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DUAL LICENSURE GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO PREPARE TEACHERS IN THE RURAL MIDWEST

Nicole Lambright and Jessica Grubaugh

¹²Mount Vernon Nazarene University

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ABSTRACT

General education and special education teachers are by and large prepared in separate programs despite the need for all teachers to be able to effectively teach all students. The current demand for special education teachers, especially in rural districts, has meant that general education teachers have been pressed into service in the area of special education despite their lack of preparation to do so. Dual licensure programs provide preservice teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet all of their students' needs across all environments within a school. This study examined the level of preparation of middle and high school teachers in the rural midwest to meet the needs of special education students in the general education classroom. Findings indicate that general education preparation alone is insufficient to prepare teachers to meet the needs of all students.

KEYWORDS:- Teachers Preparation, Dual Licensure, General Education, Special Education, Rural Education.

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Introduction

Teacher preparation programs are designed to prepare future educators to enter classrooms with the competencies and confidence required to successfully guide their students through the educational system. Prior to 2001 preservice teacher education focused on preparing candidates for content-area study, with coursework and field experiences tailored to a specific subject or grade band (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). This method has been criticized as ineffective for years (Anderson et al., 2019), especially once the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation took effect in 2001. This act emphasized academic achievement for students with disabilities (SWD). This legislation led to changes in how school districts approached the provision of special education services (Blanton et al., 2018), with the emphasis now on inclusive practice. The practice of inclusion requires the placement of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for success, which is often determined to be the general education classroom. This inclusive placement has been

correlated to higher test scores and increased graduation rates for SWD (Kirksey & Lloydhauser, 2022).

A comparison the Initial K-12 Standards from the Council for Exceptional Children (CED) (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020) and the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Model Core Teaching Standards and Learning Progressions for Teachers 1.0 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013) reveal a significant amount of overlap in the preparation standards for general and special education teachers. Both groups of teachers are expected to master skills in the following areas: professional learning and ethics; learner development and individual learning needs; use of assessment to drive instruction based on student progress; support of social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students; development of learning environments to meet learner needs; and collaboration among professionals (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013). The primary difference between the sets of standards is the inclusion of specialized curricular knowledge and support of learning with effective practices in the CEC standards (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020). Bolourain et al. (2022) found that the factor that most impacts the success of an inclusive general education classroom is the general education teachers' beliefs about SWD and their receptiveness to hosting an inclusive classroom.

For students with disabilities, the provision of services as outlined on the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is the biggest factor that allows the student to access the general education curriculum and to make academic progress in the class (Olson et al., 2016). As Jitendra et al. (2002) reported, scaffolding instruction and provision of supplemental instruction are the key to organizing material for students and supporting students' lack of prior knowledge that may inhibit new learning. This process of adapting instruction to meet student needs is part of specially designed instruction (SDI), which is defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2006 as:

Adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction (i) to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; and (ii) to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children (34 C.F.R. § 300.39 [b] [3]).

SDI is required for all students with an IEP, and this special instruction must be delivered in the setting in which the student receives instruction (Clausen et al., 2023).

General education teachers are also responsible for providing a safe learning environment and creating behavior management systems that enable students to learn (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013). Many general education teachers are uncomfortable and unprepared for managing significant behavioral needs in the general education classroom, which often leads to special education teachers taking over responsibility for managing behavior in a co-taught setting (Bolourain et al., 2022; Clausen et al., 2023).

Background

The current approaches to inclusion have focused on providing as much instruction as possible in the general education classroom with primary instruction provided by the general education teacher (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). While special education teachers are often considered intervention experts due to their specialized training and are expected to make curricular and assignment modifications, special education teachers are not required to accompany special education students into the general education classroom (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). The assigned teacher, regardless of

grade level or content area, is now responsible for providing the services listed on the IEP for all SWD in the general education classroom (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). General education teachers must therefore provide for the needs of all students, from those with significant learning and behavioral needs to those identified as gifted (Bolourain et al., 2022).

Special education teachers working with students with significant needs are typically tasked with working with multiple students across grade levels, therefore the special education teacher is not available to attend general education courses with all students and a paraprofessional may be sent with students instead (Petersen, 2016). This has led to negative outcomes, including stigma and reduced expectations for SWD and reduced academic outcomes for students without disabilities (Kirksey & Lloydhauser, 2022). These negative outcomes are often the result of inadequate teacher preparation for instructing SWD. Traditional teacher preparation models fail to provide general education teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the diverse needs and strengths of students they will be tasked with teaching (Olson et al., 2016). Even as modern teacher preparation models evolve, post-secondary institutions must focus on explicitly preparing all teacher candidates to appropriately adjust their instructional methods and approaches to meet a wide range of student needs (Anderson et al., 2019).

General education teachers have reported a lack of knowledge and skills related to the inclusion of students with significant learning needs in the general education classroom, especially when student behavior presents a significant or unique challenge to maintaining discipline during instruction (Clausen et al., 2023) or when modifications need to be made (Olson et al., 2016). SDI is a hallmark of an IEP, as SDI outlines the changes to instructional methods, content, and delivery that are required to meet a student's needs as a result of a disability (Riccomini et al., 2017). As general education teachers may not have a special education teacher available to co-teach or provide direct support for all lessons, general education teachers must be prepared to provide the SDI on a student's IEP as well as the accommodations, modifications, and other services that are outlined on each student's IEP (Clausen et al., 2023). Many teachers use personally made materials (graphic organizers, study guides, guided notes, etc), which may be part of the SDI or accommodations listed on the IEP, general education teachers must be prepared to create and modify these materials in a manner that makes them accessible to all students (Rotter, 2004).

As Blanton et al. (2017) discuss, teacher licensure programs are predominantly stand-alone licenses, meaning teacher candidates are prepared to either teach in a general education context or to teach SWD with no or little overlap across domains. Intervention specialist licensure, which prepares teachers to specialize in teaching SWD, typically covers grades K-12 in most American states. Each licensure band covers such a wide range of child developmental stages and curricular needs that it calls into question the efficacy of a teacher preparation program to fully prepare all candidates to provide for the full range of needs of general education students and SWD across all grade bands, especially given the demands related to providing IEP services that are now placed upon both general and special education teachers.

Rationale for Dual Licensure

The increased numbers of SWD being educated in the general education classroom continues to rise. In most cases the general education teacher is the teacher of record for all students, though nearly 80% of these teachers report that it is challenging for them to adequately meet the needs of SWD (Blanton et al., 2017). The national attrition rate for special education teachers was over 17% in 2019, which has led to a shortage of specially trained teachers for SWD (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Due to this shortage of qualified special education teachers, districts are forced to hire under qualified teachers or to place general education teachers in special education roles. The shortage of

qualified special education teachers is particularly high for districts with high poverty and those in rural areas.

Kaczorowski and Kline (2021) found that teachers specifically trained in special education practices felt more confident in both teaching academics and social skills than did general education peers and reported higher use of strategies such as individualizing instruction, making curricular adaptations, more proficiency in collaboration, and increased success with decision-making related to SWD as compared to teachers trained solely for general education instruction. As general and special education have long been considered two separate entities, with differing approaches to education and unique focuses during instruction, deep and meaningful collaboration across the domains is necessary for inclusion to be successful (Ruben et al., 2016). Teacher preparation programs that do not address both general and special education needs as a cohesive approach to teacher education create a missed opportunity to fully prepare teachers to meet the needs of all of the students they will teach (Blanton et al., 2018).

As of 2020 approximately 60% of SWD spent a minimum of 80% of their day in a general education setting, which further necessitates the need for teachers to be prepared in both general and special education areas (Kroeger et al., 2019). The traditional preparation of general educators that focuses on content area knowledge and special educators focused on knowledge of meeting specific student needs is no longer sufficient to adequately prepare teachers. Dual licensure has been linked to positive outcomes for both students and teachers (Kirksey & Lloydhauser, 2020). Teachers who were prepared in dual licensure programs reported more positive responses to their coursework and field placements than general education stand-alone programs and reported more opportunities to collaborate and integrate academic and social domains (Kaczorowski & Kline, 2021). Dual licensure programs that specifically taught co-teaching strategies and provided candidates with co-teaching options led to more successful inclusion experiences of teachers, improved relationships between student teachers and cooperating teachers, and improved outlooks for the future of teaching on the part of cooperating teachers (Ruben et al., 2016).

Most dual licensure programs focus on elementary grade level classrooms, though research on inclusive practice in middle schools and high schools indicates a need for general education teachers at these levels to have additional training in special education as well. Walsh (2018) found overall willingness for middle school general educators to include students with special needs in their classrooms but increased levels of teacher anxiety with regard to knowing the best strategies for teaching special education students. After training was provided to the teachers in this study, teachers reported a need to restructure both their classroom setup and their instructional practices to best meet the needs of all students. In another study of middle school general education science teachers, Phelan (2018) reported that 90% of general education teachers had either no or insufficient training to include special needs students in the general education classroom, resulting in learning through trial and error, which led to negative outcomes for students. Problems also arise when high school level general education teachers are unprepared to meet the needs of students in special education. According to Chitiyo and Brinda (2018) teachers who are unprepared in special education will develop their own strategies and accommodations for students that are not based in evidence-based practice or philosophies of effective inclusion, which results in lack of student academic and social progress, increased bias against special education students, and decreased participation in inclusive practice in general.

Dual Licensure in a Rural Context

Dual licensure is particularly important in rural settings where teacher shortages are especially difficult to remediate. As Diamond et al. (2020) reiterate, hiring trained and effective educators in rural contexts is always difficult across all subject areas, with special education being particularly difficult to staff. In this study principals favored hiring candidates who held multiple licenses, especially those with dual general and special education licenses. Teachers in rural areas were also found to prefer accommodations for special education students that did not interfere with daily teaching procedures, do not require much time to implement, and separate students who are below grade level from their grade level peers (Bryant et al., 2017). These preferences do not align with best practices for special education; however, so equipping rural teachers with dual licensure would help to remediate both teacher shortages and implementation of ineffective teaching practices.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a rural area of the midwest based on the responses of alumni from a small, private university. The researcher of this study sought input from recent graduates who are working in rural school districts regarding their perceptions of their preparedness for addressing issues related to special education. The following research question was developed for the study:

RQ1: What is the unique ability of perceived level of preparedness of general education teachers to provide accommodations for IEP students in the general education classroom to predict perceived level of preparedness of general education teachers to complete other special education-related tasks (make assignment modifications, make curricular modifications, participate in writing IEPs, participate in IEP meetings, progress monitor IEP goals, and manage the behavior of students with identified special needs)?

Methods

An online survey was sent to all graduates of middle and secondary level general education teacher preparation programs from a university in the rural midwest. Participants were asked to complete a 10 question survey with two qualifying questions, seven Likert-style questions, and one optional short answer question.

Measures

The survey was developed by the researchers of the study to ascertain the perceptions of recent graduates about their preparedness to teach special education students in the general education classroom. The first two questions on the survey were qualifying questions (Are you currently teaching in a K-12 classroom? Have you taught a student with disabilities at any point during your teaching career?). Data for participants who answered “yes” to both questions was included in the study.

Data was collected using an online survey with Likert-style responses based on the following scale: 1 - very unprepared; 2 - somewhat unprepared; 3 - neutral; 4 - somewhat prepared; 5 - very prepared. These questions asked participants to rate how well they felt they were prepared to do the following in regard to students with IEPs in the general education classroom: make curricular modifications, modify individual assignments, participate in writing an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), participate in IEP meetings, provide accommodations listed on the IEP in the general education classroom, manage the behavior of students in the general education classroom, and provide progress monitoring data. Questions about modifying curriculum and individual assignments were included because general education teachers do not always have a special education teacher in the classroom with them and general education teachers are often tasked with making the modifications required on a student’s IEP as part of their lesson planning process.

Likewise, general education teachers are responsible for providing IEP accommodations whether or not a special education teacher is present in the classroom, so questions were asked about how well general education teachers were prepared to provide accommodations. General education teachers are required to attend and participate in IEP meetings, and feedback to the university from previous graduates indicated that early career general education teachers often felt underprepared to participate in the IEP process. Progress monitoring and managing behavior were also areas of concern for some general education preservice teacher candidates at the university, so these questions were included to determine whether in-service teachers felt they had been adequately prepared to meet these needs in their classrooms.

In addition to the quantitative questions, an optional open-response question “Is there any additional information you'd like to share regarding how you were prepared to teach special education students in the general education classroom?” was asked.

Participants

The fourteen participants who participated in this study received instruction at the university in a general education teacher preparation program. All participants graduated between 2020 to 2022. All participants are currently teaching in K-12 schools and all have taught students with disabilities in the course of their current teaching experience. No demographic data was collected in the study. While the authors acknowledge that a study of demographics may have enhanced the analysis of the data, the university itself and the sample size are both small enough that collection of demographic data may have enabled participant identities to be determined and the authors wished to keep the survey anonymous.

Data Collection

This study was conducted using a quantitative non-experimental research design to obtain descriptive data. Data was collected using an online survey with Likert-style responses and one optional short answer question. No email addresses were collected and no demographic data was obtained. Participants responded to questions related to their perceptions of their preparation for teaching special education students in a general education classroom.

A total of 14 participants completed all quantitative questions on the survey and two completed the optional short answer response to the question “Is there any additional information you'd like to share regarding how you were prepared to teach special education students in the general education classroom?”.

Data Analysis

A quantitative approach was used to garner data regarding participants' perceptions of their level of preparation to carry out various special education-related tasks in the general education classroom and a qualitative question enabled participants to report any additional areas of concern not addressed in the quantitative questions.

Quantitative Analysis

In order to validate the quantitative portion of the survey before use with participants, the researchers surveyed faculty in the Education Department to determine faculty perceptions of topics in special education for which current general education major students had not yet mastered content. These areas of concern were then translated into survey questions designed to address the common areas of concern for candidate preparation among faculty.

Data analysis was completed using regression analyses in which the predictor variable was preparedness to provide IEP accommodations in the general education classroom. Providing IEP accommodations is a legal requirement for all general education teachers who teach students with IEPs, which led the researchers to determine that, of the areas of special education measured in this study, preparation to provide accommodations was the most foundational skill present. Descriptive statistics were also examined to compare mean responses for each question.

RQ 1 was analyzed using multiple regression. Data analysis determined a statistically significant outcome with 89% of the outcome variable attributable to predictor variables. RQ 2 was analyzed using hierarchical regression which resulted in statistically significant findings for lack of preparedness to make modifications to the curriculum and assignment, to participate in writing IEPs, to progress monitor, and to carry out behavioral interventions and relation to lack of preparedness to provide IEP accommodations. Only lack of preparations for participating in IEP meetings lacked significance in relation to preparation for providing accommodations to special education students in the general education classroom.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative responses were analyzed using generic qualitative design with constant comparison. Only two qualitative responses were provided by participants, but were coded under the theme Underprepared for IEP Processes as both responses reported a lack of information provided to them regarding how the full IEP process runs.

Results

Quantitative Results

RQ 1 was analyzed using multiple regression. The R square statistic was .89079778, indicating that 89% of the outcome variables were attributable to the predictor values. This is demonstrated in Table 1. Table 2 shows the ANOVA report for the data set. Statistical significance was found with a p-value of .01, which is less than the alpha of .05. Table 3 provides the mean and standard deviation for each of the seven quantitative variables in the study.

Table 1

Regression Statistics - Multiple Regression

Table 2

ANOVA - Multiple Regression

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics

Qualitative Results

Qualitative responses were coded using generic qualitative design with constant comparison. This analysis requires researchers to group participant statements into themes by comparing each new participant statement against previous participant statements (Percy et al., 2015). In this study there were only two responses:

“I got my degree in only general education, and felt very unprepared when it came to teaching students with IEPs, reading and helping write IEPs. I also felt unprepared to keep data and did not realize how vital and important this would be for students who I am trying to get evaluated for IEPs.” (Participant 4)

“I am a gen ed teacher on a special education team. I wish I had more information/learning about the specifics of the IEP writing process.” (Participant 11)

These responses were coded under the theme Underprepared for IEP Processes as both speak to a general lack of knowledge or comfort with the IEP process.

Discussion

Quantitative Questions

The multiple regression analysis resulted in an overall statistically significant finding of .01 which demonstrates that general education teachers feel unprepared for all of the responsibilities of providing instruction to SWD in the general education classroom.

Curricular Modifications and Assignment Modifications. Students with IEPs must be provided with curriculum and assessment materials that enable them to access the general education curriculum. This often requires some type of modification to grade level learning material, which falls under the category of SDI. SDI must be provided in any setting where the student with an IEP is being educated, and as a special education teacher is not always present in the general education classroom with SWD, general education teachers must be adequately prepared to make these required modifications (Clausen et al., 2023). In this study participants rated their preparation to provide curricular modifications at 3.0 and assignment modifications at 3.3571 on a 5-point scale. The findings of this study indicate that general education preparation alone inadequately prepares general education teachers to provide modifications as needed in their classrooms.

Preparing an IEP and Participation in an IEP Meeting. Both general and special education teachers are responsible for developing IEPs and participating in IEP meetings, with general education teachers generally serving a support role in the process; however, many general education teachers must serve as special education teachers, especially in rural areas with special education teacher shortages (Gregory, 2018). Participants in this study reported their preparation to participate in writing an IEP meeting at 2.0714 and preparation in an IEP meeting at 2.2486 on a 5-point scale.

Providing Accommodations. Accommodations are changes to the environment that minimize the barriers to success for a SWD in the general education classroom, and are legally required to be provided by the teacher(s) present in the classroom (Riccomini et al., 2017). As general education teachers are not always accompanied by a special education teacher (Clausen et al., 2023), it is vital that general education teachers are able to provide accommodations to students. Though the provisions of accommodations for individual student needs is included in the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards for general education teachers (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013), participants in this study did not feel prepared to implement accommodations in their general education classrooms, reporting a mean of 2.8571 on a 5-point scale.

Monitoring Progress. As with providing accommodations, monitoring student progress is considered a basic skill requirement of general education teachers (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013), though progress monitoring of IEP goals is not specifically included in InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards. Participants in this study received instruction in monitoring student progress in the general education classroom, but still felt unprepared for monitoring the progress of SWD. Participants in this study had a mean of 2.5714 on a 5-point scale for level of preparation to monitoring progress in the general education classroom.

Management of Behavior. Bolourain et al. (2020) reported that, of all areas of providing special education services in the general education setting, general education teachers felt the least prepared to manage the behavior of SWD in the general education classroom. The current study

also demonstrates low levels of preparation for general education teachers in the area of management of student behavior with a mean response of 2.5 on a 5-point scale.

Qualitative Question

The qualitative question “Is there any additional information you'd like to share regarding how you were prepared to teach special education students in the general education classroom?” only elicited two responses, which were coded together under the theme Underprepared for IEP Processes. One participant desired more information on the IEP process in general and the other felt unprepared across domains of special education with particular emphasis on the data collection and progress monitoring requirements for general education teachers. Monitoring student progress and growth is an In TASC standard (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013), though many general education teachers are uncertain about how to measure progress when students are performing below grade level (Byrd & Alexander, 2020).

Conclusions and Future Directions

The analysis of data for this study demonstrates empirical evidence for the need to educate future teachers in a manner consistent with dual licensure programs. General education teachers must be able to provide IEP services in their classrooms and participate in IEP meetings with confidence regardless of whether or not a special education teacher is present in the classroom (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Many school districts have a shortage of special education teachers, which leads to general education teachers serving as special education teachers, especially in rural school districts (Diamond et al., 2020). This further emphasizes the need to prepare general and special education teachers under dual licensure programs to meet district needs as well as the needs of individual students. Likewise, many students who have not been identified as having a disability perform below grade level, struggle with behavioral concerns, or do not respond to traditional general education teaching practices (Gregory, 2018). When general education teachers provide all students with high leverage practices commonly used for SWD, all students have an increased opportunity to succeed across several domains (Riccomini et al., 2017). Dual licensure programs that prepare future teachers for both general and special education teaching roles lead to positive outcomes that single licensure programs cannot provide.

Research indicates that dual preparation programs for teachers in grades K-5 lead to better learning outcomes for SWD and graduates of those programs feel more prepared to teach all students (Baker & Lane, 2022). Considered with the results of this study, dual licensure programs for middle and high school teachers would likely lead to similar outcomes. Teacher preparation programs should further explore how to develop curriculum that provides pre-service candidates with more inclusive experiences and skill development opportunities directly related to special education practice. Further research examining student learning outcomes for middle/high school students taught by dual-licensed teachers is needed as is research on the essential knowledge and skills general education middle/high teachers need in order to effectively teach SWD in the general education classroom.

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