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BiSped: Filling a Critical Shortage Area

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Portland State University's (PSU) *BiSped* Program is a pathway for district partner bilingual paraprofessionals to achieve special education licensure and expertise in the education of ELL students. Oregon, like most other states in the nation, has a shortage of teachers prepared to teach ELL students. Fewer than 20% of public-school teachers throughout the U.S. with at least one ELL student in their class are certified to teach ELL students (Waxman, Tellez, & Walberg, 2004). The percentage of teachers with expertise in English as a second language (ESL) issues with special education certification is even lower. In 2007, a consortium of ten school districts and faculty from PSU's Bilingual Teacher Pathway Program, a pipeline bilingual teacher certification program with previous funding through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), met to discuss the critical need for educators who could address the key factors in assessing when an ELL student's academic difficulties are due to a disability and when they are a function of the difficult task of learning in a second language. The outcome was an OELA-funded program called *BiSped*. *BiSped* is now entering its third year and has faced many successes as well as challenges in accomplishing its mission and goals. This article describes *BiSped*'s development, goals, and impact on stakeholders.

Mission and Goals

BiSped's mission, preparing bilingual special educators, is accomplished through the following goals.

1. Develop and provide a research-based licensure program leading to highly qualified special-educator status with expertise in ELL instruction to 40 bilingual/bicultural paraprofessionals.
2. Mentor participants during their full-time field experience and first year teaching to increase retention of special education with expertise in ELL instruction.
3. Provide on-site professional development in distinguishing *difference* from *disorder* to full-time student-teachers and first-year graduates as well as their pre-referral and Response to Intervention (RTI) teams.

Specialized Curriculum

After receiving funds, the consortium's first task was to determine the competencies desired for participants beyond those needed for state special education licensure. They reviewed competencies required by the few states with bilingual special-education certification and by bilingual special-education licensure programs offered at other universities to determine the focus for specialized coursework. Optimally, *BiSped* participants would have completed coursework for both the special-education license and the state's ESOL/Bilingual endorsement; however, the number of credits required was prohibitive. Thus, the consortium recommended additional courses related to second language acquisition, biliteracy, and the assessment of ELLs. In addition, to extend and enhance both their licensure and specialized coursework, *BiSped* faculty and participants meet quarterly. District partners are also invited to all professional development events; each year, *BiSped* hosts a conference for participants and district partners that includes current topics such as RTI and Progress Monitoring for ELL students.

Participants are admitted to the program once per year and are infused into a part-time cohort with other special-education licensure students. While this has been enriching in many ways, it also brings challenges participants have identified through focus group discussion with the program's external evaluator.

What BiSped Participants Say

Focus groups conducted with each cohort provided unique insights. In general, their knowledge of issues facing ELLs is greater than their graduate school counterparts and instructors.

Cohort 1. When asked to describe what is working best for them in the program, participants offered, “working with classmates and learning from them,” “classes based on scientific research,” and course content that “rolls over into useful lesson plans.” In describing what they learned about ELLs with and without special needs, they voiced some reservation regarding the level of ELL knowledge held by course instructors. It is key to remember that participants are bilingual and have themselves often faced the challenges of second language acquisition. This is not necessarily the case for many course instructors. This led one respondent to point out:

Teachers do not go into detail and point out what works best for ELLs. I need to pick out what works for them. Nothing presented has been explicit for ELLs, but our experience allows us to pull out ELL-related content.

When asked for recommendations to help instructors relate content to ELLs, participants suggested “simply mentioning ELLs in the context of strategies,” “using pictures,” and “bringing out assessment issues in working with ELLs.”

Cohort 2. Responses were similar except in one respect. This cohort included more general-education-licensed teachers and each of these licensed teachers also holds an ESOL/Bilingual Endorsement. Thus, their responses tended to reflect more on program curriculum and design. The longer a participant had taught, the more they expressed what they perceived as program limitations. They felt they knew more about the needs of ELLs than many of the faculty. One participant said:

There has been a lot of information presented that experienced teachers already have. For example, we need collaboration taught with a bilingual/bicultural twist. It would be good to have two tracks: one for brand new teachers and one for teachers/people who have quite a bit of teaching experience already.

A less-experienced participant offered a different perspective:

A world of knowledge has been provided to me from my position as a non-teacher. Everything I learned in each class is new, but most important has been the current information of how to best serve our target ELL student population.

Interestingly, participants were unanimous regarding the value of a course on assessment of ELLs, which they felt focused on what they most needed. This course was developed by the project director as a mechanism to infuse ELL knowledge into the special education program and led one student to say:

The class last summer (bilingual assessment) was the most helpful so far. It offered truly new information. I felt like that course has been the missing link between teaching ELLs and students with learning issues and disorders.

This course in particular appeared to establish a standard for addressing the ELL needs expressed by program participants.

Other Perspectives

Two liaisons (one from the ELL department and the other from special education) from each district attend meetings held every other month to discuss field placements, participant progress, coursework, and professional development opportunities. Although it is often difficult for busy district personnel to attend meetings, attendance has been consistent, indicating their commitment to the partnership. One district liaison reports:

BiSped helps us to train teachers in ELL/special education issues who can be “in-house” experts to serve in advisory roles to other teachers/administrators.

Sentiments regarding the need for a program with this focus include the following:

This program is fulfilling a huge need in the field one educator at a time. Although the program is small, there are that many more people in this field locally than prior to this program. The professional development piece is a wonderful way to spread the knowledge and commitment to this work.

One of the special education faculty members made the following observation:

Overall, the faculty [members] believe *BiSped* benefits the department. We are currently working on a curriculum redesign. *BiSped* faculty consults with us to reconceptualize course content to appropriately address the unique needs of ELL students and their families. *BiSped* participants help their peers understand the cultural capital that diverse students bring. Their stories and perspectives are invaluable.

The Future

While we have anecdotal evidence that district partners are now more aware of the disproportionality rates of ELL and other minority students in special education, it continues to be difficult to obtain district and building level data. We will continue to work with partners to measure the program's impact on disproportionality as well as staff knowledge.

Recruitment has been challenging. Our target group has been bilingual paraprofessionals. However, the program is currently offered only at the graduate level, so the consortium has decided to widen the pool to include bilingual substitutes and temporary employees. This partnership provides promise for filling a critical educational niche as described by one participant:

BiSped is offering me the opportunity to fulfill a career dream on working with ELL students who have learning disabilities.

References

Waxman, H., Tellez, K., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). Improving teacher quality for English language learners: Reports and next-step recommendations from a national invitational conference. *The LSS Review*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, The Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory.