

**Final Report for Initiative 23A: Special Education Practices Study Group  
Submitted by Howard Weiner, group facilitator, 8/30/09**

## **I. Background**

The focus of the current study group's work derived from issues raised last year by the first Special Education Practices study group. Two SETRC documents, Quality Indicators Review and Resource Guide for the Delivery of Special Education Services, and a survey of IHE use of quality indicators in teacher preparation programs, provided the original group's information base for discussion and findings. Last year's study group's report to the Higher Education Task Force included the following conclusions;

Among the seven critical Quality Indicators, *the vast majority* (75% or more) of IHEs reported that both general educators and special educators were **always** required to demonstrate knowledge about *Direct Instruction, The 5 Components of Literacy, Collaboration and Valuing Inclusive Practices* in their programs.

The *vast majority* of IHEs also indicated that special educators, but not general educators, were also **always** required to demonstrate a knowledge of all key indicators including; *IEP Focused Instruction, UDL and RTI*.

However, among the seven critical quality indicators, the vast majority of IHEs reported that only special educators were **always** required to show an ability to deliver content area instruction for any of the indicators and then only three of them, *Direct Instruction, IEP Focused Instruction and Valuing Inclusive Practices*.

Both general education and special education candidates may leave most of these 15 surveyed IHE training programs unable to deliver instruction using most of the research-based quality indicators. We need to close the gap between knowledge about what to do and actually doing it. If these research-based quality indicators are not rigorously applied and viewed as essential components of instruction to help the most challenged students learn well, inclusion may not be successful.

Recommendations included seeking further information and examples of IHE teacher preparation programs using the quality indicators and examining implementation issues.

## **II. Three projects**

The current Initiative offered IHE instructors the opportunity to evaluate the experience and impact of incorporating a quality indicator in their coursework. Three projects conducted at Touro College during the Spring and Summer 2009 terms, each involved collaborating with another faculty member and designing and conducting a workshop and survey embedded in a graduate level course. Each project addressed the following four questions regarding using a Quality Indicator (QI) in a course;

1. How well did the implementations work?
2. What changes would you make to the projects and to the QIs to ensure further/stronger implementation?
3. What were the implications of these projects for pre-service teachers and for professional development?
4. What themes became apparent through the implementation of these QIs?

### **A. Collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals**

Elizabeth Haller, with Prof. Bevins' cooperation, created a workshop where classroom teachers and paraprofessionals addressed collaboration and role issues in two sections of a fieldwork course. The course addressed using strategies in the classroom.

#### **Quality Indicator: Effective implementation of specially-designed instruction**

The driving question for this workshop was whether specially designed instruction improves student learning when the role of the paraprofessional is clearly defined and supports development of student independence. The workshop focused on three questions; What is the scope of the paraprofessionals responsibilities? Why is it necessary to plan with the paraprofessional?, and Why is it important to have good collaboration between the teacher and the paraprofessional?

Prof. Haller's 45 minute workshop addressed the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals, their instructional and non-instructional responsibilities and collaboration with the teacher. The workshop offered related handouts, and discussion to help Touro students to better understand the role of the paraprofessional in the classroom. A pre-test/ post-test instrument was comprised of the same questions to evaluate the impact and knowledge imparted by this training.

- Comparing pre and post test answers, the emphasis of the post-test responses was on time constraints, team planning as well as respect. This was essentially what the class workshop entailed.
- All of the participants were eager to share their experiences with paraprofessionals and listened closely to those participants who were paraprofessionals.
- More respondents (4) gave their answers for Questions 10 and 10a in the post test. The paraprofessionals in the group were happy and thankful to realize that many of their concerns were being addressed.

#### **Prof. Haller's reflections on the four QI questions are as follows;**

1. The implementations worked well. I appreciated the fact that the other professor was understanding and gave the group time to discuss the role of the paraprofessional. The co-professor thought this was an important topic also. He gave some valuable insights from his own experience. I felt that we both were facilitating and modeling professional respect.

The group of teachers and pre-service teachers were happy to address this topic as most had been working with a paraprofessional and were anxious to discuss their concerns about their role. There were some paraprofessionals in the group who were studying to become teachers and they were very vocal. These students were important because they had first hand knowledge as to how effective they are in the inclusion classroom.

The questionnaire was short enough to be filled out in less than 30 minutes and it was a good motivation to the discussion which ensued. The article about paraprofessionals was appropriate with good suggestions and implications.

2. I felt that more time was needed to plan with the other professor for these workshops. The other professor was very cooperative but what if he hadn't been?

Changes to QI: I would include in the column "look for" under Indicator: "Instructional Practice"

- a statement about planning time is carved into the schedule of both the paraprofessional and teacher to accommodate planning and effective teaching techniques
- a statement regarding teachers and paraprofessionals attend workshops to further understand each other's role in the classroom.
- A statement that addresses: Teachers and paraprofessionals share a mutual respect for each other.

3. The implications were that both teachers and paraprofessionals felt that they needed more time to plan and share. The paraprofessionals also were pleased that this class workshop addressed their situation. This would be an interesting topic to address in a further research study with the following questions:

- What role do administrators play in the smooth operation of facilitating cooperation and understanding between teachers and paraprofessionals?
- How can teachers better understand their role as an executive and team member in the inclusion classroom?
- How can paraprofessionals have a greater "voice" in their school that emphasizes their strong relationship with the student with disabilities?
- Are parents aware of the role of the paraprofessional?

4. Themes that became apparent:

- Time: Teachers and paraprofessionals felt that they needed more time to plan with each other.
- Respect: Paraprofessionals stressed that respect for them was sometimes not given in terms of consistency, sharing responsibility and appreciating the role of the paraprofessional in having an insightful understanding of the students they are working with.

## **B. Collaboration between teachers and occupational therapists**

### **Component: Effective implementation of specially-designed instruction**

**Driving Question:** Does the specially designed instruction improve collaboration between students in a special education class and students in an occupational therapy class?

Dr. Orentlicher's class, OT 650: Specialty Seminar: School-Based Education and Dr. Dressler's class, SpEd 602, Introduction to Teaching Students with Disabilities and Prof. Deborah Natale participated in a collaborative project on July 7, 2009. The rationale for this project was the importance of teaching our students to work collaboratively in the inclusive classroom to address K-12 students' needs. Students participated in a five-hour seminar that included the following: roles and responsibilities of special education teachers and occupational therapists; developing goals for the individual education plan (IEP) and addressing student needs; principles of collaboration; how to identify criteria of communication and how to collaborate. A pre-test/post-test instrument was implemented to help determine the impact of this training.

Handouts, lectures, role plays, case studies and discussion helped Touro students to better understand the role of the special education teacher and occupational therapist in the classroom and the importance of collaboration.

Three groups of students , pre-service teachers , in service teachers and occupational therapists participated in the seminar and completed the pre-test survey and the post-test survey.

#### Summary of responses: Post test

- What are the roles and responsibilities of the special education teacher and the occupational therapist?

The respondents indicated in the post test that the special education students and the occupational therapy students were able to indicate each other's roles and responsibilities. The pre-test indicated that in service teachers were more knowledgeable about the roles and responsibilities of the occupational therapists as would be expected. The post-test answers for the inservice teachers indicate that this group had experience working with the OTs in the schools.

- What are some of the challenges to planning between the special education teacher and the OT?

Respondents indicated these challenges: "time management and scheduling to find a common time to meet; need for communication and collaboration; need time, have to be willing to share, listen respectfully to each other's ideas and strategies; scheduling the OT at the right time when it would be the most beneficial to each child."

- What are the characteristics of the collaborative team?

Respondents indicated these characteristics: "team communication, open minded, team player, considering the premises of other disciplines, not thinking that my discipline is the only one helpful; listening to each other; sharing ideas, implementing each other's techniques to help child; teachers, staff, related service providers work together to meet the needs of each student based on their IEP"

- Do you think this collaboration was successful?

Respondents indicated the following: "I now see OT in a totally different perspective; I have learned a lot. Everybody learned new concepts; helps the child get best education possible; taught me a lot; It helped me learn about in service teachers and their perspectives on OT and schools; another workshop next year- I hope!"

#### **Prof. Dressler's reflections on the four QI questions are as follows;**

1. The implementation worked well. Students in both classes were prepared to teach other their respective roles and responsibilities. Students applied this knowledge and what was learned from Meira Orentlicher and Deborah Natale's presentations on OT and on collaboration to activities on scheduling and addressing challenges in the inclusive classroom.

2. Approximately one-half of the 602 class that participated in this project consisted of preservice teachers and one-half were inservice teachers. This was the 5<sup>th</sup> day of this summer class. For nearly half the class (career changers) this was their first experience with a course on teacher education. If we were to do this again, I would suggest that we conduct the project in the middle of a 12- week course during the fall or spring

semester. I also suggest that the participants in the project complete the post survey at the end of the semester.

3. Collaboration is so necessary to the inclusive classroom. It is also required and indicated in the draft of the new certification requirements. For collaboration to occur, teachers and occupational therapists need to understand what each other does in the classroom and how they can work together to address the needs of the individual child.

4. The inservice teachers, as expected had some experience working with the OTs in the classroom. This group stated the day after the project that they would be more open to collaborating with the OT to address the challenges to planning. The data indicated on the post surveys revealed that participants understood each other's roles and responsibilities and the challenges to planning. The participants also identified the characteristics of the collaborative team and believed that the collaborative project was successful.

**Prof. Orentlicher's reflections on the fourQI questions are as follows;**

1. I think that overall it worked very well, but I felt that we didn't have enough time. For example, we started the class with the students introducing themselves (teachers told the OT students about their role in schools, and vice versa). We only allocated 20 min for this activity, but it took 45 min. This meant that I had to cut short my lecture time that focused on writing joined IEPs, figuring out methods to address the students' needs, etc. At that point the class felt rushed, and I felt that the students only got a small part of what I would have liked them to get.

2. I would add more time. I would consider presenting more than one class together (double or even triple the time), and have the students work on joint homework projects.

3. In the following week, my students told me that they realized how little the two professions really know about each other. They learned that they shouldn't assume that teachers know what OTs do. They learned the importance of communication and information sharing.

4. Much more needs to be done to increase communication and collaboration between teachers and related services providers. Even in the QIs the focus is on teacher preparation, but teachers are not the only professionals who work in schools and in the classrooms. The QI should also address the educational needs of related services providers

**C. Preschool Response to Intervention**  
**Quality Indicator: Response to Intervention**  
Prof. Howard Weiner

A 60 minute workshop on Response-to-Intervention for Early Childhood and some follow-up in preschools was conducted in two dual certification early childhood classes. With the assistance of Prof. Ann Mulvey, students were given a pre and posttest to see if they felt they knew how to use RTI on the *early childhood* level.

The workshop focused on the following topics; overview of RTI; why preschool RTI was important; emergent vs. phonics-based direct reading instruction; curriculum-based literacy measures on the preschool level; two preschool literacy programs; assessment instruments; and data analysis and decision making.

Pre and posttest results indicated significant changes in understanding how to use RTI. About a third of the students reported a pretraining familiarity with the basics of RTI and posttraining it was nearly 96%.

Only 1 student reported a pretraining familiarity with Early Childhood RTI but 23/24 at posttraining did so. The number of students who thought programs for 3-5 year olds should be RTI-based doubled from 11 to 22 from pre to posttraining.

Students reporting knowing what to teach 3-5 yr. olds about formal literacy increased from 8 to 16, pre- to posttraining. Several open ended question posttest responses suggested students now knew how to conduct literacy lessons with preschoolers.

Three weeks after the workshop, Prof. Weiner asked volunteers who worked in preschoolers to assess a class on a beginning literacy assessment measure. The data from the assessments was analyzed in class, where small groups of students identified at-risk children and developed level II intervention plans.

**Prof. Weiner's reflections on the four QI questions are as follows;**

1. Consistent with the other projects, implementation was easy. Other instructors were happy to collaborate on this project and I hope to work with them in the future to replicate this work. Prof. Mulvey provided before workshop and follow-up discussions in her class about RTI because she agreed that practical hands-on information was an important part of the coursework.
2. I agree with my colleagues, time to implement the training is an issue. One consideration is where the QI work fits best into the course syllabus. If it presented in the later part of the term, follow-up work may be constrained. In my project, I presented the workshop when the students were ready to analyze RTI assessment instruments, toward the end of the term. The volunteers who assessed children and brought in actual class screening data needed a few weeks to get permission and do the testing and an important part of the project was conducted at the very end of the semester.
3. I think that the QIs are so important in preparing preservice and inservice teachers to succeed as effective instructors that there should be some coordination between IHE course instructors and mentors and other support providers in the classroom. The QIs were developed for evaluating observable classroom behaviors and environments. All teacher preparation program coursework should address the realities of the classroom and what works best (as reflected in the QIs) or they will not be viewed as relevant to either prospective or experienced teachers.
4. One common theme all the study group members mentioned is the importance of collaboration and respect for disciplines working at IHEs. We modeled collaboration in the joint presentations and focused on how people with different orientations and priorities can work together. Touro College has a dual certification program and the collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere between departments and disciplines is appreciated. Professors who were approached to partner with us welcomed the opportunity. The IHE survey conducted last year did not often show the impact of collaboration to address the needs of all students.

### **III. Looking Ahead**

As a study group facilitator working with the QIs for two years now, my appreciation of how useful the document is has grown over time. Today, we focus on outcomes for students and are beginning to recognize that the quality of instruction should be the first place we look to understand academic achievement. We know a lot about what works and what is quantifiable and observable. The QIs present critical teaching components that suggest whether or not evidence-based instruction and a respectful and supportive classroom environment is being presented to students.

The IHE is where the QIs should first be examined and digested by preservice teachers. We need to work more closely with the SETRC trainers to make this document more syllabus-friendly for teacher training program application without watering down the powerful no nonsense authenticity it offers.