

Learning Disabilities: Preservice Preparation of General and Special Education Teachers

*National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities**

In memory of William Ellis, who initiated the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities' exploration of teacher preparation. Mr. Ellis served as a representative to the NJCLD for The Orton Dyslexia Society and the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

This paper has been approved by the following member organizations of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD): the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association; the Association on Higher Education and Disability; the Council for Learning Disabilities; the Division for Children's Communication Development; the Division for Learning Disabilities; the Learning Disabilities Association of America; the National Association of School Psychologists; the National Center for Learning Disabilities; and the Orton Dyslexia Society. The International Reading Association has not approved this paper.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) believes it is essential that educators be prepared to meet the needs of **all** students, including students with learning disabilities who have unique needs. The NJCLD believes that comprehensive, interdisciplinary programs are necessary to ensure adequate preparation of professionals in education. Only then will there be the healthy exchange of ideas that will lead to a more complete view of how individuals learn. An interdisciplinary approach promotes the development and use of a core body of knowledge about human development, learning theory, language acquisition and disorders, and cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and methods of associated disciplines. The purpose of this report is

to identify the core competencies that the NJCLD believes are essential for both general and special educators who work with children with learning disabilities. The first part of the paper delineates competencies for general education teachers. The second part delineates additional competencies needed by special education teachers. Although these competencies represent the ideal, we believe they are worthy goals toward which every teacher preparation program should strive as they undergo program review.

Preparation of General Education Teachers in a Core Curriculum

All prospective teachers need to have, at a minimum, an overview of the scope and sequence of the curriculum from kindergarten through 12th grade. In addition, teachers should be well prepared in their subject areas and understand the central concepts and tools of inquiry in these areas.

The curricular areas required for all prospective teachers are reading, writing, communication skills, mathematics, social studies, the sciences, health/physical education, fine arts, and vocational/transition education. The emphasis in **early childhood** is on sensorimotor and social/emotional development, listening and speaking, and emerging reading, writing, and mathematical skills. In **elementary grades** the emphasis is on teaching and learning in reading, writing, and mathematics. During **middle school** the shift to classes by content area requires that children develop higher-level cognitive skills and understand the underlying concepts. Work on reading, writing, and reasoning within specific content areas throughout **middle and high school** is necessary. Also necessary is the integration of technology into all areas of instruction. Various professional organizations may assist in formulating specific knowledge and skill competencies for each of the content areas.

Reference this material as: National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. (1998). Learning disabilities: Preservice preparation of general and special education teachers. *Asha*, 40 (Suppl. 18), in press.

Index terms: assessment, education, learning disabilities, teacher preparation

* February 1, 1997

Although the majority of students with learning disabilities have specific difficulty in the area of reading, spelling, or writing (Lyon, 1995), most of these students are placed in general education classrooms. Reading researchers have reached consensus that most reading and spelling disabilities originate with specific impairment of language processing. Therefore, in order to prevent problems in acquiring written language and to provide timely intervention for this major problem, general education teachers (especially in preschool and primary classrooms), special educators, speech-language pathologists, and other school-based personnel must have a thorough knowledge of the structure of oral and written language and its influence on literacy (Moats, 1994). In the content areas for which they are responsible and in other subjects, teachers must demonstrate proficiency in their spoken language, reading, and writing. **Teachers also must be competent to teach word analysis, spelling, reading comprehension, and the writing process.**

Students with learning disabilities also may have problems with mathematical calculations and reasoning. Therefore, general classroom teachers also must have a thorough knowledge and understanding of mathematical concepts and relationships and instructional techniques to assist such students in general education classrooms. Classroom mathematics instruction must be explicit and progress through three levels: concrete, representational, and abstract.

Teachers and others who work with students who have learning disabilities need to determine how their students' learning differences affect their acquisition of knowledge. All prospective teachers should be taught how to individualize instruction and how to determine when and how to make accommodations and modifications.

Collaboration among teaching professionals is a relatively new concept. With the current emphasis on mainstreaming (including students with disabilities in general education classrooms), general and special education teachers must work together cooperatively. General educators provide extensive knowledge in content areas; special educators and other specialists bring a variety of instructional techniques and knowledge that are especially beneficial to students with learning disabilities. Too often either the general or the special education teacher is relegated to an ancillary role. **Successful collaboration requires an equal partnership, willingness to collaborate, good communication skills, cooperation among the participating teachers, adequate planning time, and administrative support (NJCLD, 1994a).**

Collaboration may include co-teaching situations in which special educators teach alongside their general education counterparts in the regular classroom. If this is the case, co-teachers may have to learn classroom management techniques and teaching strategies to accommodate their colleagues' teaching styles.

In teacher preparation programs general and special education professors should model collaboration by teaching classes together and designing integrated training programs. Professors involved in successful collaboration should serve as mentors for those entering teaching, those who provide related services, or experienced teachers who embark on new collaborative teaching experiences. Successful practitioners may assist in teaching students the fundamentals of collaborative teaching.

All graduates of teacher preparation programs need the following core competencies to help them work with students who have learning disabilities:

Definitions and Characteristics

- have knowledge of current definitions and characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities and how these disabilities affect students' development and educational performance

Rights and Procedures

- have knowledge of legal rights of the students and parents/guardians and the responsibilities of teachers and schools regarding special education and related services
- have knowledge of procedures for accessing and providing special education and related services (i.e., prereferral, referral, and implementation)

Student Evaluation

- be familiar with commonly used instruments for assessment of students with learning disabilities
- identify informally each child's strengths and weaknesses across developmental areas
- use various formal and informal assessment techniques, including observation, interviews, samples of student work, student self-assessments, and teacher-made tests
- evaluate student performance on an ongoing basis in order to make instructional modifications and referrals when appropriate
- modify/adapt assessment tools in order to meet the specific needs of students with learning disabilities
- use grading procedures appropriate to the needs of students with learning disabilities

Instruction

- develop and implement lesson plans to meet students' unique needs as identified in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
- demonstrate knowledge of the continuum of services and placements for students with learning disabilities
- plan and implement instruction in collaboration with the special education teacher when indicated
- modify instruction given students' unique learning characteristics
- modify instruction given such external factors as size of groupings, seating, pace of instruction, and noise level
- adapt technology for students with learning disabilities
- integrate students with learning disabilities into the academic and social classroom community

Social/Emotional Development

- model respect and acceptance of students with learning disabilities
- provide opportunities for meaningful and ongoing social interactions among all students
- recognize and reinforce all student successes, even the small ones, to enhance self-esteem

Classroom Management

- demonstrate various classroom management techniques that assist students with learning disabilities in their social interaction and self-regulation
- facilitate the participation of all students in large- and small-group interaction.

Relationships With Families and Colleagues

- promote positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities and their families
- understand the child's culture and community
- develop an effective partnership with the family in the education of the child
- establish and maintain collegial relationships with school and community

Preparation of Special Education Teachers

Teachers planning to specialize in learning disabilities must have the core competencies required for general education teachers and an in-depth knowledge of the diverse nature of learning disabilities. A

curriculum for preparing learning disabilities teachers should build on the competencies developed in the general education program (see above). To maximize learner outcomes, educators should have an opportunity to apply what they have learned in both supervised classroom settings and through carefully constructed classroom assignments. An earlier paper (NJCLD, 1994b) made the point that prospective teachers require ongoing practica and fieldwork to gain comprehensive experience in both general and special education. These practica should be supervised by master teachers and clinicians.

The NJCLD believes that educators who are earning degrees as learning disability specialists should have the following core competencies:

Definitions and Characteristics

- demonstrate an understanding of the major theories, contributors, history, and trends in the field of learning disabilities
- demonstrate an understanding of (a) the characteristics of students with learning disabilities across the developmental spectrum, (b) cultural influences, (c) social/emotional development, and (d) medical interventions
- understand the differences between learning disabilities and other exceptionalities

Rights and Procedures

- know federal, state, and local laws and regulations that directly affect students with learning disabilities
- understand and be able to discuss current legal and ethical issues in special education

Student Evaluation

- evaluate the impact of related factors on a student's learning (e.g., self-regulatory behavior, social perception, social interaction)
- administer and interpret various assessment measures (e.g., formal and informal, achievement- and process-oriented instruments) to identify learning disabilities
- work on a multidisciplinary team to problem-solve and to determine prereferral interventions or eligibility for special education services
- understand the biases and limitations of assessment tools used to identify the abilities and disabilities of diverse learners
- identify and use alternative grading procedures (e.g., oral presentations, projects, portfolios).

Instruction

- demonstrate competence in developing individualized education programs (IEPs) and working with a multidisciplinary team to translate diagnostic data into interventions
- determine prereferral intervention strategies for students suspected of having learning disabilities
- match the unique needs of these students with mandated services along the continuum
- demonstrate the ability to use various specialized methods and materials (e.g., multisensory approaches)
- use assistive technology in instruction across the curriculum
- recommend to general educators appropriate academic modifications and accommodations (e.g., extended time on exams, alternative test formats, spell checkers, audiotaped instructional materials)
- provide instruction in life skills and preparation for transitions from elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and high school to adult living
- provide instruction in learning strategies (e.g., self-monitoring) and organizational strategies (e.g., note-taking, time management, study skills)

Social/Emotional Development

- understand the psychosocial variables affecting self-esteem, behavior, and academic progress
- understand the impact of the complexities and pervasive psychological effects of learning disabilities
- teach students self-awareness (e.g., understanding one's strengths and weaknesses), self-determination (e.g., goal-setting, decision-making and problem-solving), and self-advocacy
- teach students social skills to enhance social competence in school, outside school, and in work settings

Classroom Management

- collaborate with the general education teacher to assist in differentiating between primary behavior problems and those secondary to the learning disability
- develop and implement strategies to help students manage and regulate their behaviors in school

Relationships with Families and Colleagues

- provide effective resource assistance to and/or collaborate with general education teachers
- be involved with various parent and professional organizations and advocate for individuals with disabilities
- be able to collaborate with families to meet the child's special needs in the home
- collaborate and consult with related service providers, administrators, community services agencies, and others in planning for further education, careers, and transition/vocational programming

For more detailed descriptions of competencies of teachers of students with learning disabilities, refer to *What Every Special Educator Must Know: The International Standards for the Preparation and Certification of Special Education Teachers* (1995), Council for Exceptional Children, Reston, VA.

Summary

The NJCLD believes that comprehensive interdisciplinary education programs are necessary for the preparation of all education professionals. To serve the needs of students with learning disabilities most effectively, all preservice teachers should have preparation that includes the competencies described in this paper. Furthermore, professionals who specialize in learning disabilities must have had additional experiences to demonstrate proficiency in all competencies described in this report.

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