

In order to meet the needs of rural exceptional students who come from ethnically and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds, university training programs must move beyond monocultural approaches.

# Curricular Revision in Rural Special Education: A Multicultural Approach

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One of the greatest challenges in preparing rural special educators is providing training which realistically addresses teaching exceptional students who come from ethnically and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (Baca, 1980; Harber, 1980; Poplin and Wright, 1983; Cunningham, Cunningham, and O'Connell, 1986). In Helge's (1981) survey of 200 rural special educators, 97 percent reported that they had not been specifically trained to work with rural handicapped children. Perhaps one reason that 30 to 50 percent of rural special education teachers leave the profession (Helge, 1983) may be the unpreparedness to work with culturally diverse exceptional students.

Both the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) and the National College Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have acknowledged the significance of multicultural education and have prescribed standards which promote multicultural teacher training (AACTE, 1973; NCATE, 1979). Nevertheless, in the field of special education, a considerable discrepancy exists between the acceptance of these tenets and actual practice. Beyond modifying curricula to address nondiscriminatory assessment of exceptional students, few university training programs have systematically tackled and integrated other multicultural factors such as recognition of different cognitive styles of learning or modification of the curriculum to meet the needs of culturally diverse groups (Rodri-

guez, 1982). Marrs (1984) contended that the development of new training curricula to be used in the preparation of rural special education teachers would alleviate the high attrition rate as well as enhance the personal and professional success of the rural handicapped population.

New training curricula designed to provide pluralistic preparation of special education teachers are necessary to enable them to serve the needs of culturally diverse handicapped students in rural locations. The premise follows that well-prepared teachers who are effective at meeting the needs of their students will be more likely to remain in the profession. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the steps by which university teacher training programs can revise curricula to include a multicultural perspective. Project AIME (Achievement in Multicultural Education), a demonstration project for the Department of Special Education at Southeastern Louisiana University, delineates a step by step example of how such revision was accomplished in a teacher training program.

## Evaluation of Existing Training Program

The first step in curricular revision focuses on evaluating the existing program. Evaluation should include a broad programmatic needs assessment as well as specific evaluation of each course for multicultural content. In Project AIME, a comprehensive needs assessment tool evaluating multicultural training competencies was sent to special education professionals throughout the state. The 52 responses determined high priorities for several competencies. For example, "Methods course work with concentration focused on individual traits, learning styles, perceptual styles and cognitive styles" was deemed the most important preparation for multicultural competency. Glimps (1985) contended that teachers must understand that cultural and linguistic differences in children affect learning and necessitate flexible approaches to teaching. The special educators in this survey cited cognizance of linguistic and communicative behaviors as essential to effective teaching. Certainly, teachers need to distinguish a legitimate language deficit from a cultural linguistic difference. Based on these and similar recommendations, revision of the training program reflected concerns of practitioners who deal daily with handicapped students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Project AIME utilized an evaluation process developed by Rodriguez (1982) to analyze multicultural content of courses in the special education teacher training program. An evaluation grid was used to assess whether texts, readings, lectures, and other learning activities addressed pertinent multicultural issues such as limited English proficiency, cultural values, disproportionate numbers of minorities in special education, etc. On the basis of the grid, each course was ranked in terms of four levels of multicultural content ranging from an absence of multicultural content (Level 1) to in-depth multicultural challenges and synthesis of issues (Level 4). The mean ranking of all courses offered by the department was 2.67. Thus, although courses overall addressed multicultural issues, room for improvement was clearly evident.

Another feature of Rodriguez's (1982) approach is the collection of qualitative data to offer individual insights into how multicultural information is presented in various courses. To accomplish this component, the two project coordinators interviewed all Department faculty members with respect to each course they taught. During the struc-

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tured one hour interview, each member responded to six questions concerning the extent to which multicultural content was integrated in each course. Interestingly, in complying with mandates for NCATE accreditation, the Department had embraced multicultural objectives as part of the overall pedagogical mission. Through the interview, each faculty member expressed a personal interest in fulfilling the commitment which the faculty as a group had made.

#### Developing the Framework for Program Revision

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) provides curriculum guidelines (1987) to promote the inclusion of multicultural content. Of the different approaches recommended, the Project AIME staff selected the unit and infusion approaches to professional training. In the unit approach, each course in the curriculum includes one or more units which focus on information pertaining to multicultural populations. Based in part on the data collected through the needs assessment, the multicultural unit took the form of a one hour lecture and demonstration presented by the two project coordinators. The infusion approach emphasizes the integration of multicultural content throughout the entire course especially in regard to texts, lectures, and other learning activities. The curriculum analysis has provided the foundation for Project AIME to integrate multicultural content. The evaluation of texts, lectures, syllabi, and learning activities delineated specific strengths and weaknesses. Faculty members are now in the process of meeting the mandates of these evaluations.

#### Integration of Multicultural Objectives and Content

The multicultural unit was presented to every class offered by the department during the first year and to all introductory classes during the present school year. In this way, every student who is matriculating in the special education program has participated in the multicultural unit. In order for the unit to be effective, the project coordinators made the presentation more attractive and interesting through a multi-media format encompassing lecture, overheads, video, and class discussion.

Five components comprise the multicultural unit: pretest, foundations lecture, video of demonstration project, discussion of rural multicultural considerations, and posttest. The pretest assesses students' knowledge of multicultural issues which are addressed in the unit. A Likert-scale was used to facilitate quantitative statistical comparisons with the posttest. The foundations lecture addresses multicultural issues deemed important through the needs assessment as well as concerns voiced in the faculty interviews. Focusing on assessment, instructional programming, linguistic considerations, and demographic trends, the foundations lecture utilizes overheads to present research ranging from Mercer's (1973) revelations of the overrepresentation of minorities in special education classes to Taylor's (1986) examination of communication disorders in culturally diverse populations. A 20-minute video, "What's the Difference Being Different?" (Research Press, 1979) follows. This documentary describes a multicultural demonstration project which was developed and implemented through a partnership of teachers, teacher educators, and community members. Discussion of rural multicultural issues was facilitated by an overhead illustrating the factors of rural poverty, ethnicity, geographical impact, and religious influence in teaching exceptional students in rural southeastern Louisiana. Finally, as a posttest measure, the students answered the same questions asked on the pretest.

#### Discussion

The need is growing for university special education training programs in rural areas to offer a more pluralistic approach to teacher preparation. Effective training will incorporate issues such as learning styles, communication variations, behavioral characteristics, value differences, parental participation, and poverty. With an appropriate background from knowledge-based curricula, preservice teachers will be able to grow and profit from experiential training (i.e., practica and student teaching) where multicultural issues come to life.

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Editors' Note: The Collegiate Instructional Discrimination Index has been recently developed by James B. Boyer, Ph.D., of Kansas State University. This self-check instrument lists multi-ethnic, multilingual, cross-racial, and non-sexist criteria for examining course syllabi and instructional delivery at the college level. This instrument may be obtained from Dr. James B. Boyer, Bluemont Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506.