thus receives a message of acceptance and trust. A child may have feelings inside that he has brought from home to the children's center. These feelings may cause him to be cheerful and friendly or upset and aggressive. The child may also have feelings derived from his need to control his body and his world. Whatever feelings belong to the child, he can face them if he feels free to express them and knows that someone will understand and accept him, along with those feelings. When practicing active listening, the teacher listens for those feelings, interprets them, and reflects them back to the child. Active listening also gives the teacher the opportunity to stop the reactive response of one child on another child, and begin the path to reasoned responses. A young child, not unlike an adult, cannot reason when they are so emotional. Amen (1999) said, "Thoughtfulness and impulse control are heavily influenced by the prefrontal cortex." When a child is so emotional that they are in physical confrontations the prefrontal cortex is thought to be inhibited by the over-stimulation of the amygdala. The role of the teacher is to use the tool of active listening until which time the child can self-regulate and express their own feelings and emotions.

The term in problem solving that refers to resolving conflicts between children is "negotiation". The teacher helps the children identify their problem, encourages them to

contribute their own ideas toward a mutually acceptable solution, helps them decide on their preferred solution, and oversees the implementation of their chosen solution. When the problem has been solved by the children involved, the teacher affirms the children's hard work to let them know what a good job they have done. As well as solving problems, negotiation helps build self-esteem. When children can call on their inner resources and find validation for their own ideas, they perceive themselves as capable, effective, and powerful. They consequently become more independent and self-reliant.

A program in which groups of young children are cared for requires a system for keeping children safe, protecting materials and equipment, teaching children to accept responsibility for their actions, and shielding children from discrimination. The problem-solving philosophy is based on **limits** rather than rules. Whereas rules are absolute, may be broken, and result in punishment, limits are boundaries that are flexible and negotiable. Limits are set with "I-messages", information, natural consequences, contingencies, and choices. The "I-message", the most desirable way to set limits, consists of a statement of the teacher's feelings, what the teacher sees happening, and the reasons for those feelings.

Modifying the environment is a technique for responding to children's inappropriate behavior by childproofing, simplifying, restricting (limiting), enriching, and impoverishing (subduing) the child's surroundings. Teachers sometimes overlook it as a way to avoid inappropriate behavior, instead attempting to fit the children into the existing environment. In times of stress, such as transition times, modifying the environment is often the most effective technique. The goal is to promote appropriate behavior through solving a problem that originates in the environment itself (Reynolds, 2008).

Childproofing simply means providing equipment that is safe and furniture that is child-sized and by eliminating items that are toxic, or have small pieces.

Simplifying refers to making materials accessible to children so that they can function as independently as possible. It also means removing anything unnecessary or unusable, or that inhibits normal play.

Restricting refers to providing a variety of play areas, including those for noisy, active play and others for quiet activities. Children can then choose the type of environment they want to function in at a particular time.

Enriching refers to adding something that was not previously there, to draw children's attention and focus, to spark interest in a new topic, to help children wait for a transition, or to provide a new experience.

Impoverishing or subduing the environment refers to removing something stimulating that may prevent rest or focus. It can also mean simply toning down the amount and intensity of stimulation.

Environmental Conditions should be carefully planned to allow for small group activity throughout the day. Children with special needs generally respond better when participating in

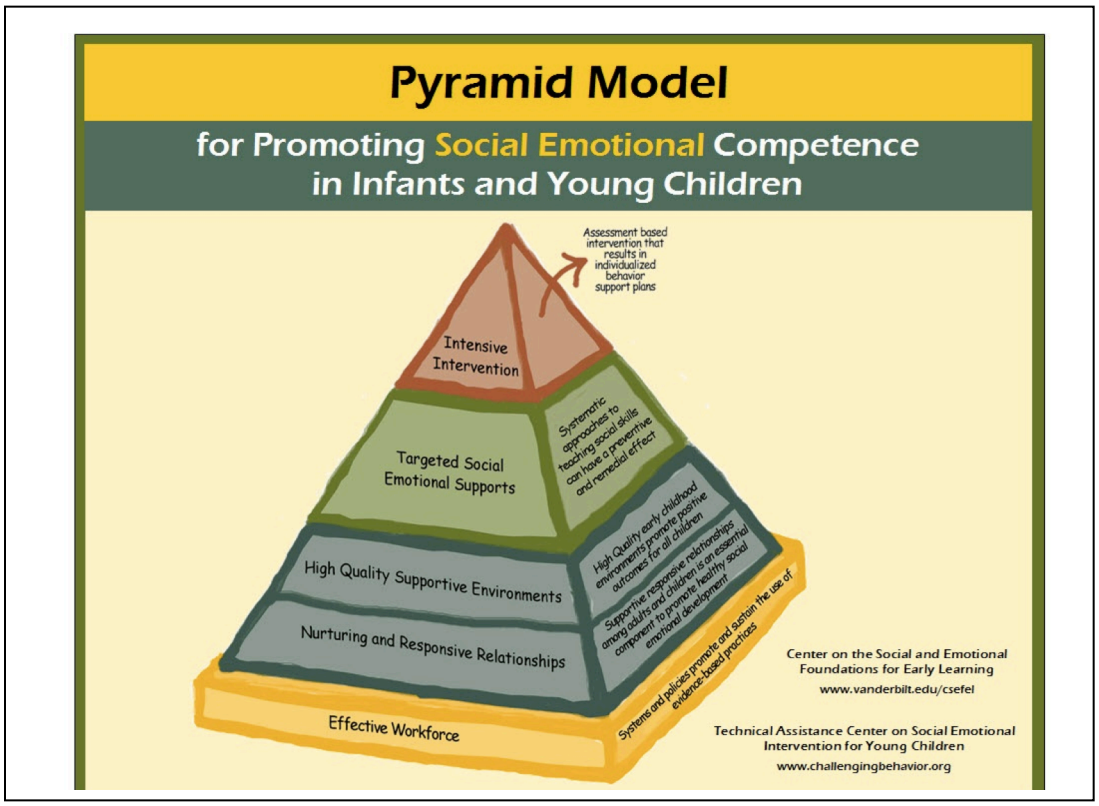
small rather than large groups. Allow a few quiet areas in your room for children who need alone time as part of their day. These should be an option and a privilege for all children. Evaluate your setting to determine the number of spatial alternatives you provide for the children. This includes space for creative movement, places where children can go for alone time, and social spaces for interpersonal interaction, game playing, and group projects. Arrangement and organization of space influences both the learning and the behavior of children. Become aware of the different background noises within the room and external to it. Work to filter out distracting stimuli by eliminating extraneous sounds, if possible. Note the amount and type of lighting used in your setting. Research suggests this makes a difference in the learning and behavior of children. Full-spectrum fluorescent lighting, which contains the color spectrum indicative of natural outdoor light, has been found to support positive learning and behavior better than cool white fluorescent lighting (Moore, 2009). Color can have an influence on the learning and behavior of children. Exposing children to a wide assortment of colors and allowing them to utilize the ones that make them feel calmer and more focused have proved effective in children's performance. The choices for room colors and furniture can also have an impact on children's learning and behavior. Generally blues and greens are more calming colors compared to reds and oranges.

Affirmations are the teacher's tools for helping children feel valued. They are the way to give attention to every child, whether or not he has earned it by a particular action. Every human being needs acknowledgement and validation just because he exists. Behavior that is appropriate and safe is always worthy of comment, but the child who is sitting quietly by himself also deserves to be noticed and shown that someone cares. The simple act of greeting a child with a personal remark helps him feel important.

Problem-Solving is one developmentally appropriate, child-centered method, recommended by the National Association for the Educational of Young Children (NAEYC) and by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood (DEC). These two major professional associations have joined together to develop guidelines for the developmentally appropriate education of young children with and without disabilities. One positive outcome has been decisions about how to best meet the needs of all young children in inclusive early childhood environments. This includes a common understanding that "a high quality environment is a necessary foundation for inclusive programs, but that individualized support and strategies are needed to meet the unique needs of young children with disabilities" (Grisham-Brown. J., Hemmeter, M.L., & Pretti-Frontczak, K., 2006), as well as those with differing learning styles, interests, and backgrounds.

Physical inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool classrooms is not enough in and of itself. Children must have supports and services available to them in those settings. Rather than children being pulled away from their peers and ongoing activities, to receive needed instruction, that instruction or support is provided within the regular routine of the blended classroom.

"The Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children is a conceptual framework of evidence-based practices developed by two national federally-funded research and training centers: The Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) and TACSEI" (CSEFEL & TACSEI, 2011).



The foundation of the pyramid represents the systems and policies in place to deliver a quality program for the education of all the children, 80% of whom will develop their social and emotional skills appropriately. If they do not, then something fundamental to the program needs to be changed.

The second tier represents universal supports for all children through nurturing and responsive relationships in high quality environments.

The third tier represents targeted social emotional strategies to prevent problems. Some may need direct instruction in small groups to be successful in negotiating solutions during conflicts.

The fourth tier represents the small percentage of children who may require intensive individualized interventions, including an analysis of the function of the behaviors and individualized support plans to help them develop self-regulation behaviors.

As we in rural Appalachian areas work together to educate all young children, we are developing strategies that represent "best practice" in both the fields of early childhood and early childhood special needs. Children all have their own unique strengths and weaknesses, and all children can learn. Using the Problem Solving Method, along with a scaffolding of support, children can develop social-emotional skills that will help them solve disputes and conflicts without violence. They will solve their own problems in a respectful, mutually satisfying way, learning to work together with others. This is a fundamental skill needed throughout life.

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM A LARGE URBAN PROJECT THAT CAN BE APPLIED TO RURAL SETTINGS

"A shortage of any type of leader can seriously hamper the field's infrastructure and hinder improved results of students with disabilities." (Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010, p. 26) As Smith and her colleagues emphasize, special education leadership preparation ultimately makes a difference in the services received by students with disabilities. Crockett (2007) contends that the landscape of school leadership has changed due in part to recent mandates contained in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004. In the original IDEA special educators were perceived mainly as advocates for students with disabilities. For many, the role today has evolved from one of advocate to one of compliance monitor and legal counsel (Boscardin, 2004). Lashley and Boscardin (2003) see the role of special education administrator as shifting in many significant ways. They see principals assuming more responsibility for the direct provision of services for students with disabilities and LEA administrators as having a broader scope of more diverse responsibilities. They state, "special education administrators are now at a crossroads in the field. Their challenge will be promoting collaboration between general and special education teachers and administrators to assure that high-quality education programs are accessible to all students" (p.3). Lupi and Martin (2005) assert that to be effective, special education leaders must not only possess the needed skills and dispositions but must also have an understanding of how to bring human and other resources together to get the job defined clearly and done well.

According to the 2007 Wallace Foundation report, A Bridge to School Reform, "Leadership is an essential ingredient for ensuring that every child in America gets the education they need to succeed. Indeed, education leadership has been called the "bridge" that can bring together the many different reform efforts in ways that practically nothing else can. We cannot reform education until we become serious about strengthening school leadership" (DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, & Haycock, 2007). Arthur E. Levine, current president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and president emeritus of Teachers College, Columbia University, has declared that "Our country needs skilled education leaders more than it has ever before and our schools of education aren't preparing those people. And there are ways that they could change that would prepare those people" (Education Week, March 16, 2005, p.1). Perhaps the most significant longitudinal study of urban school improvement, Organizing Schools For Improvement: Lessons from Chicago (Bryk, Bender-Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010) identified key attributes of school leadership, a welcoming attitude toward parents, quality of teaching staff, safe learning climate and strong instructional guidance, as essential elements for success. Viadero (2010) shares that nowhere is the challenge of

redefining the roles, strengthening the competence, and providing adequate support for leaders more crucial than in the area of special education. There is a critical need for school districts and school leaders to have full access to the best available research and practical wisdom and to receive strong support in transforming that knowledge into high-quality performance with continuous improvement for themselves and for those they lead. The challenges of providing highly qualified administrators in poor, underfunded, hard to staff, urban and rural schools are many. "Special education administrators play a critical role in the implementation of successful inclusion in diverse, standards-based environments. They provide the vision and leadership necessary to guide educators in both general and special education as they deliver instructional programs to meet the needs of diverse students with disabilities" (Voltz, & Collins, 2010, p. 70).

Urban schools have been hit especially hard by the repercussions of AYP because they have a large percentage of students who fall into one or more of the subgroups of students who have disabilities, who are of color and/or are English language learners (York-Barr, Ghere, & Sommerness, 2007). Rural school districts have been hit equally hard. Teachers indicated that the community's isolation and the cost of travel to larger communities is one challenge that rural schools face (Barley, 2009). The range and complexity of issues facing urban and rural school leaders are particularly daunting. The issues currently facing urban and rural special education leaders have shifted but remain critical, varied, and challenging. "The spotlight on local education agencies (LEAs) in their efforts to improve performance of all students, including historically underperforming groups, has increased scrutiny on LEA leadership" (Keller-Allen, 2009, p.1). To compound the problem, "districts and special education administrators face a shortage of licensed and certified personnel which necessitates filling special education positions with uncertified and untrained personnel" (Lashley, & Boscardin, 2003, p.14).

We must strengthen and broaden the knowledge and skills of special education as well as other educational leaders and reform the programs that prepare and support them. For special education administrators, their competencies and their roles will need to be restructured and realigned to reflect the latest current research on effective school leadership, especially in terms of working with general education colleagues. The breadth and depth of the essential elements of successful school reform indicate strongly that the role of special education administrators will need to change from being seen generally as the provider of student services to that of collaborator, innovator, facilitator and educator of the greater school community on issues of disability. Special education leaders must become models of research-based collaborative practice while protecting the rights and interests of students with disabilities and their families. Unfortunately, many view university programs to prepare school administrators as "adequate to poor" (Archer, 2005) and much improvement is needed. A recent national survey of students in 78 special education doctoral programs indicated concern about the structure, time requirements, and adequacy of research-based knowledge in their programs (Wasburn-Moses, 2008). Moreover, traditional post-graduate leadership programs are often ill-suited for increasing the supply or quality of special education administrators. Most potential candidates cannot afford to leave their current positions and these programs are more demanding of a flexible and practically focused program to meet their recognized needs of serving more diverse students (Smith, Tyler, Pion, Sindelar & Rosenberg, 2001).

The situation at the LEA level is equally unsettling; practicing special education administrators (Wigle & Wilcox, 2002) as well as the teachers with whom they work, (Goldstein, 2004) have indicated that they do not feel they have the competencies necessary to do their jobs in line with state and professional standards. Special education curricula are often poorly aligned with state standards (Kurz, Elliott, Wehby, & Smithson, 2009). In an Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative (USELC) unpublished national study, conducted for NUSELI in 2006 by David Riley, about 1/3 of the special education leader-respondents said that their districts did not have anyone else interested in and/or capable of providing leadership should the respondents leave their positions. While most respondents indicated that their districts provided leadership training, they indicated that this training was mainly for principals with little focus on other roles, special education, or integration of special education with general education. When asked what competencies were critical to the success of special education leaders the most frequent responses were knowledge of special education law and regulations; ability to collaborate with general education colleagues, parents and community agencies; resource allocation and management; developing and realizing a shared vision of special education program development and service delivery within the special education and general education interface; crisis resolution; and organizational change. The disparity was clear between what was judged desirable in terms of essential special education leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions and what was being provided in the way of professional development and support. It is clear that the entire system from the recruitment and preparation of special education administrators and teachers; to the ultimate impact of these administrators on teachers and teachers on students, needs to be re-examined, re-aligned, and strengthened across a wide range of factors. One such reflection must be to include distance technology opportunities to deliver current and relevant information as an easy to access format that reaches across the boundaries of distance and into the hands of the school leaders who need it.

Since the inception of the National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative (NUSELI) in 2005, many new technological advances have been made. Yet challenges to deliver doctoral level preparation coursework still remain. Special education administrators and the teachers with whom they work (Goldstein, 2004; Wigle, & Wilcox, 2002) have indicated they do not feel they have the proficiency needed to perform their jobs in line with state and professional standards (Martin, 2012, p. 5). The need to use distance learning technology can be problematic when not all the participants have the requisite knowledge, skills and access opportunities necessary for success. One major theoretical basis and research area that supports the use of technology in course delivery has been in the conceptualization of Universal Design for Learning. The principle of universal design for learning (UDL) is well grounded in research. "UDL provides rich supports for learning and reduces barriers to the curriculum while maintaining high achievement standards for all." (http://www.cast.org/). The National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standards (NIMAS) were established by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. Rose and Vue (2010) found that these standards have shifted the conversation away from students being "at fault" to the need to allow avenues of access other than print when presenting new knowledge which provides a powerful model for the participants in the NUSELI project. For school leaders to know and understand UDL principles is a critical part of the project and a critical ripple in the provision of appropriate services for all students. Rose and Gravel (2012) state that "The National UDL task force in 2008 continued to make UDL a powerful player. Thanks to its efforts, UDL is now

defined in federal statute. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 established statutory definition of universal design for learning" (p. 24). Additionally, the U. S. Department has released its National Technology Plan (2010) which can be found at http://nationaledtechplan.org/. We now must address how to effectively and efficiently use technological opportunities for doctoral training.

The NUSELI project is grounded in the Advanced Standards for Special Education Administrators (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009) and cross-walked with the Educational Leadership Policy Standards of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 2008) while also including the implications of the most valid, current and relevant research. Full consideration is given to the recent recommendations of key organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, March, 2010) and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDTE, 2010) pertaining to aligning special education standards and the eventual reauthorization of IDEIA with the upcoming Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization and ESEA recommendations from President Obama's administration (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The project has graduated 12 of its participants for a 100% graduation rate. Currently 14 students are enrolled in the project with the expected graduation rate to remain at 100%.

The project reported in this paper serves doctoral students in central and south Florida. The program of study is delivered through the use of various technologies, which will be discussed. In the program delivery, at least three technological applications are utilized as teaching and learning tools to expand the knowledge base of school leaders in rural and urban areas. In the program delivery, at least three technological applications are utilized as teaching and learning tools to expand the knowledge base of school leaders in rural and urban areas. The technologies are web based and are used to provide advanced professional development across distance, through both synchronous and asynchronous applications. The importance of equipping special education administrators and all school administrators with additional tools that provide services to students with disabilities and their families can't be underestimated. The information presented is universal in its delivery and very practical for all educational leaders.

The first technique to be discussed is Skype. Skype is a Microsoft product that was founded in 2003 and is headquartered in Luxembourg. The Skype Chief Executive Officer stated that "Skype is committed to removing barriers to communications and enabling conversations around the world with technology that is easy to use and affordable" (http://skype.com). Skype allows users to text, call or video chat with colleagues, friends and family using real-time audio and video technology. Skype is a free product that can be downloaded to your computer, phone or any device with an internet connection. Skype allows users to connect virtually to speak, see and instant message other Skype users. Skype provides an easy way for students and teachers to work collaboratively as well as bring students and guest speakers into the classroom from a distance.

The second technique is ooVoo. ooVoo is a high-quality, free, social video-chat service. ooVoo users can connect with colleagues, friends and family through at 12-way video chat. This product can be downloaded on your computer, Android, or iOS-based mobile device or tablet. This real-time video and audio technology allows up to 12 people to connect on a call all at the

same time and to see and talk to one another in the same way they would in person. This product also allows users to send video messages, instant message, and share files. This file sharing capability allows for greater communication and collaboration on projects, papers and presentations between both teachers and students. Additionally, ooVoo has the capability to record video calls that can be shared with anyone, anywhere.

The third technique is Google Hangout. Google Hangout is a feature of Google +. Google + is a free technology for all goggle users. This tool is also a real-time audio and video chat technology that allows for up to 10 individuals to connect at a time. Users can connect to each other from their computer or through the Google + mobile app that is available for any Android or iOS-based device. Google Hangout additionally allows users to share files stored in their Google Drive. These documents can include word documents, PowerPoint presentations, videos and much more. These documents can then me modified and updated in real time allowing for input from all collaborative partners.

The fourth technique is Adobe Connect. Adobe connect is a web conferencing platform that allows users to conduct web meetings, eLearning and webinars. Web meetings allows for collaboration anytime, anywhere from virtually any device with an internet connection for up to 25 participants. Participants joining Adobe Connect meetings do not need to download any applications and can log in through a web address. Screen sharing, file sharing and the ability of uploading video and web links are an additional feature of Adobe Connect. Webinars can allow for pre-recorded content to be replayed live for participants. Additionally attendance can be monitored through a password-optional entry and additional participants can be reached through the Webcast option. With Adobe Connect eLearning users can create engaging courses and content, manage and track professional development, and record web conferences for later viewing (http://www.adobeconnect.com). Adobe Connect also allows for break out rooms to focus discussion and host small group discussions. The host can manage participants meetings by monitoring breakout settings, move between rooms, or broadcast messages to participants across room boundaries. Adobe Connect is a for charge feature that offers monthly, annual, and individual use pricing.

Additionally numerous technologies are used throughout the NUSELI program. The NUSELI principal investigator, program coordinator, and project assistant communicate with NUSELI participants, Advisory Board, and National Faculty Committee through the use of email. Communication regarding coursework, conferences, and individual needs are addressed through this mode of communication. Additionally, the NUSELI program uses online technologies in order to enroll NUSELI participants in courses and pay tuition and fees. The use of an Excel spreadsheet, that was created to track finances, was created to document all payments made from the NUSELI grant. These spreadsheets make it easy to track spending and complete reports required by the Offices of Special Education Programs in order to ensure compliance grant regulations. The NUSELI program also uses online technologies to register NUSELI participants for state and national conferences and professional development, including the Annual Council for Exceptional Children Conference and the Harvard Institute on Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

The use of these technological tools has ensured the successful inclusion of NUSELI participants from a distance. Skype has been used between participants to include each other in face-to-face courses to include students who were unable to be physically present but needed to participate in class. One participant connects with the participants from a distance and the participants from the distant site are able to attend class virtually, complete with audio and video of the lesson. Other participants choose to use ooVoo to virtually connect to classes. These two tools are free and the choice between the two was made based on participant preference. Google Hangouts has been used by NUSELI participants to meet as groups and to share files in order to collaborate and complete papers, projects, and PowerPoint presentations. Adobe Connect has been a tool to successfully conduct a class online with synchronous communication between teachers and participants. Professors are able to upload course content for students to view, including videos and web links, and hold class in real time. Additionally, the use of the chat feature during Adobe Connect session allows for students to pose questions and comments to which the teacher and their peers can respond.

In summary, we have found that the use of technology has greatly enhanced the NUSELI program. While NUSELI focuses on urban school leaders, the beauty of the technology is that it can be used anywhere at any time. Our students have been successful in completing courses, preparing presentations and working in groups through the use of the different technologies discussed. We believe the idea of these tools is easily transferrable to most settings urban and rural.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES LIVING IN RURAL SETTINGS

Along with the explosion of social networking comes the fear and promise of what these tools might mean for people who struggle with social interaction and communication difficulties. Living in a rural area can add further complexity for social engagement, as the chances for social interaction outside of the school day can be limited for some students due to the nature of their disabilities and the environments in which they live. The author argues that although online social networking has limitations, with supervision, social media holds potential for developing the opportunities for social interaction for individuals with disabilities.

The social difficulties of students with disabilities are well documented, as many do not possess the natural ability to interact with other adolescents (Blancher & Howell, 2008). Critical social skill and/ or communication deficits can impede social interaction for an individual with a disability. There are a host of social difficulties and differences in communication that can occur, acting as barriers to developing productive communicative and social experiences.

Struggles with pragmatic skills such as deciphering non-verbal communication, maintaining eye contact, and not perceiving the need of another's personal space can make for awkward interactions with others. Lack of understanding or the inability to execute social conventional rules such as demonstrating interest in the speaker, reciprocity in conversation, topic maintenance, and appropriately terminating a conversation are problematic as each is required to create a successful conversational event. Being unable to engage with others by initiating conversation or to read the social cues of a speaker or listener also decreases the opportunity to establish meaningful social interactions. The inability to join into a conversation in 'real time' can cause the individual to appear off topic (Kuder, 2008).

Difficulty in understanding the perspective or intention of others, and the inability to distinguish sincere interactions from those meant to hurt, use, or mock can cause lifelong communication and interaction struggles. All, or any of these communication differences can lead to awkward, uncomfortable interactions because “inability to relate easily to peers can be stressful and stigmatizing for these children, especially in their adolescent years when there is such an emphasis on having friends and fitting in” (Pollack and Russo, 2009, p. 91).

Additionally, some individuals with disabilities, particularly those on the autism spectrum, have difficulty with sensory input, which interferes with their ability to engage with others (Elder, Caterino, Chao, Shacknai, and De Simone, 2006; Ruble and Akshoomooff, 2010). These social skill deficits frequently result in the individual’s ability to establish “meaningful social relationships” causing him or her to become socially isolated (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007, p. 153).

Living in a rural area can add further complexity for social engagement, as the chances for social interaction outside of the school day can be limited for some students due to the nature of their disabilities. The logistics of transportation can be problematic and the scarcity of local social events can limit opportunities to engage with same aged peers. In a case study conducted by Schultz, Jacobs and Schultz, (2013), Jacob, a young man diagnosed with high functioning autism, was unable to engage in after school activities because he did not live within walking distance of the school, and he did not live on a bus route. Taxi service was limited, and when available, costly and unreliable. Although Jacob had a desire to increase his social connections with others, he was limited by his disability as well as the area he resided in.

However, with the explosion of social media tools that have been developed over the last decade, there is promise for individuals who struggle with social interactions and communication difficulties, as well as those who are affected by distance, to make on-line connections with their peers. "What started out as a tool for college students to stay in touch with friends has grown into a worldwide phenomenon that includes people of a wide range of backgrounds and ages" that holds promise for individuals who live at the social margins (Schultz, Jacobs and Schultz, 2013).

The promise of social media as a communication tool is significant. Those living in rural environments would not have to travel to a fixed place and time in order to socially interact with others. There are considerable benefits to using a digital environment to alleviate many of the social and communication difficulties discussed earlier. In an digital environment, pragmatic difficulties such as eye contact that might make an individual with a disability uncomfortable, or problems with invading another's personal space are 'virtually' eliminated. Social awkwardness no longer becomes a factor. Sensory overload, and having to process conversation in 'real time' also decreases. Lags in conversational turn taking are acceptable on social media sites. Spelling errors are common among the general users of social media while posting. Randomness is appreciated, and can often work to the advantage of the person with a disability. Consider this post by Jacob, who asks one his random wonderings, "*I had an interesting thought over the holidays and that was why do they call both red cabbage and red onions red when they actually are purple?"* (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013, p. 17). This random post started a conversational thread about other oddities. However, if asked in a group of non-disabled peers, this wondering would probably have been looked upon as quite a peculiar question.

Another advantage of social media is the propensity of individuals to use gaming features. On-line games with 'friending' features often reward participants for having more neighbors. Through the 'neighbor' feature in games, it is possible to build a network of friends by inviting and being invited by others to become a neighbor, or to join new games. This feature of the game allows the individual with a disability to become an active part of a social gaming network, rather than being an onlooker or outsider. Additionally, many of these games include chat features where individuals can send messages to each other through the game site. In Jacob's case, posting and chatting in games overflowed to posting within Facebook, participating in real time messaging and using the 'chat' feature in Facebook. More remarkably, after first strengthening on-line relationships, generalization of conversing extended to face to face interactions (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013).

On-line affinity groups that allow individuals with unique interests to converse with like minded individuals are another benefit. Some individuals with social and communication disorders and differences may hold inappropriate or eccentric, long-winded conversations about their favorite topics (e.g. trains, dinosaurs, glass bottles), with little regard for another person's interest. Farmer, Leung, Weiss, Irvin, Meece, and Hutchins (2011) maintain research indicates that adolescents tend to find peers who share the same interests and characteristics that they do, when embedding themselves in a peer group. Young adults who grew up with the same small cohort of peers can have difficulty finding peers to interact with that have similar unique interests. Joining affinity groups can assist people with unusual or obscure interests to feel socially connected to a group, and not as different as they are sometimes made out to be (Gee, 2003).

Farmer, et al. (2011) also reported that rural high school students with disabilities "were socially marginalized, and affiliated with peers that may contribute to the development and maintenance of school adjustment problems" further asserting students with disabilities who attend small rural schools are more likely to be "isolated or peripheral" within the structures of school social groups (p. 32). Such students may engage in risky or problem behaviors, to increase their visibility, and chances of being accepted by a social group (p. 33). Gristy (2012), who studied social and emotional development of students in rural schools, noted the benefits of building social capital, stating adolescents have a need for social interaction, and when it is not acknowledged, can lead not only to loneliness, but difficulties within teaching and learning. Gristy also cites a relationship between a lack of social acceptance, and attendance, poor behavior and/or exclusion in school. Therefore, she states, building opportunities for social interaction are essential for academic success.

Increased interaction through social media venues may help to strengthen social ties to other individuals and ease social anxiety. Posting on sites such as Facebook or My Space can allow for a greater network of individuals to connect with socially, and has potential for creating a reciprocal relationships and even friendships, albeit on-line. Social networking can allow students with disabilities to take ownership of social situations, by complimenting, not replace face to face interactions (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013).

However, there can be concerns regarding whom individuals with disabilities are interacting with. Concerns involves predation. The U.S. House of Representatives passed the “Deleting Online Predators Act” in July 2006, "which requires schools and libraries to protect minors by creating barriers to online sites that require a profile or allow communication with other users" (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013, pp. 22-23). If passed into law, this act would provide protection to schools and libraries against predators, however, would not protect the individual in other environments. Consequently, Schultz et al. (2013) assert ongoing discussions about on-line safety are a must and monitoring of social interactions is highly recommended. Parents, teachers and other caregivers should monitor how private information is posted on social media sites and how privacy options are set (p. 23). Social visibility in on-line environments can also be controlled through adult supervision.

Social networking appears to hold promise for adolescent individuals with disabilities as a venue for increasing social interaction with others, "in what has become a conventional method of communication" (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013, p. 23). The hope is that through the use of *monitored* social media, adolescents with disabilities living in rural areas, that remain on the fringe of social interaction, may be able to strengthen connections and become more comfortable interacting with peers.

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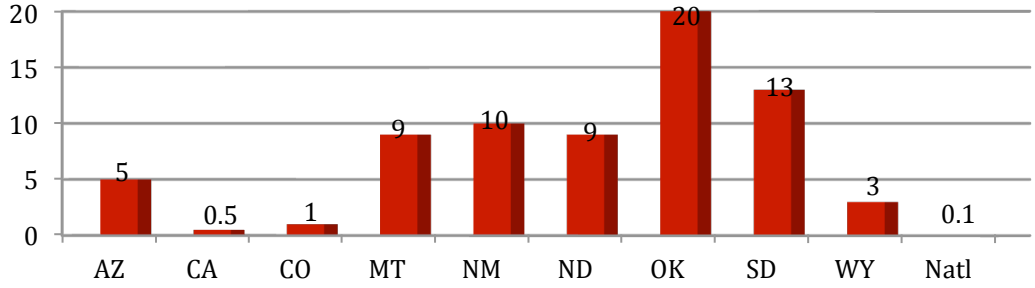
NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENTS: A META-ANALYSIS OF OVERIDENTIFICATION AND STRATEGIES FOR CORRECTION

Are Native American students over-identified in special education programs in the United States?

In a word … "Yes!" Although living in all States, students self-identifying as *Native American* (or biracially *Native American*) are found primarily in the followings 9 States: Arizona, California, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The percentage of students self-identifying as Native American within the total population of these States and nationally is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Native Americans as a percentage of state populations, U.S. Census, 2011.*



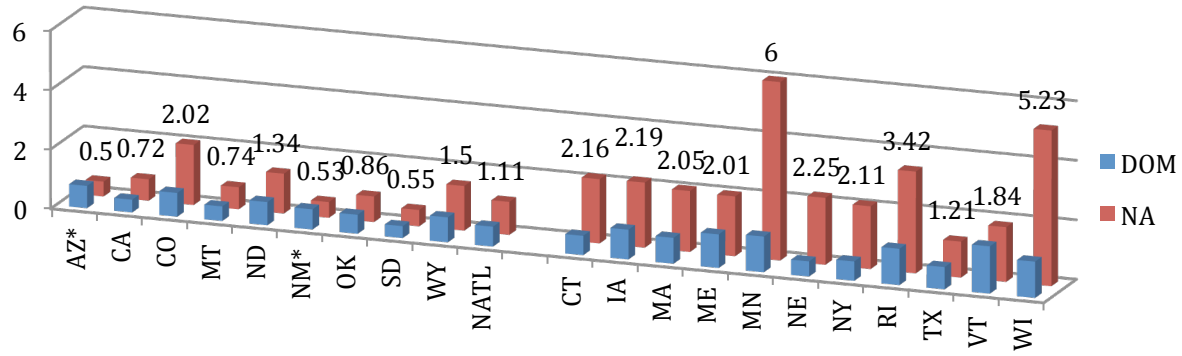
Identification is not as straightforward as might be thought. Increasingly the option of self-identifying one's self as *Native American* is being dropped out of demographic surveys in favor of the category *Other*. The ability to identify one's self as *Native American* or as belonging to more than one ethnic group, the status of many Native Americans, is simply not provided. The simple dignity of belonging to a recognized racial category is disappearing in demographic accounting systems.

What factors account for the over-identification of Native American students in special education programs?

A variable contributing to the over-identification of Native American students is simply living in a State with a low proportion of Native American people. In all States there is overrepresentation of Native American students who are placed and educated as students in federally recognized categories of special education. In States where Native Americans live in low density numbers there appears to be even higher levels of identification and placement into special education classes. As noticed in Figure 2, all States (and nationally) exhibit a statistically

disproportionate representation between students self-identifying as being *Native American* and students from the dominant culture who receive services as emotionally/behaviorally disordered. For example, the rate of overrepresentation as an Emotionally/Behaviorally Disordered student markedly increases when Native American people make up less that 1% of any State's population. What seems to be apparent is that when members of the multidisciplinary team are potentially more familiar with Native American cultures and/or members of those cultures, then the levels of identification and admission into special education programs are diminished.

Figure 2. *Comparison of high ratio to low ratio states on percentages of Native American (NA) and dominant (DOM) culture students receiving services as Emotionally/Behaviorally Disordered, 2010-2011.*



*Both Arizona and New Mexico have multiple schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs where students, nearly all being Native Americans, are not counted in the statistics for those States. The Bureau of Indian Affairs reports that 70% of students enrolled in their 183 schools are functioning under grade level.

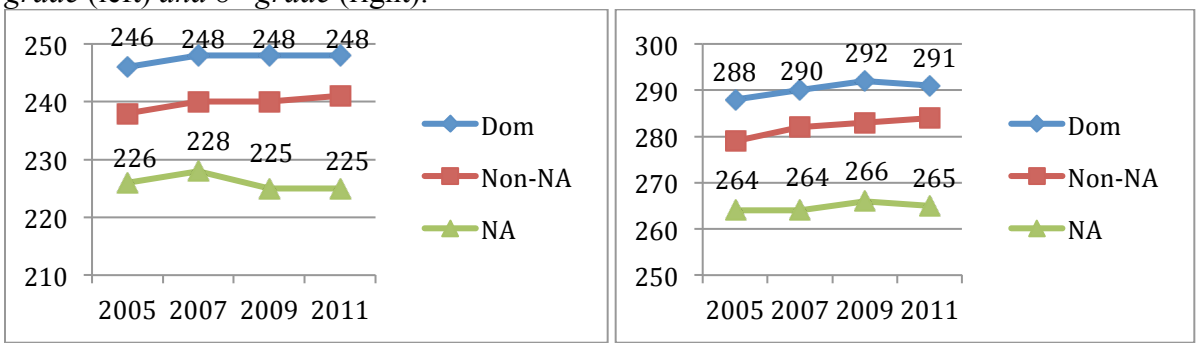
Another factor linked to low academic performance and referral into special education programs is living in a low population density area. While about 20% of students in the United States attended school in rural areas as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2011, almost half (49%) of all Native American students attended rural schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Conversely, about 30% of Native American students attended school in city or suburban locations as compared to 66% of all other students. While identification and admittance into special education programs could not be parsed out of data reported by the States and cumulative federal data, higher population density seems to have a positive impact on higher math and reading scores at the 4th grade level and higher reading scores at the 8th grade level when evaluated using the *National Assessment of Educational Progress*.

Whether differences based on representation within the local population and/or population densities are contributory factors in the overidentification of Native American students in affective and cognitive areas of special education may be debated. It is known that as a group the academic achievement levels of Native American students are lower than for students from the dominant culture.

These cognitive educational performance differences have been noticed for years. Nineteenth century mission schools for American Indian students were largely replaced by schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). These schools were administered directly from the nation's capital. At that time Indians were not U.S. citizens, and they lacked the right to control their own lives and the education of their children (Eder and Reyhner, 1988; Whiteman, 1986). Indian Commissioner Thomas J. Morgan wrote in 1889 that "the Indians must conform to the white man's ways, peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must." Native Americans were granted citizenship in 1924 and their education today takes place largely in the public schools. It may be argued that conformity has occurred as much for Native Americans as it has for any minority group in this nation.

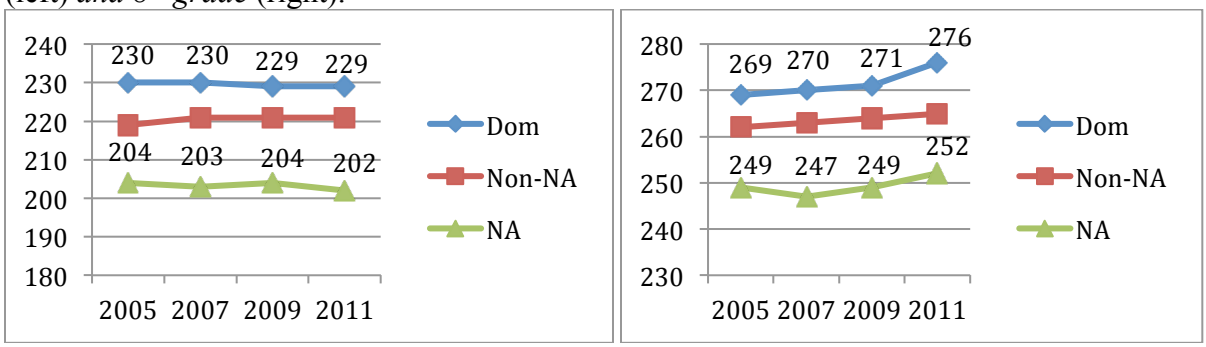
A review of the published data from the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013), also referred to by the United States Department of Education as *The Nation's Report Card*, shows a continued historic pattern of low performance in reading and mathematics by Native American students. Similar findings have been reported by other federal agencies involved with Native American education over the years. The mean scores by ethnic group for the NAEP (2013) *Mathematics* test for the years 2005 to 2011 are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. 2005-*2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress results in Mathematics, 4th grade* (left) *and 8th grade* (right).



The mean scores by ethnic grouping for the NAEP (2013) *Reading* test for the years 2005 to 2011 are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. 2005-*2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress results in Reading, 4th grade* (left) *and 8th grade* (right).



In published data showing mean performance levels by ethnicity the National Center for Educational Statistics (2013) has adopted the practice of comparing Native Americans to a composite of all ethnic groups, *Non-N(ative) A(merican)*, the middle line in the data points presented in Tables 3 and 4. It may be argued that this represents a truer comparison standard since it includes African American, Hispanic/ Latino, Asian American, and Caucasian students and represents the true state of combined performance of students in the United States. It may also be argued that this gives a false impression of the differences between Native American students and students of the dominant culture.

The differences between Native American students' average score and the Non-NA students' average score are provided by skill area and grade in Table 1.

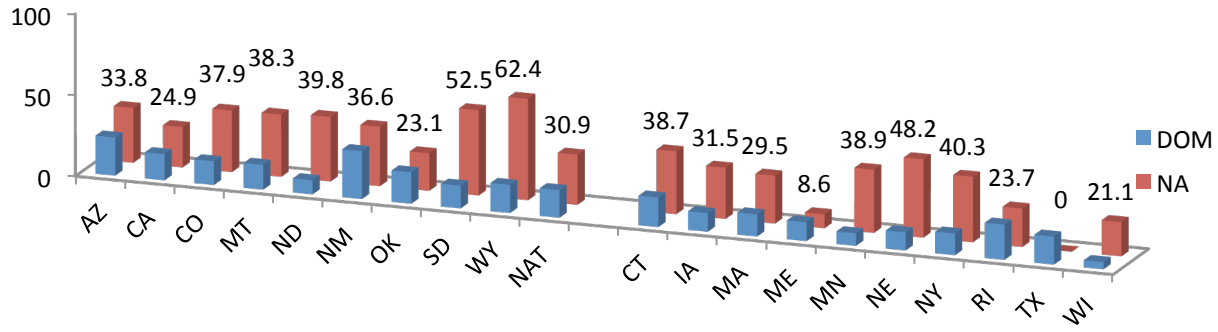
Table 1. NAEP average point differences between Native American students and reported cumulative non-Native American scores (left) and dominant culture student scores (right), 2005-2011.

	NA:Non-NA	NA:Dominant
4th grade Math	14	21.5
8th grade Math	17.5	25.5
4th grade Reading	17	26
8th grade Reading	14	22

What may be noticed is that these test scores, indicative of the reported results over 7 years, would support the conclusion that instructional pedagogy does not seem to meet the needs of Native American students. Native American students as a group appear to be regressing in mathematics as demonstrated by NAEP scores. Progress in reading skill acquisition is stagnant at the 4th grade level. Reading mastery at the 8th grade level shows a gain, but it is not as strong a gain as that reported by students of the dominant culture. What is not so apparent is that analysis of NAEP *Reading* scores between male and female Native American students shows that males have consistently scored 12 points lower at the 4th grade level and 9 points lower at the 8th grade level when compared to females.

Also contributing to overidentification of Native American students in special education is a strong sense of and familial respect for self-determination, a trait that might be described as each person knowing best what is right for him or her. This has created a culture among Native Americans that condones dropping out of school (Price, Kallam, and Love, 2010). Many of the same types of behaviors associated with students identified as emotionally/behaviorally disordered – oppositional, defiant, noncompliant - are also associated with students who dropout or who are pushed out of the public schools. Using the data reported by the U.S. Department of Education (Stillwell and Sable, 2013), a national dropout rate of about 31% is reported for Native Americans as compared to 17% for dominant culture students. This calculation uses the *Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate*, an estimate of the percentage of high school students who graduate within 4 years of first starting 9th grade. The data for States with the highest concentration of Native Americans and other comparison States is provided in Figure 5.

Figure 5. *A comparison of percentage rates of Native American (NA) and dominant (DOM) culture students dropping out, 2009-2010* (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

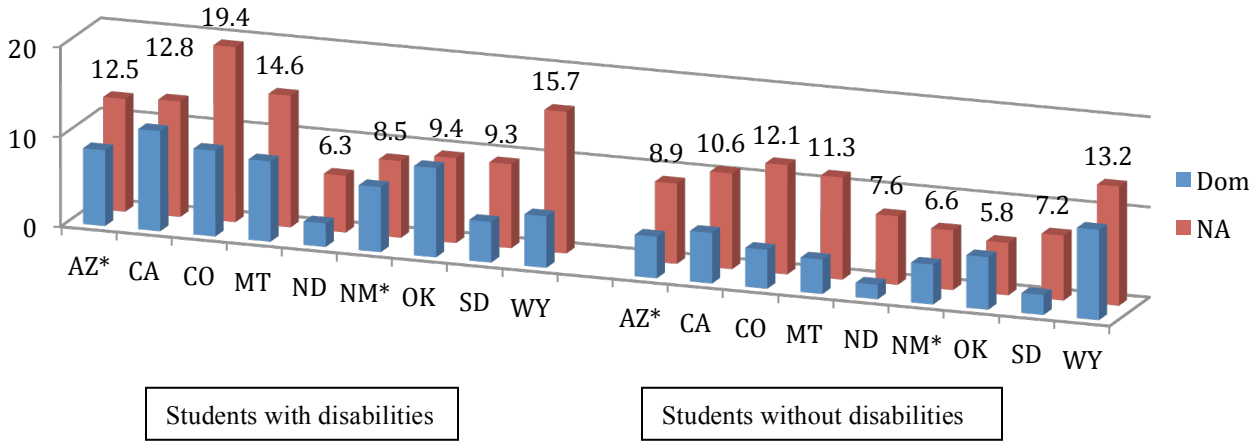


Thornbugh (2006) makes a very convincing argument that all reported State and national dropout rates are optimistically low. A truer dropout rate for Native Americans is estimated by him to be about 36% nationally. The U.S. Department of Education assumes dropout occurred during the high school years and not earlier and fails to include students leaving school in earlier grades. It also assumes accurate recordkeeping at school, district, and state levels for students plus it includes students who complete a *General Education Development* or *GED* test.

It is unclear exactly what factors contribute to an individual's decision to leave school, whether voluntarily or predicated by what are perceived to be coercive disciplinary practices. In an analysis of data reported by the United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights from 2009, it is apparent that Native Americans living in the States with the highest Native American density are suspended or expelled at a higher rate than students from the dominant culture, with the sole exception of Oklahoma (Losen and Gillespie, 2012).

In Figure 6 the percentages of students with disabilities are presented on the left half and the percentages of students who are not identified as having a disability are presented on the right side. What is apparent is that the condition of being disabled accounts for a higher percentage of suspensions in most States. When the mean was computed for the nationally reported data it was found that a Native American student with a disability (12.055% suspension rate) was 60% more likely to be suspended from school than a student with a disability from the dominant culture (7.533%). If the Native American student had no disability (9.2556% suspension rate) he/she was about 96% more likely to be expelled than a student with no disability from the dominant culture (4.7% suspension rate). However, being both Native American and having an identified disability in 2009-2010 resulted in national levels of suspensions that were 156% higher than for nondisabled students from the dominant culture.

Figure 6. *A comparison of percentage rates of Native American (NA) and dominant (DOM) culture students suspended or expelled with disabilities and without disabilities, 2009-2010.*

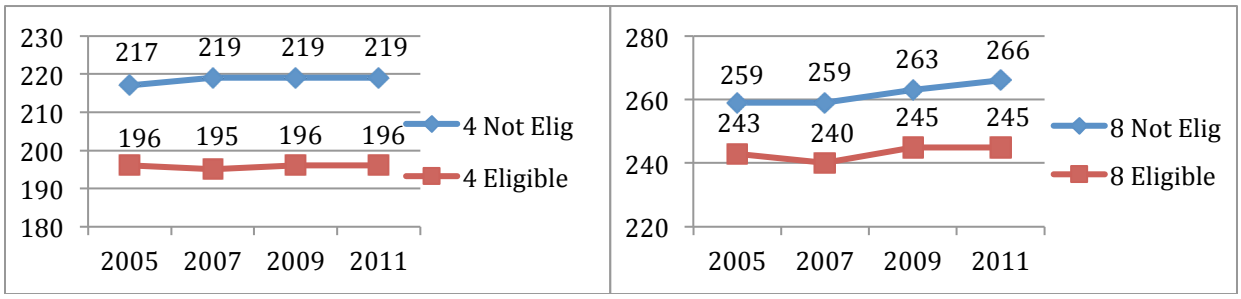


An additional key factor generally associated with student dropout is poverty (Price, Kallam, and Love, 2010). This is complicated because it has been stated that *all schools are middle class institutions and espouse middle class values* (Entwistle, 2012). But not all students are from the middle class and familiar with middle class values and middle class expectations, whatever those may be. This contributes to a mismatch between the student's idea of acceptable behavior and the expectations and interpretations of acceptable school performance by teachers and others, resulting in conflicts and higher rates of referrals and placements in all special education categories.

As a group students who live in poverty are more likely to be noticed as having educational problems when compared to students who do not live in poverty (Jensen, 2009). According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010, Native Americans were the poorest citizens in the nation earning on average 72% of what other groups earned. Native Americans were also the most likely to be unemployed, with regional unemployment averages ranging from 42% in metropolitan areas to 80% in rural areas. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau decided to eliminate the demographic category of *Native American* from most of its forms. Current poverty and unemployment levels are believed to be even higher. The effects of poverty upon a student's educational performance are unclear and contested by many.

What is known is that Native American children who were eligible for the *National School Lunch Program*, one hallmark indicator of poverty, scored lower on the *National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Test* than Native American children who did not qualify for this program, and this pattern has remained consistent over the years. As displayed in Figure 7 scores on the NAEP Reading test for 4th grade Native American students living in poverty showed a performance difference of over 20 points lower than for Native American children not living in poverty. At the 8th grade level there has been a similar and consistent 18 point difference when poverty is factored into Native American students' performance.

Figure 7. Comparison of Native American students' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading test, 4th grade (left) and 8th grade (right) when sorted by poverty level.



What strategies are most effective in educating Native American students?

Factors noticed above that influence performance of Native American children include:

- Being identified as a Native American student
- Living in a State with a low density of other Native Americans
- Living in a rural setting as compared to a city or suburban setting
- The cultural acceptance of self-determination, which condones dropout
- Over-use by schools of suspension of Native American students as a disciplinary tool
- Living in poverty

The question may be reasonably asked by educators, *What can we do about any of this?* The answer is that quite honestly there is little that educational institutions can do to change many of these factors. People self-identify with friends and family. People live where they choose. Poverty has been a reality of the human condition since prehistory.

Factors that schools can change are the disciplinary practices. Instead of using a piecemeal approach of individual behavioral management plans, a continuum of positive behavior support for all students within a school needs to be implemented in classroom and nonclassroom settings (such as hallways, buses, and restrooms). Since Congress amended the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) in 1997, Positive Behavioral Supports has held a unique place in special education law (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(3)(B)(i)). PBIS, referred to as positive behavioral interventions and supports in IDEA (34 C.F.R. § 300.1 *et seq.)*, is the only approach to addressing behavior that is specifically mentioned in the law. This emphasis on using functional assessment and positive approaches to encourage appropriate cognitive and affective behavior remains in the current version of the law as amended in 2004. Positive behavior support is an application of a behaviorally-based systems approach to enhance the capacity of schools, families, and communities to design effective environments that improve the link between research-validated practices and the environments in which teaching and learning occurs. Attention is focused on creating and sustaining primary (school-wide), secondary (classroom), and tertiary (individual) systems of support that improve lifestyle results (personal, health, social, family, work, recreation) for all children and youth by making targeted behaviors less effective, efficient, and relevant, and the desired behavior more functional.

Vygotsky (1978) theorized that learners are not genetically predisposed to a learning style, which may or may not be correct. He wrote that we learn *"how to learn"* through

socialization. What seems to be supported by test performance and school continuation is the conclusion that Native Americans tend to learn differently than students from the dominant culture. Classes are typically taught for the group and outliers are known to be left behind. Generally poorer test scores in academic achievement tests indicate that the instructional needs of Native American students are just not being met.

Based on their observations in classrooms with high concentrations of Native American students Price, Kallam, and Love (2010) noticed the unique differences between Native American students and their peers as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *A comparison of common learning traits* (from Price, Kallam, and Love [2010])

Native American Learners	**Majority Middle-Class Learners**
Visual learners with a strong use of imagery and graphic art	Refining verbal skills using linear linguistics
Cooperative learners	Value competition and become more independent learners
Develop global perceptions	Perceive analytically through facts and sequential solving of tasks
Reflective learners	Impulsive learners with a higher rate of error

Other factors contributing to school failure of Native American students were identified by Gilliland (1986) and Price, Kallam, and Love (2010). They include nine sociocultural factors as potentially responsible for the poor academic achievement of Native American students:

- differences between native culture and school culture
- ignorance of native culture among school staff
- differences between students' and teachers' value systems
- differences in native students' learning styles
- poor motivation of Indian students
- language differences of students and teachers
- students' home and community problems
- inappropriate use of tests with Indian students
- tendency to perform an activity by repeatedly observing behavior performed by another, practicing in private, and not performing publicly until confident that it can be done well.

What works to counter over-representation?

The Johnson-O'Malley Act of 1934 requires for the education of native peoples and gives parents of these children in local schools and the community of Native Americans some input into educational decisions made by schools that receive federal funds pursuant to the act. Local committees of Native American parents have the power to approve or disapprove of school programs funded under the Act. When this has been done the achievement rates of Native American students are equivalent to or higher than the achievement rates for students from the dominant culture.

When parents and teachers are authentically involved in the educational process the test scores of Native American children as a group rise to the levels of students from the dominant culture. The data for Oklahoma, the State receiving more Johnson-O'Malley funding than any other State, indicate comparable scores, comparable suspension rates, and comparable dropout rates or better for Native American students when compared to students from the dominant culture.

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TEACHER RESEARCH ON CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS WITH STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS

This action research study is the continuation of the lead researcher's examination of students' self-reflections on their cultural responsiveness during a semester-long course of field research (Kuykendall, 2008, 2012). After the semester under study, she examined essays written by four graduate students in a Master of Special Education program. Cultural responsiveness is a term representing the attitudes and strategies embedded in culturally responsive teaching which is based on Vygotsky's socio cultural theory (Gay, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Action research is a practical way for teachers to improve their teaching. According to Pine (2010, p.3), "Within the context and practice of special education, action research can make a meaningful difference in the lives of teachers and their students with special needs."

Method

During the semester, the four graduate students who were teachers assumed the role of teacher researchers as they participated in field research in local area public schools. Three of the students were special education teachers. Of these three teachers, two taught as special education inclusion teachers and one as a special education teacher in a self-contained classroom. The fourth student was a physical education teacher who completed her special education field experiences in a self-contained classroom in a public school in addition to teaching part time in a private school. Their teaching experience ranged from one to over 30 years. Of the four students, the two special education inclusion teachers taught at the elementary level, one taught in a self-contained classroom at the high school level, and one in dual settings. All were females and all were white. Two of the teachers grew up in the area in which they teach, one moved to the area from another region in the state, and one was a native of Canada. The area, the Mississippi Delta, is a region known for its cultural diversity, civil rights history, and high level of poverty.

The lead researcher, who was also the instructor of the capstone course, gave the teacher researchers a checklist on cultural responsiveness to complete at the beginning of the semester. Towards the end of the semester after developing and teaching 5-day units, the teacher researchers completed the checklist again. At the conclusion of the course, the teacher researchers wrote structured essays keyed to specific items on the checklist and corresponding indicators on the Teacher Intern Assessment Instrument (TIAI). The teacher researchers received 3 separate ratings on the TIAI during the semester. The essay represented one of the requirements of a section of the special education capstone folio.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the growth in cultural awareness and the use of culturally responsive strategies of the teacher researchers, who from this point forward will be

referred to as the teachers. The teachers reflected on their growth and strategy use in structured essays that they wrote at the conclusion of their field experiences. The lead researcher closely read each paper, looking for and establishing adequate descriptions of the teachers' reflections for the subsections of the essay: cultural awareness, classroom environment, interactions, instruction, and assessment. The co-authors of this paper will discuss the descriptions with other special education colleagues and continue to refine them through shared interpretations. All three authors will draw conclusions as the recursive cycle of action research continues. Action research follows a reflection-action-reflection-action process (Pine, 2010). The cycle began with the teachers' initial reflections based on the checklist on cultural responsiveness and their action of teaching of their units, subsequent checklist and essay reflection. The lead researcher continued the cycle with her initial essay readings and reflective descriptions embodied in this paper which, in turn, will become part of a professional discussion conducted by the co-authors. Their understandings will be shared with the lead researcher and the outcome will be used to revise and refine the checklist which will be employed in subsequent semesters.

The body of this paper will follow the format of the subsections of the structured essay on cultural responsiveness to which the teachers responded: cultural awareness, classroom environment, interactions, instruction, and assessment. The checklist items for cultural awareness on which the teachers were asked to reflect were "I am aware of how my own culture is similar to my students and how it is different" and "I understand that my judgments of students are filtered through my own beliefs and biases." It is important to note here that all four teacher researchers taught in public schools where the population consisted of students who came from a different race. The teachers were all white while their schools' students were a majority of African Americans.

Results

The teacher who taught in a self-contained classroom at the high school level had moved into the area several years ago. She stated that having lived in different areas of Mississippi throughout her life, and having taught in different schools prior to moving to the Mississippi Delta, she was not aware that teaching in the Delta would be so "different". She described herself as a middle class white female teacher in school in which the student population is almost 100% African American who live below the poverty level. She was aware of the racial differences between herself and her students. However, despite the obvious differences, she observed that they had many things in common. For example, she wrote that they have the same beliefs based upon the Baptist faith. She also made the grim observation that the Mississippi Delta is still somewhat segregated, by choice, and that racism is still rampant among middle-upper class white citizens. She believed, therefore, gaining the trust of her students was one of her first and most significant challenges.

The special education teacher who taught in dual settings stated that her cultural awareness had grown significantly over the semester although she did not expand on the topic or discuss how her judgments of students were filtered through her own beliefs and biases. She did write that she learned more about the environment and the people living it and related the following example. She was unaware of how terms can have different meanings in different cultures. She pointed out that in Canada when they say 'yes mam' it is in a rude tone and it is not acceptable. When she started teaching in the Mississippi Delta she did require that the students to

use the term when responding to her. She felt that this situation represented one of her greatest cultural difficulties. She noted that she did not correct her students when they did not use 'yes, mam' and 'no mam'. This situation must have resulted in feedback from other teachers or administrators on how to interact with the students which brought this cultural difference to her attention.

The two special education inclusion teachers grew up in the area in which they taught: one in a small town which she described as rich in culture and diversity. She noted that because she grew up in Clarksdale where she taught, there were many aspects of her life and her students that were similar. She went on to observe that although the class had a vast diversity of children, race was not one of those diversities. Their classroom consisted of all African-American children and she herself was white. She believed it was very easy for her to connect with her students based on the fact that they were both raised in the same community. Although she shared parts of her background with her students, she was also aware that there were many cultural differences in the ways they were raised. She stated that it was essential for her to consider these differences and appreciate the many ways that she could learn from her student's experiences. Because parts of their background were so different, she wrote that she must work every day in her classroom to ensure that she was not bringing in any type of bias to the classroom, and also that she was respecting the cultural backgrounds of her students' families.

The second teacher who grew up in the area in which she taught actually grew up in a tiny community near Clarksdale. She too stated that she was aware of how her own culture was similar to her students and how it was different. She believed that the similarities of people in the Mississippi Delta are greater than their differences and that gave her and her students many connections. She grew up in a small community named Stovall, which is north on the same highway from the elementary school and small community in which she teaches. Her small home was rented from the plantation owners, and all of their neighbors worked on the plantation. Her community was made up of farmland with crops of cotton, soybeans, corn, and winter wheat. They went to Clarksdale for appointments and shopping. She observed that the basic agricultural and socioeconomic layers continue to be the same today. She and her students both enjoy animals and the biological sciences and have spent a lot of time watching cartoons and Disney-type programs about them.

This teacher continued her observation by noting most of her students were of a different racial and cultural background than her own; however, she found this to be less of a difference than differences in age and socioeconomic backgrounds. She related that she and an older Afro-American teacher who grew up in the nearby community at the same time have found that they were much more alike in their values, interests, and background than they were different. She believed that even though one of them was white and one was African American, they had more similarities when compared with many of the younger teachers. She believed that their values and expectations were similar because of the area and times of their youth.

The classroom environment subsection of the essay consisted of items regarding positive teacher attributes: communicating high expectations, conveying enthusiasm, demonstrating fairness and supportiveness, and establishing a classroom climate in which each student feels he or she can learn and wants to learn. In addition the lead instructor requested that the teachers

reflect on the cultural responsiveness of the physical classroom environment (Kea & Campbell, 2004). Items of this type did not appear on either the checklist or the TIAI. They will be added to the revised checklist to be used in future courses.

Two teachers emphasized independence within the classroom environment. One of the teachers taught students with moderate to severe disabilities in a high school self-contained class. She stated that her classroom was very open to allow students as much independence as much as possible. She realized very early on that many of the students with whom she worked were not accustomed to being "helped" and took offense to being asked too many questions or having someone watch over them as they worked. She observed that the students were not like her in terms of family experiences while growing up. She related that when she was a child, her parents were always watching over her and there was always someone there to help her. Her students, however, were growing up with little or no adult supervision and therefore, despite their disabilities, they were very independent. As high school students, they viewed themselves as "grown". In their life skills classroom, she allowed the students to attempt to do just about anything they wanted to do independently within reason. She felt that other teachers did not understand her relaxed nature by allowing the students cook and run errands, because the students functioned on the level of normally developing one to seven year old children. The teacher supported the students' independence in the classroom because she recognized the students' social and survival skills were developed far beyond their academic abilities.

The other teacher who mentioned student independence was the one in dual settings. She wrote that the one item about the classroom environment that stood out the most to her was having the students make their own decisions. She stated that she did her best to encourage students to be independent. She felt her students tended to follow the crowd and that she wanted to create a classroom that supported independence. In addition, this teacher emphasized that a culturally sensitive classroom should be decorated with different pictures from a variety of different cultures. She believed it should have pictures of a variety of people, places, and religions. She observed that the use of pictures and objects, such as the newspaper created different social interactions and that the students were motivated by what was placed in the classroom. She also related that the students were motivated by new people, stating they always wanted to show anyone new who walked in the door what they could do.

One of the special education elementary teachers emphasized the emotional aspects of the classroom environment. She related that she worked to create a climate that appreciated and respected all of the things that makes each child so unique. She believed the goal of a culturally responsive classroom was to create an environment that welcomed all students and made learning individualized. She observed that there are many aspects that teachers must take into account to create this type of environment. Some of these facets she noted included students' backgrounds, learning styles, social experiences, and prior knowledge. She added that while taking the students' cultural backgrounds into account, a teacher must find ways to motivate and connect with all students. She related that she told students on the first day of class that she had high expectations for all of them. She told them that although not everything in her subject of math was easy, she knew that they could all succeed. She reiterated this throughout the year as she individualized her instruction.

The other special education elementary teacher wrote of her efforts to create a classroom culture of learning with student pride in work and high expectations for learning. She fostered a mental environment based on: "It may be hard, but let's break it down and figure it out." Her students knew that they would be asked to work hard and accomplish as much as possible. During the unit that she taught in the third grade, her students knew her expectations were high because she interacted with them on a consistent basis whether it was about their academic work, uniforms, speaking correctly, or behavior. She used words and books that the students told her they enjoyed. In the future, she plans to deliberately include more of the students' interests that she previously used in an extemporaneous manner.

Regarding the physical environment, this teacher wrote that their materials such as books, signs, classroom posters, and projects reflected respect for all people. The books were arranged by reading levels so that the students could select reading materials that would give them success. Their class library contained legends, stories, and myths from different countries and eras. The stories represented African-American, Hispanic, or European cultures and celebrated the special attributes of each society. During the year, they celebrated holidays and seasons as much as possible. She noted that during most of the year her units and lessons centered on holidays because they were of special interest to the students. Fabric, decorations, and art about the seasons and holidays covered the walls and were compared with other countries.

The essay subsection on interactions shifts in teacher emphasis from a focus on overall attitudes and general strategies to the employment of grouping strategies. The teachers reflected on checklist items involving opportunities for students to cooperate, communicate, and interact with each other. They also reflected on their use of flexible grouping patterns (pairs, triads, quads) including techniques that emphasize cooperative learning. The special education high school teacher wrote of a wide variety of grouping strategies. She grouped students by abilities for instruction for some activities and at other times, she used homogeneous groupings to address males or females separately. There were times when she used mixed groupings with peer tutors from the general education classrooms to assist in teaching. She stated that both groups of students benefitted from these interactions and enjoyed their time spent together.

This teacher cited a fascinating example of a time in which she used heterogeneous groupings for a unit on research and presentation. In compliance with an alternative assessment objective, 'student presents information using pictures, texts, or other media on a research topic,' she grouped students according to their interests. Each group had a teacher/leader assigned to the group. The teacher facilitated the research and helped the students to organize their data and create a presentation of their information. Students who were more interested in the computers and technology could choose to present their information via a PowerPoint presentation. Other more artistic students could use pictures or graphics to present their information, while more verbal students could choose to make a verbal presentation using only a few pictures and texts. All students were required to complete an assignment individually; however, they were grouped according to interest to plan and conduct their research.

One of the special education elementary teachers wrote that classroom interactions in a culturally responsive, safe classroom should look very cooperative. She believed that when students are taught to show respect to everyone, including their classmates, cooperation among

children becomes a natural, everyday occurrence. The teacher noted that during her TIAI unit, students were given the opportunity every day to work in groups or with partners. The students in her class often preferred to work in cooperative groupings. She changed the groups so that each student was offered the opportunity to work with different students. She wrote that students were grouped according to several different factors, such as ability, interests, or diversity. The students were always eager to find out who they would be working with for a particular activity, and they knew that during group work they must be respectful. She believed group work served as reinforcement for whatever skill was taught that day and that it also served as an opportunity for students to talk. For this teacher, allowing students the opportunity to talk at school was vital. According to her, too often students are told "don't talk, be quiet." She believed that all students need the opportunity to talk because it enhances vocabulary.

The other special education elementary teacher recorded how she also facilitated respectful interactions. She wrote that she attempted to actively build a community of learners who encouraged each other academically as well as socially. For example, they reminded each other of what to do rather than "telling" on them. When she taught the TIAI unit in the third grade, the students were aware of her expectations for behavior during their group interactions. The teacher grouped students primarily in pairs in the general education classroom because she believed that their maturity level could only accommodate paired work. In her resource room, she used pairs or triads depending upon the number of students in that section. The students were asked to work cooperatively in reading and on work that they brought from the general education classroom. She noted that she read the directions and made sure that they knew the parameters of the project before they began in any cooperative group. If she was not directly working with them, she would go over the material with the group to ensure their understanding.

The special education teacher who worked in dual settings observed that reflecting on interactions caused her to consider how each student is greatly affected by their peers, parents and teachers. From a unique perspective, she wrote that she believed speaking with parents to be a very important aspect of interactions. She noted that learning about the parents and getting to know them allowed her to build a closer connection with the students. She felt that it also allowed her to build connections with her students and gave insight into how to group them. At times she liked to give the students options to select the student with whom to pair, while at other times, she arranged the pairs. Either way she became very sensitive to personalities. She noted that being paired with a friend or someone who is not a friend allowed the students to extend their comfort levels and learn how to work and interact with others.

The essay subsections on instruction and assessment had the teachers focus on strategies for student-centered learning and student-centered assessment. The checklist and TIAI items involved knowledge of students' backgrounds, interests, experiences, and prior knowledge to ensure that instruction is relevant and meaningful. Teachers reflected on their use of a variety of strategies that highlighted students' strengths, interests, cultures, and styles. They also reflected on their incorporation of diversity, including multicultural perspectives, and the use of family and community resources in lessons. In addition for assessments, they reflected on their attempts to personalize them for each student by using knowledge about the culture and family background.

The special education high school teacher wrote that she made efforts to ensure that her instruction made each concept real to the students and made a connection between student learning and real life experiences. She discussed lessons on cooking and kitchen safety to which the students easily related. She noted that many of them cooked at home or if they did not, they had seen others cooking plus they all loved to eat. In addition she noted that she attempted to make connections across the content areas. During her TIAI unit, she incorporated geography and foreign languages by presenting the students with a resume written in Spanish. They discussed various countries whose people speak Spanish, the influx of Spanish-speaking people in our country and community, the location of Spain and Mexico, and compared a Spanish resume to an English resume. She attempted to make assessments interesting and meaningful for the students by incorporating resources from the community, their personal lives, personal interests, or events in the school or classroom. She found that students performed better on assessments when the content included their interests, backgrounds or prior knowledge.

The special education teacher in the dual settings viewed instruction and assessment in relation to each other. She related that she learned about the students' socio-economic status, their educational level, and their own cultural awareness. She also learned about their language, and where they were from. When she assessed the students, both for formative and summative assessments, she wrote that she could use materials and examples of the students' favorite things and interests. In addition, she employed a variety of assessments that accommodated for the students' different learning styles. Her assessment results provided her with a basis to differentiate instruction.

One of the special education elementary teachers echoed the importance of differentiated instruction and using formative and summative assessments that highlight students' cultural similarities and differences. She observed that students' cultural backgrounds can easily be embedded in assessment questions through understanding their individual interests and culture. In addition, she noted that questions should be created based on students' prior knowledge and that assessment questions should never confuse children because of unknown words. When she made assessments, she took into account students' interests, ability levels, and materials to which the students had been exposed.

The other special education elementary teachers wrote about the strategic use of instructional conversations. She felt this strategy was necessary for working with students who are deprived of conversation in the lower socioeconomic areas of the Mississippi Delta. She related positive results while working with three students who received resource services from third grade and had significant difficulties with conversation. She noted that this cognitive strategy extended dialogues in instruction for students and enabled teachers and students to know how to navigate language and thinking skills. She employed these interactive discussions to help students learn through the basis of their own experiences. She also noted that using visuals helped the students remain engaged in these conversations.

Discussion

After reading and studying the essays the lead researcher recognized the growth in cultural awareness among the teachers as indicated from their initial checklist ratings and the

reflections in their essays. She noted the many culturally responsive strategies described by the teachers who actively employed the strategies in their TIAI units and in their daily lessons. Three of the four teachers reflected in detail about their cultural awareness, their awareness of the similarities and differences between themselves and their students, and how their biases might affect their judgment. All four teachers reflected on the physical and emotional classroom environment. For interactions the teachers described a wide variety of groupings and cooperative learning opportunities which fostered respect. For instruction and assessment they cited examples of differentiated instruction, recognized the recursive cycle of the assessment and instruction, and related their use of formative and summative assessments to inform instruction.

One of the special education elementary teachers summed up her action research concisely and, in many regards, reflected the attitudes of the other three teachers and findings from previous action research studies conducted in the capstone course. She believed that being 'forced' to reflect upon her own teaching principles more than she ever had to in the past helped her to become a better teacher. She noted that the most difficult habit she had to break was bringing her cultural bias into the classroom. She eloquently stated that she had to learn to remind herself that even though she and her students came from the same community, their family values could be very different. She wrote that she noticed a major difference in the relationships that she maintained not only with her students, but also with her students' families. She believed that by making her students' cultures a priority in the classroom, their families also had the opportunity to feel appreciated.

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TEACHING DIVERSE LEARNERS ONLINE: FLIPPED COURSES AND OTHER STRATEGIES

P-12 technology is a rapidly changing field, and a variety of tools is being implemented in classrooms and in special educator preparation programs with the research just keeping up with the field (O'Brien, Aginaga, Hones, & Harshorne, 2011). Some strategies and technologies like classroom response systems are more extensively researched (Fies & Marshall, 2006) while others are spreading rapidly in classroom applications as action research is being pursued. In this context, "technology rich instruction" utilizes technology within the traditional classroom to augment and expand instruction for students during the traditional school day (Staker & Horn, 2012). Examples of this include use of interactive digital textbooks and/or novels (Dunleavy, Dextert, & Heinecket, 2007), use of internet sources for targeted instruction of specific skills deficits (Schorr & McGriff, 2011; Dunleavy, Dextert, & Heinecket, 2007), or use of classroom response systems for formative assessment (Fies & Marshall, 2006). With increasing student access to mobile devices, "BYOD" (bring your own device) and smart phone applications for recording responses are starting to replace earlier response systems. Through other apps, iPads can be used in interactive content presentation and practice in the classroom, as well as recording presentations for later student use, simplifying the process of developing podcasts for P-12 and teacher preparation. Skype can also be used for inclusion of absent students as well as guest presentations, especially in rural areas.

Blended Learning

As distinct from technology rich instruction, "blended learning" includes traditional classroom instruction but also utilizes technology to extend learning beyond the traditional classroom and the traditional school day. It can potentially involve parents in the learning community (Dunleavy, Dextert, & Heinecket, 2007). An important component of blended learning is that the student has control over time, place, path, and/or pace (Staker & Horn, 2012). In blended learning, online and other technologies extend the classroom beyond the four walls and allow for a multitude of differentiation options. Blended learning falls into three basic types (Staker & Horn, 2012). The first, the rotation model, is specific to one class where students rotate intentionally between learning modalities. Rotating among learning stations and modalities is a co-teaching instructional delivery model that enables teachers to scaffold instruction and content for diverse learners (Sileo & van Garderen, 2010). Examples include the station-rotation model with students moving within the classroom; the lab rotation model where the computer lab is involved; the individual-rotation model involving one student; and the flipped classroom model involving time outside the classroom and school day, which is described below. The second

basic type of blended learning, the self-blend model, involves individual students taking courses both in the traditional classroom and online. The third type of blended learning involves the entire school in both off campus and on campus learning, and is referred to as the enriched virtual model (Staker & Horn, 2012).

Flipped or Inverted Classroom Model

This presentation includes an example of blended learning that has been introduced in the last several years which represents a systemic "pedagogical shift" for P-12 educators and schools called the flipped classroom. In a flipped or inverted classroom, students use prerecorded content during out-of-class time, e.g., at home, freeing up in-class time for "…more interaction-oriented functions" rather than lectures and content presentations (Kumar, 2012, p. 625). The instructional recordings alone do not constitute the whole of instruction but are an integrated part of teaching concepts and content and allow teachers to structure class time for more differentiated, hands on activities that allow individual students to interact and meet daily learning targets and accomplish academic standards (Tucker, 2012). The instructional recordings utilized outside of class time may introduce content, teach content, review content, or enrich and extend content. Parents have access to the recordings and are able to partner with the classroom teacher in helping their children access the content.

In an online survey conducted by the Flipped Learning Network, 95% of teachers who reported flipping their classroom are secondary school teachers, 85% of whom have seven or more years of teaching experience. Half of these teachers practice in suburban schools, with urban and rural schools accounting for 25% of the flipping. Ninety-one percent of these teachers have used the flipped model for less than two years (Flipped Learning Network, 2012). Teachers reported benefits in student achievement and overall classroom climate; 67% percent of these teachers reported improvement in standardized test score and 80% percent reported improvements in student attitudes. Overall, teachers reported benefits for all students, in particular for students taking advanced placement courses and students with special learning needs.

Marion County Flipped Classroom Action Research

Marion County Schools (Lebanon, Kentucky) is a rural southern Kentucky school district with a 60% free and reduced lunch rate. A team of teachers, parents and administrators at the high school were concerned about low student performance and the lack of student engagement in the area of math. Parents voiced that they were unable to assist their students with high school math homework, and the existing after-school assistance program, called extended school services (ESS) in Kentucky, was not effective in reaching many students who needed it, due to barriers like students needing to work after school and transportation issues. The team determined that a different approach was required to provide assistance in and out of the classroom environment. As a result, an action research project was developed for using technology integration to "flip" a collaborative high school Algebra I class to reinforce content and skills. A class of 21 students would be divided into two groups, with the seven students with IEP's balanced across the two groups. The two groups would receive different instructional interventions on alternate weeks. One group would receive traditional instruction while the other

group participated in flipped activities; the groups would reverse their instructional delivery method the next week. This arrangement would continue for the entire semester.

To implement the plan, the special education director solicited a private, in-state grant to purchase iPods, awarded based on the rationale that the use was for action research purposes. Parents and students were included in the planning for upfront buy-in, with guidelines developed on taking the iPods home. In the action research, the collaborative special education teacher developed podcasts of content instruction and mini-lectures for students to view at home, prior to time spent in the classroom completing assignments traditionally considered homework. Because content was viewed prior to class time, students could review it more than once and more class time was available for differentiation and hands-on individualized instruction. Pre- and post-data for the two groups looked at student performance on quizzes as well as performance (completion and scores) on homework and bell-ringer assignments. Results were positive across all student levels, with the greatest gains for the students with IEP's who had the lowest cognitive/academic scores and performance in classroom. Overall results indicated special and regular education students increased their homework, bell-ringer, and testing percentages in a six week period. In addition, students sustained performance levels when the iPods were removed for instruction for a week. In interviewing the students pertaining to these results, it was indicated to the teachers this was due to anticipating having the iPods back the next week for intervention assistance. It was a very motivating tool and provided the student with the ability to obtain instruction independently and immediately. However, research on this strategy is still in early stages.

Conclusion

Technology equips teachers with the means to differentiate instruction for diverse learners both within and outside of the classroom. The variety of technologies and applications can be used in teacher preparation as well as P-12 classrooms, but the speed of change can also be overwhelming to education faculty and classroom teachers alike. Tips for managing the learning curve include giving yourself time to learn; trying one new technology at a time; being open-minded about potential use; networking with others; evaluating potential usefulness; and practicing what you preach.

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MULTISENSORY STRATEGY INSTRUCTION FOR VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AND MAINTENANCE

Educators employ a variety of teaching techniques to assist their students with learning and retaining new material. The intervention described in this paper was designed specifically for a seventh-grade English/Language Arts class. The use of multisensory instruction to teach vocabulary words yielded significant positive results. These findings support the use of this type of instruction for teaching vocabulary words. However, additional research is recommended. Recommendations for future research that would provide greater clarification regarding the efficacy of this teaching method are provided here.

Multisensory Strategy Instruction for Vocabulary Acquisition and Maintenance

Educators employ a variety of teaching techniques to assist their students with learning and retaining new material. Some of those techniques are successful and others are not. The goal of a classroom teacher should be finding and using the most efficacious teaching methods while rejecting those that do not work (Kavale & Mostert, 2003). Many educational techniques may appear effective at first blush due to popularity in the media or because they appeal to the beliefs of the teacher. However, they are of little value to students if they are ineffective. This is why it is important for classroom teachers to find and use the teaching techniques that appropriate and effective for their students.

Current educational laws also address the use of effective teaching techniques in the classroom. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires schools to identify and employ the most effective teaching methods (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Fusarelli, 2004). Therefore, finding effective teaching practices is not only the hallmark of an effective teacher, but they are also required by educational policy makers.

A final consideration when choosing a teaching technique is the classroom composition. Students with disabilities are increasingly being educated with their non-disabled peers in mainstreamed classrooms (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Palloway, Miller, & Smith, 2012). This will sometimes require adjustments to the methods employed by those teachers in the regular education environment so that the needs of all students are being met.

The intervention that will be discussed here was developed for use in a middle school classroom where I was serving as a classroom teacher. The intervention used multisensory instruction to assist with vocabulary development and retention. I hope that this information will be of assistance to classroom teachers as well as to educational researchers.

Importance and Effectiveness of Visual Learning

According to Penrose, Rasberry, and Meyers (2008), learning that includes audio and visual components is statistically more effective than audio-only and visual-only methods. To support their assertion, those authors provided results of a study of communication in audio-only, visual-only, and audio-visual mixed modes of training. They found that the three-day recall rate of information for the three methods was 10% for audio-only, 35% for visual-only, and 65% for the audio-visual combination (Penrose et al., 2008). These findings were interesting, but they were not directed specifically to students.

Other researchers have studied the use of these types of learning for students in classroom settings and found them to be very effective. Much of the current body of research has addressed students learning a second language (see Ajayl, 2008; Akbulut, 2007; Dubois & Vial, 2005). However, the research has not been limited to foreign language instruction. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) found that the combination of text, audio, and video presentations maximized student learning of social factors. In addition, Moreno and Valdez (2005) determined that using multimedia instruction increased student learning of complex scientific processes. Finally, Jones (2009) and Mary (2008) examined the efficacy of multi-method instruction for vocabulary development among students in the middle grades and found it to be quite effective. These studies provide a baseline of support on which this current study was designed and conducted.

This study used a multisensory teaching strategy to help middle school students in a mainstreamed classroom learn vocabulary words. It was designed to augment the current research in the field to include students in a mainstreamed classroom setting. This was an area that had not been specifically addressed in previous research. In addition, it addressed a need that I had noted during my 14 years as a special education teacher – students with disabilities in the mainstreamed environment were struggling with vocabulary acquisition.

The intervention that will be discussed here was developed while I was teaching a middle school class in English/Language Arts. It was not designed as a true experimental student with a control group and experimental group. Instead, it was a teaching technique that I employed to assist my students. The setting, methods, and results of my intervention will be presented here. Also, a discussion of practical applications for classroom teachers and recommendations for future research will be provided.

Setting

The setting for this study was a seventh grade English/Language Arts classroom at a public middle school located in a rural town in West Virginia. Total school enrollment was approximately 250 students in grades 6 through 8. A total of 26 students were in the classroom where the study was conducted. Eighteen of the students were males, and eight were females. The student ages ranged from 12 to 14. Finally, the classroom was mainstreamed (i.e., both regular education and special education students in the same classroom).

Method

Ten vocabulary words were introduced at the beginning of each of six weeks in a literature-based unit. Students were presented with PowerPoint slides with pictures illustrating the vocabulary words. The teacher pronounced the word and provided the definition while the students viewed and discussed the pictures. This review lasted for approximately five to ten minutes, and it was conducted each day for five consecutive days. Students were then tested using paper-pencil quizzes at end of each week and then again six weeks later.

The pictures used to create the PowerPoint slides were located through Google searches by either typing the vocabulary word plus "picture" or something to illustrate the word's meaning plus the "picture." This method of picture selection was chosen over using commercially-available sources with photos because it was easy to assemble and it was free of cost.

Results

The mean accuracy rate for the weekly tests for all students was 88%. In addition, the mean accuracy rate for the cumulative tests (given after six weeks) was 77%. In addition, to a high rate of recall, students were asked about the use of the pictures in the learning of vocabulary words. The students reported that they enjoyed having the pictures to accompany the definitions of the words. One of the benefits cited by the students was that the pictures helped to reinforce their understanding of the definitions.

Another benefit noted during the exercises was that the pictures allowed for additional vocabulary development. Since the pictures used might also have synonymous meaning with the students, I was able to discuss synonyms for the vocabulary words in addition to their definitions. For example, the picture that accompanied the vocabulary word "queasy" showed a woman who appeared ill. Some of the students stated that the woman appeared "sick" when we reviewed the slide in class. This allowed me the opportunity to discuss how those words are similar. This was not the original design of the exercise, but it was an additional benefit of which I took advantage.

Discussion

The intervention described here can be used in classroom instruction or a part of a class website to provide remediation or review at home. The applications may also go beyond those mentioned here. They would be bound only by the limits of technology and time on the teacher.

As previously discussed, this intervention was not designed to be a true experiment with a control and experimental group. It was simply designed as a classroom intervention. However, I would recommend that this study be used as a stepping stone for future research on the effectiveness of this method of teaching vocabulary development. Future research would be informative and would add to the current body of research. Adding a control group that uses audio-only (i.e., no pictures) instruction could assist in determining the comparative effectiveness of this method of instruction. In addition, future studies could examine any

differences in learning and retention related to different student characteristics such as gender, age, disability, and so on. This intervention did not have a large enough sample size to draw any conclusions regarding the effectiveness of this type of instruction for these items. However, future research could address one or more of these areas.

Summary

Educators employ a variety of teaching techniques to assist their students with learning and retaining new material. Some of those techniques are successful and others are not. The intervention described in this paper was designed specifically for a seventh-grade English/Language Arts class. The use of multisensory instruction to teach the vocabulary words yielded significant positive results. These findings support the use of this type of instruction for teaching vocabulary words at this and other grade levels. In addition, recommendations for future research are provided here. Future research would provide greater clarification regarding the efficacy of this teaching method.

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PROJECT ENVISION: AN ONLINE PROGRAM TO PREPARE TEACHERS TO WORK WITH STUDENTS WITH LOW VISION/BLINDNESS

Abstract

Project ENVISION is a federally funded personnel preparation project based on a graduate certification/degree program in Low Vision/Blindness at West Virginia University. This program uses multiple technologies to deliver courses and over clinical experiences: Blackboard (a learning management system used for multimedia modules, discussions, assignments, assessments); Live Classroom (a virtual classroom program with audio and video conferencing and other tools used for live interactive class sessions in courses and supervisory conferences in clinical experiences); Second Life (a virtual world used for real time class sessions and on demand activities); and iWebfolio (an online portfolio system for portfolio artifacts and reflections).

The paper will accomplish three (3) objectives:

1. to describe the program context and components;
2. to describe how synchronous and asynchronous technologies are used in online special education courses; and
3. to summarize of program outcomes and participant perceptions to date and discuss the advantages and limitations of these online technologies for personnel preparation.

The procedures and outcomes described in this project may be useful for college and university faculty and/or state and local school personnel who are currently using or may be considering technology applications for use in online programs designed for prospective or practicing teachers.

Overview of Project ENVISION

Project ENVISION: Educating New Vision Impairments Specialists Online was designed to increase the number of special education personnel certified and highly qualified to work with students with vision impairments in the very rural state of West Virginia, which lies entirely within the Appalachian region, an area characterized by high persistent poverty and high rates of disability conditions. In 2005-2006, West Virginia University (WVU) reactivated its dormant program in Vision Impairments and developed and implemented an online distance education program at the graduate level for teaching certification in Visual Impairments for Grades PreK through Adulthood and/or a Master's degree in Low Vision/Blindness.

This project is a personnel preparation program that was funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs in 2008, initiated in January 2009, and operation from January 2009 through December 2012. Participants were provided full reimbursement of tuition and fees for all required courses and approved electives leading to certification in Vision Impairments plus a Master’s degree in Special Education with an emphasis in Low Vision/Blindness.

Reimbursement was contingent upon signing a service agreement committing to 1) finish the program and obtain or continue in a teaching position as a special educator for at least two (2) years for each program year; 2) complete at least two (2) courses per semester with a grade of A or B; and make continued progress to earn certification and degree within a two (2) year period. All courses were scheduled at least once during each two year program cycle; practicum experiences were available every Fall and Spring semester.

Context of Project ENVISION

Certified and qualified special educators trained to work with students with vision impairments have been and continue to be in short supply, especially in rural areas of the United States. The specialization in vision impairments (VI) has been consistently listed in the top 10 shortage areas for nearly two decades (AAEE, 2011). The supply of new personnel is decreasing due to low enrollments and program termination by institutions of higher education looking to reduce expenditures (Corn & Spungin, 2003), even as the need for these specialists is increasing due to more inclusive placement of students in local schools instead of residential schools (Ferrell, 2002).

Vision impairments specialists require a highly specialized program that meets both national and state standards for licensure (Erin, et al., 2006). Online programs are becoming increasingly common in personnel preparation in special education, especially in low incidence disabilities and in rural areas (Ludlow, Collins, & Menlove, 2006). Online technologies have been used successfully in special education for course instruction (Steinweg, Davis, & Thomson, 2005), practicum supervision (Pemberton, et al., 2004), peer coaching (Knapczyk, et al., 2005), and professional development for groups (Forbush & Morgan, 2004) and individuals (Stowitschek & Guest, 2006). West Virginia has continued to experience difficulty enrolling individuals in campus-based preparation programs in vision impairments as well as in recruiting vision impairments from other states.

WVU wanted to expand access to training in vision impairments due to:

*Need for vision impairments specialists in the state and region;
*State with many rural and high need schools with critical teacher shortages;
*More children with vision impairments in local schools and in inclusive placements;
*Higher number of vision impairments specialists on emergency permit;
*Pending retirements of specialists currently employed in many systems; and
*Existing preparation programs in and out of state inaccessible in most locations.

The WVU Department of Special Education made the decision to re-open its certification program in Vision Impairments, make it available for certification only or certification with degree, and increase its accessibility by offering it entirely online, beginning in 2007. To make the program more attractive to potential students, the department chair sought funding from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs and succeeded in securing around $800,000 in funds to support the program and its students.

Components of Project ENVISION

Project ENVISION is based upon WVU's graduate certification and degree program in Low Vision/Blindness, which is fully state approved, nationally recognized by the Council for Exceptional Children, and nationally accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education.

Total Hours for Initial Certification in Visual Impairments: 42
Total Hours for Initial Certification + Masters Degree in Low Vision/Blindness: 42
Total Hours for Masters Degree Only in Low Vision/Blindness: 36

Program Courses
ALL required courses are offered in a two (2) year program cycle at the rate of two (2) courses each semester and summer session. Additional courses are available for use as electives every semester and summer session.

Core Courses

SPED 600 **Instructional/Assistive Technology**
Technology applications for individuals with significant disabilities

SPED 603 **Classroom/Behavior Management for Special Needs**
Evidence-based strategies for management of individuals and groups

SPED 663 **Collaborative-Consultative Inclusion Strategies**
Skills for collaboration and/or consultation in an inclusive school environment

Specialization Courses

SPED 630 **Introduction to Low Vision/Blindness**
Overview of low vision and blindness; causes, characteristics and educational programs; clinical evaluation of vision loss and functional assessment of vision

SPED 631 **Introduction to Braille (prerequisite to SPED 632 and SPED 633)**
Fundamental skills for reading and writing Braille code

SPED 632 **Braille Reading and Literacy Development**
Methods and materials for teaching students with low vision/blindness to Use Braille to develop reading and literacy skills

SPED 633 **Nemeth Code and Mathematics Development**
Methods and materials for teaching students with low vision/blindness to Use Nemeth code to develop computation and problem solving skills

SPED 635 **Instructional Strategies for Students with Low Vision/Blindness**
Strategies for teaching academic and functional skills to students with vision impairments as the sole disability.

SPED 636 **Instructional Strategies for Students with Multiple Impairments**
Strategies for teaching academic and functional skills to students with vision impairments who also have other sensory, physical or intellectual disabilities.

Capstone Courses for Certification with or without Degree

SPED 639A **Culminating Practicum: Low Vision/Blindness**
Clinical experience with children in elementary public school settings.

SPED 639B **Culminating Practicum: Low Vision/Blindness**
Clinical experience with children in secondary public school settings.

OR

Capstone Courses for Degree Only

SPED 675 Research to Practice
Current research in special education and applications to professional practice

SPED 680 Culminating Project
Independent planning, implementation and evaluation of project applying theory to practice

Field and Clinical Experiences

Field and clinical experiences are offered in collaboration with local public schools in each student's home community. These local schools must agree to provide supervising teachers (for field experiences), master teachers (for full time practicum experiences) or peer mentors (for on the job practicum experiences) to oversee these experiences. Many school placements are located in high poverty areas of Appalachia and one student completed these experiences in an international area. Site-based supervisory personnel follow program practicum policies and procedures in cooperation with and with support from university personnel who provide supervision online in courses or practicum experiences.

Field experiences. Many courses have an associated field experiences, requiring students to conduct activities with individuals with exceptionalities their families, programs, or professionals in public schools under the supervision of a certified teacher. In each course, students complete a series of assignments applying theory to practice with an individual with a specific exceptionality, their family, or professionals in given disciplines in a program at a specific grade level and for s specified number of contact hours (ranging from 5 to 40 hours for a given course and totaling at least 125 contact hours across all courses). Students who cannot complete these assignments in their own job setting must locate schools/individuals/families and schools as needed to complete all required activities.

Schools often require formal approval of each field experience activity by the school board prior to classroom placement, so students are advised to contact the school board as soon as possible to make the necessary arrangements. Students who cannot secure an appropriate placement may be unable to complete an assignment and a lower grade for the course. Students who do not submit documentation of minimum contact hours and required activities signed by the supervising teacher may be assigned a grade of Fail for the course.

Clinical experiences. Students in all certification program options are required to complete a culminating practicum experience for a minimum of 16 weeks of full day placement in public school(s) at the end of the program to meet state and national standards. The cooperating professional provides site-based observation, feedback and evaluation, while the university supervisor provides online observation, review of products, feedback and evaluation, and the practicum team (practicum student, cooperating teacher and university supervisor) coordinate their activities with online communication.

Students currently employed in a public school engaged in direct instruction of students on IEPs in the area of specialization may complete practicum in their own work setting (on-the-job). Those not so employed must take a leave of absence from other employment and locate a placement with a master teacher in their local community that meets practicum requirements (full-time). Students must have completed all required courses and passes all required Praxis Content Tests to be eligible for practicum only during Fall and Spring semesters.

Online Delivery System

All courses are offered in Blackboard Vista Enterprise, an online learning management system with a wide array of technology formats for content presentations, learner interactions, and learning assessments. In addition, live class sessions are offered on alternate weeks using Wimba Classroom, a desktop conferencing program that permits real-time interactions between instructor and students. This enables the instructor to display presentation slides, Web sites, and desktop applications in real time and to poll the participants using yes/so, multiple choice and short answer responses, whether anonymously or not. The system allows interactions via voice or text chat; students can also engage in small group discussions or collaborative activities using break-out rooms. Instructor and learners use an inexpensive microphone or headset connected to the computer for adequate sound quality, but no other special equipment is necessary. In one course, SPED 663, the instructor uses Second Life, a 3-dimensional virtual world, for live class sessions; in this online immersive environment, students create personal avatars and interact through speech, text, gestures and movements to participate in classes and in simulation activities and role plays to practice professional communication and collaboration. Live sessions are held on alternating weeks from 5-7 pm ET; an archive is made of each session and is available immediately and throughout the course.

All practicum experiences are offered in Blackboard Vista to facilitate asynchronous interactions among practicum students, cooperating professionals, and university supervisors and also to structure activities for individualized practicum planning, personal reflective journaling, group seminar discussions, progress reporting, electronic portfolio preparation/review, performance assessment, and practicum evaluation. In addition, live conferences are conducted using Wimba Classroom to facilitate synchronous interactions by each practicum team (student, professional, supervisor) a minimum of three (3) times per practicum experience to review performance and progress and troubleshoot problems that arise. Students prepare and submit an electronic professional portfolio using Nuventive iWebfolio, an online portfolio system that allows the student to create web pages and attach multimedia files and the supervisors to review reflections and artifacts and score them using a rubric.

Summary and Implications

Project ENVISION has completed two (2) full 2-year program cycles, so initial findings are now available on learning outcomes, participant satisfaction, and program impact. To date the project has prepared 13 special educators certified in Vision Impairments with a Master's degree in Special Education; another 17 individuals are enrolled in the program and on track to complete all requirements by the end of the two-year extension during the 204-205 academic year. The majority of these individuals were living and working in West Virginia but several

were from other states, including Kentucky, Georgia and Ohio. All of them were special educators teaching students with vision impairments but working on emergency permits, and the program enabled them to become fully certified, highly qualified, and eligible for salary increments associated with a master's degree.

The advantages of online delivery of personnel preparation programs include:

*enhanced access to the program in even the most remote rural areas;
*higher enrollments and cost efficiency improve viability of low incidence programs;
*online interactions among students and with faculty promote networking and reduce feelings of isolation common to students working in low incidence and/or rural areas; and
*provision of opportunity for national and even international outreach.

The disadvantages of online delivery of personnel preparation programs include:

*some investment of time and effort is needed to learn to use new technologies;
*lower quality of the audio and video images compared with live interactions;
*technical difficulties with the desktop conferencing server or software and the users' computers; and
*the bandwidth limitations in some areas of the country or other parts of the world.

It is clear that online instruction, especially when it involves utilizing desktop conferencing and virtual reality for live interactions, represents a viable option for delivering instruction in real and/or delayed time as well as an acceptable balance between program quality and accessibility. It has proven to be especially promising as a delivery system for low incidence programs such as the WVU program in Low Vision/Blindness.

Future directions for the project include:

1. continue to enroll and complete students through 2014 during a two-year extension of the project approved by the Project Officer;

2. modify the program to offer courses in a one (1) year program cycle that will enable participants to complete all program requirements in three (3) semesters instead of six 6) semesters if they wish to complete the program at a quicker pace.

3. market the program to prospective and practicing teachers living and working outside of West Virginia to inform them of this now accessible program.

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Additional Resources

Blackboard Learning Management System: http://www.blackboard.com
Wimba Classroom: http://www.wimba.com/solutions/higher-education/wimba_classroom_for_higher_education/
Second Life: http://secondlife.com
Nuventive iWebfolio: https://www.iwebfolio.com

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SPECIAL EDUCATION ONLINE DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM FOR PARAPROFESSIONALS

Distance education has become increasingly common in postsecondary education. Many postsecondary institutions offer distance education to improve their ability to reach new audiences as well as to increase enrollments and students' access to learning. (Allen & Seaman, 2008). While many institutions offer online courses leading to certification, few universities offer a bachelor's degree program that can be completed online. A search of the Southern Regional Education Board's Electronic Campus (http://www.electroniccampus.org), which covers 16 southern states, revealed only one special education degree completion program (University of Georgia).

Increasingly, online learning is perceived as an effective method of instruction (Downing & Chim, 2004). O'Neal, Jones, Miller, Campbell & Pierce (2007) completed a study comparing web-based to traditional instruction for teaching special education content. The results of this study indicated that four critical elements are all possible within the online environment: 1) opportunities for students to reflect on their learning, 2) activities that engage all learners in discussions, 3) attention to the application of best practices in the classroom, and 4) assessment of learner outcomes. Caywood & Duckett (2003) reported no significant differences in student learning between an online and a traditional con-campus course on behavior management. More recently, McDonnell, Jameson, Riesen, Polychronis, Crockett & Brown (2011) reported no significant differences between students in distance education and on-campus cohorts of a teacher education program in severe disabilities on measures that assessed acquisition of content and ability to apply knowledge and skills acquired. Many colleges and universities now offer online courses and programs in order to increase their enrollments and increase revenue by reaching beyond their traditional service areas (Ludlow, 2006). Because of the rapid growth of private, for-profit online programs, it has become a highly competitive environment. However, there is some evidence that students prefer online programs delivered by traditional universities (Lorenzo, 2000).

Program Overview

The purpose of this paper is to describe an innovative online program that allows paraprofessionals working in public schools that complete two years at a community college to

seamlessly transfer to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree with EC-12 special education teacher certification. Students receive the same degree and certification as they would receive as traditional students on the campus. Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) is a regional public university located in Nacogdoches, Texas. The university serves a largely residential population of about 13,000 students, with approximately one-third of students from the Houston area, one-third from the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, and one-third from the Deep East Texas area.

Students in the Online Special Education Degree Completion Program come from 33 counties in the State of Texas. These are individuals who would typically not be able to complete a bachelor's degree in a traditional manner since most cannot commute to a four-year university due to work, distance, and/or family circumstances. Most are non-traditional age college students, have families of their own, and are active in their communities. Many live and work in rural areas and welcome the opportunity to complete a degree and earn a teaching certificate while remaining in the schools and classrooms where they work. The program began on a small scale in the fall of 2010 and the first degrees were awarded in the spring of 2012.

Course content is presented primarily in an asynchronous format using Desire2Learn (D2L) for creation, delivery and management of courses. Learning modules incorporate text, images, video clips, case studies and links to websites. Students are required to purchase and read textbooks aligned with course content and access additional readings through the SFA library's distance education support program. Student-to-content, student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions are included in each course. Students are assigned to discussion groups of 4-6 students and engage in asynchronous discussions but also have use of the synchronous D2L Chat tool. In some courses students record their introductions, reactions, reflections and responses using Screencast-O-Matic, a free online screen recorder. Students demonstrate mastery of the content through online quizzes, exams, and projects linked to the College of Education's performance assessment system. Synchronous communication is accomplished by means of a webconferencing tool, Collaborate, which is embedded within the D2L learning management system. Using Collaborate, the instructor can interact with up to 6 individuals using audio, video, desktop sharing, and instant messaging. Faculty members teaching in the program go through a rigorous training program provided by SFA's Office of Instructional Technology (OIT) to become certified online instructors. Support for online students is provided by SFA's Office of Instructional Technology in the form of free software downloads, text and video tutorials, and assistance by telephone or email.

Online degree completers are required to come to campus once each semester for a two to three day campus visit during which they meet one another in person, interact with faculty, learn about policies and procedures related to completion of the degree and certification, complete practice exams to receive feedback in preparation for the EC-12 Special Education certification exam (TExES), and take mastery exams in order to receive clearance to sit for the state certification exam.

Successes

Perhaps the greatest success of the program is that paraprofessionals who are limited by work schedule or geographic location have access to higher education that prepares them for a career as a certified special educator. Related to this, these students are succeeding, which we believe is at least partly due to what has been described by Ludlow and Duff (2006) as improved quality of instruction, more individualized assignments and learning activities, as well as increased student responsibility for their own learning.

Online degree completers are the recipients of financial benefits. Tuition for online degree completers is computed without some of the fees required by traditional campus students such as the Recreation Center and Student fees. SFA provides a Community College Transfer Scholarship that offers students transferring from community college with a minimum of 45 transferable semester hours $1000 for the year if the transferable GPA is 3.0-3.49; $2000 for the year if the transferable GPA is 3.5-4.0. This helps in recruitment of high quality community college students. Transfer scholarships may be renewed for a second year to students who earn a minimum of 24 semester hours of academic credit for $1000 if the GPA is 3.25-3.49, and $2000 if the GPA is 3.5-4.0, which encourages students to strive for academic excellence. In addition, many of our online degree completers qualify for the federal TEACH Grant which pays up to $4,000 per year (aggregate limit $16,000 total) for students being prepared to teach in a high-needs areas such as special education.

Challenges

Some background is required here. For many years Texas allowed paraprofessionals with at least two years of experience in an accredited public school to waive the requirement for student teaching. A few years ago, the State Board for Educator Certification added a new requirement - paraprofessionals were must have been recipients of the Texas Educational Aide Exemption in order to waive student teaching. The first 14 graduates of the online program were exempted from student teaching because they had received the Texas Educational Aide Exemption. However, this program was discontinued in August 2011 and therefore, most online students are now required to student teach. This presents a problem to the faculty because our online degree completers live in communities that are beyond the area in which our University supervises student teachers. It also presents a major hardship to the online student population because they have to stop working for 13 weeks of full-time observation and teaching, and because many students carry health insurance for their families through their employment. The ideal but elusive solution would be to allow the online degree completers to continue working in their schools while fulfilling the student teaching requirement for teacher certification.

The biggest challenge that we currently face is supervising student teachers all in 33 counties of the state in a time- and cost-efficient manner. As Rock, Gregg, Gable, Zigmond, Blanks, Howard, and Bullock (2012) have noted, use of distance education technologies has become common but using technology to observe classrooms is less common. Naffzinger & Sebastian (2011) have described the use of an internet-connected remote viewing and communication system for observing and assessing teacher candidates that is operated through the IRIS Connect Company. Koch, Cepello, & Porter (2011) reported using a webcam with

microphone and Skype for remote supervision of in rural settings. Hager, Baird & Spriggs (2012) developed a system for remote observation of student teachers using Remote Observation Kits (ROKs) that included Microsoft Office Communicator, a camera, microphone, and headset. Interestingly, Hager et al.(2012) reported that the use of a system for remote teacher actually improved the supervision and feedback that student teachers at a distance receive.

While our University has encouraged and supported online course delivery and online degree completion programs, the College of Education has not enthusiastically embraced the concept of remote supervision of student teachers. However, one of our faculty members has piloted remote supervision of student teachers in the deaf and hard of hearing program during the past year in order to conduct required observations in a more efficient manner than on-site visits to school that are distant from the campus.

Web conferencing in the pilot project is conducted through the D2L course management system's Collaborate tool and a Logitech orbital webcam, or using Apple FaceTime in conjunction with iPad and iPhone. Since many schools have provided teachers with iPads, use of FaceTime is preferred because of better audio and video quality as well as portability of the camera. The greatest technology issue that has occurred during the pilot has been identifying the appropriate school district technology staff member, but once this is accomplished firewall issues are easily addressed. Likewise, obtaining permission for capturing students on video has been relatively easy to achieve. Some school districts have blanket video releases signed by parents while others require special permission, which is typically granted once it is known that sessions are for educational purposes.

Next Steps

As a key component of the online degree completion program, forward progress is needed in the implementation of remote supervision in classrooms on campuses where online degree completers are already employed. It would be ideal if these dedicated students could meet the requirements of student teaching while employed so as to avoid financial hardship on their families. More progress is needed in the use of mobile learning or m-learning (Ludlow, 2006) using mobile devices such as smartphones, iPads, and the like in the area of online instruction, observation and supervision. As teacher educators, we can share ideas and work together to achieve these goals.

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EFFECTIVE EVALUATION FOR RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

Introduction

Parents, practitioners, and policymakers agree that one of the most promising elements in improving public education is the presence of a highly skilled and effective teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Goldhaber, 2002). However, confusion and controversy abound regarding the best way to evaluate teacher effectiveness (Crowe, 2010; Danielson, 2007; Tucker & Stronge, 2005). With the prospect of receiving Race to the Top funding, several states began to scrutinize their current evaluation systems and propose alternate systems (e.g. Delaware, Tennessee, District of Columbia) many of which include heavily-debated measures such as linking student test scores to teacher ratings, merit pay, as well as value-added methods. Likewise, as full implementation of the Common Core Standards takes effect and the final touches are put on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, all schools will likely find it necessary to revise and improve their evaluation systems which are utilized to retain, reward, and reject America's educators.

While the public often touts the idea of "proof" in rating teacher effectiveness (Hart and Teeter, 2002), the process is not as simplistic as it might seem especially for educators who provide instruction outside the core content areas, those who share the responsibility for a classroom of students (co-taught settings), those in roles that are varied, and those who serve students who might be considered anything but "typical" learners (Holdheide, Goe, Croft, & Reschley, 2010). For example, in Illinois, special educators enter the field with a Learning Behavior Specialist I certificate which enables them to provide instruction to students with a variety of educational and behavioral needs across severity levels and ages. Furthermore, the provision of services may range from working with students in inclusive settings (i.e. supporting skill acquisition and adapting core content) to providing on the job training and support for young adults learning life and job skills. Interestingly, oftentimes the same evaluation process and instrument(s) that are used for other teachers in the district comprise that which is utilized for special educators. Perhaps even more intriguing is the idea that building administrators, most of whom have had little to no education or training in the field of special education, are the people the school (and thus the public) often rely on to provide quality feedback (Feeney, 2007) and make important decisions related to the quality of teachers' job performance.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to gain insight into how special educators are evaluated by their respective districts and administrators in rural Illinois schools and to examine the perceived value of specific measures as well as the feedback received as a result of the evaluation process. Furthermore, the researcher sought to explore alternative propositions that

would provide true formative feedback for teachers seeking to improve their craft and increase student achievement.

Procedures

Special educators served by three Regional Offices of Education in rural central Illinois were invited to participate in a survey devised to gather practitioners' opinions of the teacher evaluation process. One hundred and eighty nine people responded to the survey with 167 completing the entire 30-item questionnaire. Of those who responded, 84.7% were certified in special education and many held additional credentials such as general education, early childhood education, or administrative certificates/endorsements. Across respondents, all age and grade levels were served as were all disability categories, with students who had a Learning Disability (LD) label being most frequently served (87.2% of respondents reported serving this population). Years of teaching experience varied across respondents with more than one-third (68.1%) having taught at least nine years in the field of special education. Participants were largely female (93.5%) with less than half (46.5%) holding a degree above a bachelor's degree and nearly all respondents (94.1%) had been evaluated in their current schools/positions.

Results

In terms of the evaluation process, the majority of respondents worked in districts where tenured teachers were required to be evaluated once every two years (81.8%), while non-tenured teachers were evaluated two or more times each year (78.6%). Furthermore, respondents most frequently reported that the School Board and/or the Teachers' Union and school/district administrators were responsible for determining the evaluation process or that they were unsure how the process was actually decided upon. Special educators' involvement in this task seemed less than optimal with only 17.7% of those responding indicating that special educators played a part in determining the evaluation process in their respective districts.

Those responding did not feel that special educators should be evaluated using the same procedures or criteria as are utilized for other teachers in the building/district with 61% replying "no"; whereas 20.1% feel that "it depends" on numerous factors such as: position, role, responsibilities and whether or not the teacher provides instruction based on the same standards/curriculum as other teachers within the building.

The majority of respondents reported being evaluated by the building principal (69.4%). More than half of respondents (53.5%) were unsure whether or not their evaluator had received specialized training related to teacher evaluation and only 38.2% believed that their evaluator had coursework/training or experience (35.3%) in special education.

When asked to rate the perceived benefit of specific measures/processes related to the evaluation of special educators, respondents considered the following "quite" or "extremely" beneficial: post-observation meetings with the evaluator (79.9%), multiple measures (73.2%), unplanned observations (68.9%), observations across class periods or groups of students (68.3%), and frequent classroom walk-throughs (67.1%). Conversely, the following were perceived as least beneficial with the percentage of respondents who rated the item as only

"somewhat" to "not at all" beneficial represented in parentheses following the measure/process: an analysis of students' standardized test scores (87.7%), value-added measures (86.6%), teacher portfolios (79.9%), growth models (72.6%), and a critique of one's own lesson plan (69.5%). Rapport/relationships with students and families as well as evidence of student progress were included in participants' open-ended responses as additional facets of a special educator's job that should be taken into consideration when evaluating overall performance.

In examining effectiveness and feedback, 98.2% of those responding felt they were "quite" or "extremely" effective at their jobs ($\bar{x}$=4.35). Furthermore, they perceived their colleagues were nearly as effective: special education colleagues ($\bar{x}$=4.07), general education colleagues ($\bar{x}$=4.14), and teachers overall in their respective districts or schools ($\bar{x}$=4.04). Unfortunately the teacher evaluation process ($\bar{x}$=3.0) did not seem to be considered nearly as effective as the teachers' performance. However, special educators reported having confidence in their administrator's job performance ($\bar{x}$= 3.79) and for the most part considered them capable of effective evaluation ($\bar{x}$= 3.47).

Administrator feedback was considered "somewhat" to "quite" helpful/useful ($\bar{x}$= 3.35) to the special educators who responded although they did not perceive that their colleagues valued the feedback to the same extent ($\bar{x}$=3.14). Over eighty five percent of respondents felt as if the feedback received would motivate them to improve their teaching or management; however only about 21% of respondents reported receiving any feedback that was negative or constructive as opposed to the 79% that received only positive comments.

Discussion

Overall, special educators expressed high levels of confidence in their own performance and related to the competence of those evaluating that performance. On the contrary, most were adamantly opposed to a standardized approach to evaluation describing various reasons why it may be less than ideal and possibly even inappropriate. One teacher summarized the thoughts of many when provided the opportunity to share any additional comments at the conclusion of the survey: "one-size-fits-all education programs do NOT adequately educate our special needs students. One-size-fits-all evaluation methods and standards will NOT adequately evaluate the teachers of these students".

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PREPARING FUTURE EDUCATORS WITH THE STRATEGIES AND TOOLS TO ENGAGE IN THE LEARNING PROCESS IN COLLEGE

At our institute of higher education as with other higher education institutions, the reading and writing skills of incoming freshmen is a concern (Reeves, 2010). To address the concerns that were observed as well as that were shared by colleagues, we decided to take action and create a program that would prepare incoming freshmen with the reading and writing skills they would need to be successful in their college courses. In addition to teaching college readiness skills, the program was also designed to create a support system to address student retention (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; NSSE, 2011). This paper will explain the details of the program we created based on our experience, knowledge, and research as well as the themes from students' work from the first half of the program. To begin, the literature on the topics of college readiness, reading, writing, and resources and learning strategies will be reviewed. Next, the program will be overviewed in detail followed by the themes that emerged from three assignments the students completed during the fall semester course. Finally, the paper will end with a discussion of next steps.

Review of the Literature

College Readiness

In higher education institutions across the country, the academic readiness of incoming classes of college students has become a serious cause for concern for their teachers. There are significant numbers of students entering college, in recent years, without the solid foundation in reading and writing skills needed to meet the demands of the college classroom (Reeves, 2010).

In the field of education, students are expected to come to college with the reading and writing skills needed to successfully complete their program of study, but to also enter the profession upon graduation with the ability to teach the next generation these skills. Frequently, those students who are identified for remediation receive tutoring at the institutions writing center—very few, if any, receive additional support with reading at the college level (Kirby, 2007). Research has shown that there is often a notable correlation between writing and reading that is typically under-addressed at the post-secondary level (Rachal, Daigle, and Rachal, 2007).

Reading

According to a recent study by McGonnell, Parrila, and Deacon (2007), reading research focused on college and university students has been relatively underexplored. Unlike the elementary and middle school classroom, the college classroom is commonly not a place where

students read aloud in class in relation to the volume of out-of-class reading that is often required to succeed in course. Therefore, any weaknesses in students' reading ability often go undetected by their course instructors and may manifest in low engagement and poor performance. Struggling readers are not achieving at high levels and are not leaving these college and university classes with a deep understanding of course content (Nist & Simpson, 2000; Kuh, 2001; Mol & Bus, 2011). A low-achieving performance cycle that could potentially lead to students dropping out of their programs of study or taking longer than the anticipated time of four years to graduate. One of the major challenges in supporting this population of students is they often opt out of self-reporting any early reading difficulties they may have since childhood (Deacon et al., 2006; Birch & Chase, 2004, Grant, Wilson, & Gottardo, 2007).

Writing

At the college or university level, students' weaknesses in the area of writing are more readily detected, given the vast number of assignments that require written response on the part of the students. However, if students are not given adequate feedback, then they will continue to make the same writing errors throughout their college education (Gambell, 1984). It is not surprising that poor writers generally receive poor grades within and across the courses they take. Today, many college instructors believe that referring their struggling students to the campus writing center is often the only available option, at the college level, to help students with improving their writing skills. Professors may accept poor writing skills because of the time it takes to address them or because of a lack of training in writing instruction, and most often because they have a considerable amount of content to cover in a particular course that they believe prohibits addressing issues with writing (Boice, 1990; Goddard, 2002).

Fallahi's et al., (2006) study supports the teaching of writing skills in content courses to improve students' writing and suggest that it is worth the time the professor would spend in class in order to positively impact student achievement. The researchers examined the effects writing instruction delivered in the class via practice time, peer review, and feedback had on improving undergraduate students writing skills. They discovered that over the course of the semester students showed a significant improvement in four areas: 1) grammar, 2) writing style, 3) mechanics, and 4) APA referencing style. According to Goddard (2002) promoting writing across the curriculum encourages all teachers to focus on both basic and technical writing skills. Studies have shown that undergraduate students do not become excellent writers over night—they need continued practice and feedback to incorporate what they have learned and continue to improve (McGovern & Hogshead, 1990; Finken & Cooney, 2003).

Resources and Learning Strategies

In an effort to support students during college and provide them with the reading and writing skills they will need post graduation, educational institutions must address the type and quality of resources that are available to their students. Historically, most of these resources are outside of the classroom where content is delivered. It appears that providing direct support in reading and writing as part of course content will help both parties reach their goals. The National Survey of Student Engagement's 2011 annual results had a section on learning strategies. In this section, it reviewed what strategies students are and are not using. In summary, they recommend that institutions identify ways to instruct students on how to use an array of learning strategies and techniques as well as how to use specifically strategies that may

require more effort or directions, like creating outlines or developing their own examples (NSSE, 2011). A study by Rachal, Daigle, and Rachal's (2007) examined student academic classification (freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior) and their reporting of increased levels of cognitive engagement, or regular use of effective learning strategies, as they matriculate through their respective program. Research findings suggest that engaging students early on in research-based learning strategies and activities as they enter college helps to promote better writing, reading, peer engagement, and use of informational technology (Allsopp, Minskoff, & Bolt, 2005; NSSE, 2011; Weinstein, Husman, & Dierking, 2000). The institutions will not lose students due to weak literacy skills and the students will develop a storage house of learning strategies that will help them not only excel in college but in life, as well.

In addition to addressing academic skills, institutions need to think about the issue of student retention. Kuh et al. (2006) published a review of the literature on student success in college and in it they addressed the connection with faculty-student contact and peer interactions as well as addressed first-generation students. These factors are important elements that connect to our program design and student population. When educational institutions intervene in such an intentional manner, students will play a substantially more active role in their own academic development and achievement (Grant, Wilson, & Gottardo, 2007; Harrison & Berres, 2007; Elton, 2010, Taraban, Kerr, & Rynearson, 2004). This pilot study will address a concern raised in the literature and in a recent study by McGonnell, Parrila, and Deacon (2007) on how reading research focused on college and university students has been relatively underexplored.

Overview of the Reading/Writing Program

This project was created when we decided to take action concerning the reading and writing skills of incoming freshmen. We observed in our classes and we heard colleagues complaining about the reading and writing skills that our students majoring in education demonstrated. We wanted to create a program that prepared freshmen for the reading and writing skills they need to be successful in college. We designed a year-long program based on the research, our knowledge of teaching, and the programs and courses offered at our institution. A flyer was created and emailed to incoming freshmen interested in majoring in education asking if they would be interested in participating in this opportunity. We had 40 incoming freshmen volunteer and we cut the list down to 25. The program consisted of the freshmen taking both the Educational Reading and Writing Course in the fall and the Integrated Thinking and Writing (ITW) course in the spring with both of us as the instructors. This cohort model addressed both the areas of teaching college readiness skills and retention through building relationships with peers and faculty members.

The Educational Reading and Writing course taught students reading/writing knowledge and strategies to help them improve their learning outcomes in classes and to be successful in the education program. The course addressed decoding, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing strategies and skills to give them the tools they need to become active readers and participants as well as engage in the learning process. In addition, the class exposed students to the various text structures they encounter in their college classes and the resources available to them on campus (e.g., writing center, math center, ASPIRE, and the library). The course will connect with EDUC 100, a required course as an education major. This created an opportunity

to connect what they were learning with some of the readings, assignments, and topics they were doing in EDUC 100. Students were also given assignments that connected the strategies they learned with other college classes they were taking to generalize their learning as well as give them multiple experiences to practice. The last several classes focused on writing skills to prepare the students for the ITW course.

The Integrated Thinking and Writing course (ITW) is a required course for all students and it is generally taken during their first year. Our proposal was accepted to teach a section of the ITW course to our cohort. The focus of the course is to allow the students to explore and to examine No Child Left Behind through readings, discussions, and research. The students research educational topics of interest connected to No Child Left Behind and with support and guidance through the writing process, they create a 15 to 20-page paper. The students will also engage in learning about taking research notes, APA citations, outlining, paraphrasing, introductions/conclusions, editing, revising, transitions, and flow. Not only will they leave with the experience of working though the writing process to create a research paper, but they will also learn about educational law and begin the process of critically thinking about educational topics.

Program Themes

Through the course of Educational Reading and Writing, we collected several work samples, got feedback on writing skills from the Writing Center, and had students complete a mid-evaluation. We analyzed several documents for themes on what students know, what they want to learn, and what are they learning that they find beneficial. All these elements are important for program improvements. This next section will review the themes that emerged from the Educational Reading and Writing Course.

Autobiography

The first paper the students submitted was an autobiography of their experience with reading and writing in school. The themes are broken down into the three branches of school: elementary, middle, and high school. In elementary school, Students reported having fond memories of their reading and writing experiences in early elementary school. Several reported being more engaged in school in general and enjoying learning new things in school. Many felt that their teachers liked and cared for them. They were allowed and encouraged to be creative with their work. Others felt that they struggled with reading comprehension and writing early on. Some remember reading a great deal of books and some don't really remember reading as much as they remember school being more "hands on."
Some reported how their teachers made learning fun in general across subject areas. They also reported how their families were more involved in supporting them. In elementary school learning to read and write was enjoyable, but as students progressed writing became more of any area of concern for them and their teachers.

For some students the transition to middle school was seamless. They reported having positive relationships with their teachers. Others reported concerns with specific teachers and curriculum. Students reported that writing began to take more precedence over reading towards the end of middle school. They reported encountering problems with both reading and writing

when it became "required" during this period. Some students reported that middle school is when they began to receive additional support with reading and writing in school, while other mentioned being unaware that they were actually a bit behind in both areas. Several remember one or two specific teachers who made writing an enjoyable experience by using creative activities. By middle school expectations changed and it became about quantity over quality when it came to the number of books they read. It also became more about writing for the assignment as opposed to learning how to convey their thoughts and understanding creatively.

In high school, many students reported that they had difficulties transition to high school due to academic challenges. Some attributed the challenges to personal issues that occurred outside of the school context and problematic teachers. Several students reported teachers who didn't seem to be invested in teaching them the skills they needed. Some reported having teachers who were uninspired and uninspiring. Many students reported being overwhelmed with the number of books they were expected to read. As a result reading was not seen as enjoyable and they did their best to avoid having to do it. Several students reported having remediation or additional tutoring in order to improve their reading and writing skills. With the focus more on vocabulary building and technical writing for research papers. By high school students either had or received support in school and some were turned off to reading and writing. The students did understand the importance of reading and writing well for future success in college.

Writing Center

The students visited the Writing Center on campus for a paper they were working on for Foundations in Education to get experience using resources on campus. The writing support team sent emails to the instructors to review what they worked on during the session and what students struggled to understand. From the feedback, five topics emerged. First, students worked on brainstorming and outlining. Some had questions about how to get started or how to organize ideas and create flow to the paper. Second, students asked for help with writing style and organization, focusing on expanding ideas and transitions. Third, students wanted to know how to use APA formatting with in-text citations and reference pages. Fourth, students did not know what was expected in the introduction and conclusion paragraphs. Fifth, students asked for help with sentence structure and grammar, specifically grammatical errors, wordiness, paraphrasing, and editing.
We are addressing these topics in the writing course presently.

Mid-Evaluations

The students completed a mid-evaluation so we could determine what was working, what we needed to change, and what students wanted to learn. When asked what they thought was beneficial about the course, they replied that they liked the preparation, the support, the strategies taught (note-taking, textbook reading guide, graphic organizers, post-it strategy, evaluating websites, and managing time), the connection to on-campus resources, the opportunities to practice, and the connection to Foundations in Education. Some students wanted to add the topics of public speaking, presentation, and writing, all topics covered after the evaluations, as well as test taking strategies and time management, topics covered by a resource center on campus. Other students stated that they would change nothing, while some thought 8 am classes were too early and some wanted more class meetings. The students thought learning the following strategies was useful in their college courses: textbook reading guide, note-taking

strategies, post-it notes strategies, highlighting, underlining key points of a paragraph, graphic organizers, how to read a textbook, study skills, summarizing, planning ahead for assignments, visiting and using the writing center, and reading strategies. When asked what topics of concerns they have when it comes to writing, the students listed numerous concerns. Some of their concerns were introductions, conclusions, transitions, organizing, outlining, APA formatting, grammatical error, spelling, writing style, paraphrasing, length of paper, supporting research, having a clear message, and writing longer papers. All of these topics are being covered in the ITW course. This evaluation not only demonstrates common themes of the semester around writing, but was also used to make sure we covered all the topics of concern to enhance the ITW experience.

Conclusion

So as the program continue to unfold, we used this opportunity to reflect on what has occurred and where we want to go next. The first year of this program, we focused on program design based on research, experience, work samples, and feedback from students. After the completion of the ITW course, we will analyze their work samples and use their feedback to plan improvements for next year's program. In addition, we would like to take the program to the next level by implementing data collection on the students, not just the program. This will provide another dimension to the evaluation of the program's effectiveness for preparing freshmen with the reading and writing skills to be successful in all their college courses.

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