

## Two For One: Challenges and Benefits of Small Elementary and Special Education Dual Certification Programs

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### ABSTRACT

There are challenges and opportunities when teaching in an integrated elementary and special education (ELEM/SPED) dual certification program. Infusing special education in general education courses and collaborating with general education colleagues to create a truly integrated program is imperative. In this article, we provide a case study of four ELEM/SPED education dual certification programs, focusing on coursework and field requirements. We emphasize that the implementation of an effective ELEM/SPED dual certification program requires collaboration, support, inclusion, patience, advocacy, and education.

### KEYWORDS

**Elementary and special education, dual certification, small special education program, teacher preparation programs**

**T**he need for dual certification programs has grown exponentially over the past few years. *The Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA; 2015) requires teacher preparation programs (TPPs) to prepare all educators to work with all students. *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA; 2004) calls for all students with disabilities to have access to the general education curriculum, therefore TPPs must prepare teachers to work with all learners regardless of their ability level.

Historically, TPPs for special and general education operated separately from one another. More recently school system administrators have experienced an increased need for TPPs to prepare teachers to work with general and special education students alike (Brownell et al., 2011; Mickelson et al., 2022; Young, 2011). *According to the 39th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA*, approximately 65% of students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their day in the general education classroom, and 95.1% of students spend at least some part of their school day in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Therefore, the need for dual certification

programs has become increasingly necessary (Oyler, 2011).

### Stages of Collaboration

There are three stages of depth of collaboration in preservice teacher education as identified by Pugach et al. (2011). In the first stage, which was common in TPPs from 1975-1982, Pugach et al. (2011) described a movement towards training teacher candidates to work with students with disabilities, albeit in programs that were separate and excluded general education teacher candidates. Students with disabilities were moving to public schools from institutional and residential settings so special education teachers were trained to work with these students in separate locations within the public-school settings. There was no overlap in services within the general education curriculum. During the second stage, 1983-2001, there was a trend toward more collaborative practices wherein some professional education organizations began to discuss how to integrate general and special education standards. In the public schools, students with disabilities were being included at an increasing rate as least restrictive environment (LRE) mandates were enforced.

Around 2001, the third stage focused on preparing teacher candidates for standardized licensure testing and updated teacher evaluations. In 2004, Response to Intervention became an avenue for identifying students with disabilities with much emphasis on initial input from the general education teacher. These changes may have influenced a national trend toward collaborative teacher preparation programs along with an increase in enrollment in such programs (Pugach et al., 2011). By this point, students with disabilities continued to be fully involved in the general education curriculum to the extent they were able.

The lack of success in inclusive classrooms can be aligned to the lack of integrated preparation in preservice teaching programs (Young, 2011). Blanton and Pugach (2011) discuss how TPPs provide a variety of ways for individuals to seek teaching certification and licensure. Most teacher candidates receive certification in either general education or special education, but rarely in both. Blanton and Pugach (2011) created a classification system for dual certification programs which includes: discrete program model, integrated program model, and merged program model. Discrete programs are defined as separate general and education programs, which function separately except for a few courses. Integrated programs are redesigned programs wherein both general and special education curricula overlap. Merged programs address the needs of all students through a shared curriculum that prepares all teacher candidates to teach both elementary and special education. Although dual certification programs are on the rise, little has changed in the sense of implementation of dual certification programs, and the three models are still relevant today. The current movement is towards a merged program, which does not differentiate between elementary and special education, but rather is all inclusive.

For the purpose of this case study, the authors define dual certification programs as the combination of general elementary (ELEM) and special edu-

cation (SPED) programs which lead to certification in both areas (Blanton & Pugach 2020). The four programs in the case study include two universities and two state colleges within the same university system in the southern United States. Although these programs contain common elements (e.g., course content and field experience requirements), there are marked differences in the structure of courses and execution of practicum hours and student teaching. The goal, however, remains the same: to prepare teacher candidates to work with all learners, serving as either the general education or special education teacher.

### **Common Context of Education Programs**

In 2009, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission established Rule 505-2.108 (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2019). Through this rule, state officials would no longer grant a single special education certification that was K-12, but instead began a program where elementary special educators could achieve the status of “highly qualified” and receive a certification that spanned elementary grades and special education. This allowed for special educators to specialize in elementary school curriculum. The university system in this article contains eight universities that offer this dual certification while at least 20 others continue to offer stand-alone Elementary or Special Education K-12 degrees leading to certification in one or the other.

Historically, teacher shortage has been an ongoing problem within the United States. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (2021) provided 10 recommendations for guidance in TPPs including: “States should seek innovative opportunities to address ongoing challenges—such as lack of diversity in the profession and the need to modernize the processes of licensure and certification—as they consider licensure and certification revisions” (Blanton & Pugach, 2011, p. 226). As a result, several institutions

have begun developing programs such as paraprofessional to professional tracks, fully online programs, teacher residency models, and additional field placements. Universities have used innovative technology such as GoReact, Zoom, and Mixed Reality Simulation to further enhance their programs and attract non-traditional students to a more traditional certification program instead of resorting to district-led programs and regional alternative certification tracks which directly compete with university and college programs.

The fact remains that in many universities, it is the elementary or early childhood programs that are keeping Colleges of Education afloat. In 2021, there were 2364 Bachelor of Education degrees conferred in Georgia (University System of Georgia, 2021). Of those, 38% were in the Elementary Education/Special Education area. One university in this article awarded 150 bachelor’s degrees in the ELEM/SPED area while only 39 in all other areas of education.

### **Overview of Coursework and Practicum**

Teacher preparation programs take on many forms. They vary in certification options, programs of study, field experiences, and modes of content delivery. This case study includes four TPPs: two small colleges and two universities within the same university system in the southern US (see Table 1). Table 1 provides an overview of these institutions.

The faculty in the four case studies identify as ELEM/SPED dual certification programs where all teacher candidates are prepared to earn certification in both elementary education and special education, and therefore fit the description of merged programs according to Blanton and Pugach’s (2011) model. In each program, the goal is to “adequately prepare candidates for both roles” (Blanton & Pugach, 2011, p. 226).

Each of the dual certification programs launched in the early 21st century, with the oldest beginning in 2006. Teacher candidates had similar backgrounds and

**TABLE 1:** Overview of Universities/Colleges

	Large University A	Large University B	Small College A	Small College B
<b>First Dual Cohort</b>	2014	2012	2009	2006
<b>Location</b>	Three campuses (dual program only on one campus)  Most students from surrounding rural areas and two, large metropolitan areas	Students from rural and suburban areas	One campus 1.5 hours from urban centers.  Many students from rural backgrounds.	One campus 20-30 miles from urban centers; students from rural and suburban backgrounds
<b>Total student enrollment (Fall 2021)</b>	27,091	18,155	2,565	3,101
<b>Size of cohorts</b>	11-34	150-190	25-35	20-60
<b>Major changes</b>	Reduced number of course per Professional Standards Commission for fall 2022	Added an online option in 2021	Added a special education practicum placement in 2022.	Added paraprofessional to teacher program in a separate, online cohort in 2020.

demographics regardless of geographical location within the university system.

Not surprisingly, of the four in this article, the largest institution had the largest cohort size. Interestingly, the other large institution had the smallest dual certification cohort size, but it also offered the option for traditional certification in elementary education or special education. Faculty in all the programs continuously seek methods to increase enrollment such as offering options for online courses and remote supervision of field experiences. Recent changes affecting all of the programs included directives from the state Professional Standards Commission (PSC) which reduced the number of courses and discontinued the Teacher Performance Assessment (EdTPA) and Georgia Assessments for

the Certification of Educators (GACE) entrance exams.

The largest university in this case study began its dual certification program with its first cohort in 2014 (see table 2). Although large in enrollment, the main campus is located in a small-town setting. There are three campuses university wide, yet the dual certification program is only offered on one campus. Most students come from the surrounding rural areas with others from two major urban centers. With a directive from the PSC to reduce the number of required program hours, faculty chose to remove a child development course, a technology course, and combine two math courses.

The other university began as a small college that offered an evening program for nontraditional students (see table 3).

In 2012, the university system merged it with another college to become a state university and replaced the evening program with the dual certification program. Students come from both rural and urban areas and attend classes at all four campuses, online, and in the local public school system. Since this program covers a large geographic area, faculty divide cohorts into Professional Development Communities (PDC) of 18-22 students based on field work placement and where the students live. In 2021, faculty added an online only PDC which consists of online-only courses and remote clinical supervision. This program also offers an option where students work as paraprofessionals while completing their coursework.

The first small college in this case

**TABLE 2: ELEM/SPED Dual Certification Programs of Study Overview - University A**

Integrated classes (SPED/ ELEM)	SPED Only	ELEM Only	Field Experience
Classroom Management	Characteristics of Learners with Disabilities	ELEM Arts & Literature across the curriculum	Inclusive P-5 placement 30 hours
Methodologies of Inclusive P-5	SPED procedures (law/ IEP)	Cultural Diversity & ESOL/TCLD	Pre-Internship-80 hours
	Assessment in SPED	ELEM Language Arts	Internship I (yearlong) 245 hours
		ELEM Math Methods	Internship II (Student Teaching)- 600 hours
		ELEM Science Methods	TCs receive a variety of placements in grades Prek-5 <sup>th</sup> in inclusion, co-taught, or resource room settings
		ELEM Social Studies Methods	

**TABLE 3: ELEM/SPED Dual Certification Programs of Study Overview - University B**

Integrated classes (SPED/ELEM)	SPED Only	ELEM Only	Field Experience
Classroom Management	Characteristics of Students with Disabilities	Teaching Reading and Writing to ELEM	144 hours Special Education
Language and Cognition	Teaching Students with Special Needs	Teaching Science ELEM	144 hours elementary (2 six-week segments)
Child Development	Assessment in Special Education	Social Studies for ELEM	SPED (144 hours) Elementary (144 hours)
Strategies for Supporting Children and Families from Divers Communities	Introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis	Teaching Music ELEM	144 hours SPED 144 hours Elementary grades 4-5
Assessment		Teaching Art ELEM	Student teaching - 14 weeks in Prek-5 OR SPED
		Children’s Literature and Language	
		ELEM Arts & Literature Across the Curriculum	
		Curriculum Methods and Materials	
		ELEM Language Arts Methods	
		ELEM Math Methods	
		ELEM Science Methods	
		ELEM Social Studies Methods	

**TABLE 4:** ELEM/SPED Dual Certification Programs of Study Overview - Small College A

Integrated classes (SPED/ELEM)	SPED Only	ELEM Only	Field Experience
Classroom Management Assessment	Nature and Needs-Labels & IEPs	Curriculum-Standards & Lesson planning	4 weeks each grade strand (2 half days per week)- K-1, 2-3, 4-5- 100 hours
	Methods (UDL, co-teaching)	2. Methods: ELEM Language Arts Methods	Semester long (2 half days per week)- Special Education- 100 hours
		ELEM Math Methods	Chosen grade level 2 full days/week for 1 semester- 150 hours
		ELEM Science Methods	Year-long residency- 600 hours
		ELEM Social Studies Methods	

**TABLE 5:** ELEM/SPED Dual Certification Programs of Study Overview - Small College B

Integrated classes (SPED/ELEM)	SPED Only	ELEM Only	Field Experience	
N/A	Characteristics of Students with Disabilities	Integrated & Applied Arts Classroom Management	100 hours in K-1 (inclusion classroom)	
	Education Interventions/ Mild Disabilities	Instructional Technology & Media	100 hours in 2-3 (inclusion classroom)	
	Assessment in Special Education	Assessment in Early Childhood (EC) Education	Classroom data analysis	100 hours in 4-5 (inclusion classroom)
			EC Methods and Materials	Student Teaching-600 hours student teaching in choice of grade level
			Integrated Social Studies	
Science in EC				

study began its dual certification program in 2009 (see table 4). The college is an “access” institution which accepts all students with a high school diploma. This has always been a dual certification program with no option for separate special education or elementary education certification. There is one campus 1.5 hours from urban centers which attracts mostly rural students for this traditional, on campus program. Faculty added specific content methods courses in 2016

and a special education practicum placement in 2022.

The second small college is also an access institution within the university system (see table 5) which accepts students into the core curriculum who do not meet traditional entrance criteria and offers academic assistance through learning support and coaching. There is one campus in a small town situated between two large urban areas which attracts students from rural and suburban areas. This

has been a traditional, on-campus dual certification program since its inception in 2006. In fall 2021, faculty added the Paraprofessional to Teacher program in addition to the traditional program. Students who choose this option must be working as a paraprofessional in a public school system anywhere in the state, and the principal must agree to allow the teacher candidate to meet practicum and student teaching requirements within the school system during working hours.

This option requires online courses and remote supervision of field placement hours.

Each of the programs of study include similar coursework, with a heavy emphasis on reading and math. Special education courses include characteristics of learners with disabilities, methods, and assessments. Three of the programs have integrated classroom management and other similar courses while one of the small programs keeps its courses separate. The elementary courses for each program can all be divided into education courses, methods, and content. There are large disparities in the implementation of field experiences, however each program has some type of inclusive special education placement within the required hours.

### **Discussion of Faculty Experiences**

Dual certification programs require that certain compromises be made. Perhaps one of the most significant areas of compromise noted in these four case studies is in the area of field work. Most of the field credits and field experiences that are provided to teacher candidates are in elementary education, with very little in special education. While one of the programs requires one of four semesters in a special education placement, two of the others do not have any semesters dedicated solely to a special education placement. However, even in the single college that had a special education placement, the supervisors often do not have special education backgrounds. This lack of expertise led to a level of concern about the feedback the college supervisors could provide with regards to interventions for specific disabilities, classroom accommodations, and modifications to the general curriculum.

Similar to the lack of supervisors with special education backgrounds, another area of compromise was in the area of instruction. Almost all the faculty teaching content methods classes had backgrounds in elementary education or were content area specialists. Most of the

faculty teaching these courses felt that they had adequate knowledge of struggling learners and rarely consulted with their special education faculty colleagues about strategies to include students with disabilities in content area instruction. Often, special education faculty members would offer suggestions or provide resources on an ad hoc basis, but the pre-existing relationships between the special education faculty members and the elementary faculty members drove this support. Special education faculty members and content area specialists felt a lack of connection in all settings, particularly in math content courses. Math faculty, who often have little to no background in education, taught these courses. With this lack of pedagogy, there is an absence of modeling of teaching strategies and best practices in the elementary setting, as math faculty often teach content in a lecture style and use few hands-on approaches. This disconnect mirrors the lack of collaboration which teachers sometimes see in the elementary setting, perpetuating the lack of collaboration between elementary and special education.

Although the dual certification programs are designed to develop candidates who can teach all children in general education settings, including students with disabilities, the course delivery is often highly siloed, and must be navigated carefully. One institution had two courses that were integrated, but across all the other institutions, special education courses were separate from the elementary courses. These integrated courses consist of content from two previously separate elementary and special education courses condensed into one course. All the institutions had a strong emphasis in reading in their dual certification programs, and those courses were often taught by reading or literacy professors, who did not collaborate either with special education or their elementary colleagues.

While three institutions provided dual certification as the only option for their elementary majors, one institution had

other programs in special education and elementary education as separate certification areas. Faculty in this institution noted that the dual-certification program was often ignored by both elementary- and special education-only faculty. Despite the goal of integrating content knowledge with special education and elementary pedagogy, dual certification programs overwhelmingly teach each area separately.

Faculty who already had a positive working relationship with colleagues and a desire for collaboration were responsible for creating any integration of course work or content. Several special education faculty mentioned using IRIS modules as materials that they would share with elementary and reading faculty. In some cases, faculty taught courses back-to-back with elements of co-teaching present. Because faculty could not adjust course loads for co-teaching demands, these collaborative co-teaching activities were often on an ad hoc basis as faculty had time to fit in the additional demands. All faculty involved felt that they had not systematized the program yet and were all deeply involved in ongoing program improvement, even in dual certification programs that were more than 10 years old. Several faculty noted that frequent changes in state requirements often drive program improvement strategies.

Although faculty teach courses separately, they integrate numerous structural elements such as the use of a common lesson plan and the specific use of differentiation and Universal Design for Learning elements within all coursework. Several institutions noted that faculty collaborated to create specific assignments taught across courses, such as a reading project that also included an assessment component. Perhaps because of the nature of small programs, administration included special education faculty in program work where they supported advocacy and inclusive approaches in all design work.

Despite some of the issues of isolation and informal collaboration that can be found within a dual certification

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program, both special education and elementary education faculty mentioned numerous benefits to the programs. They felt that teacher candidates were better able to describe how they might teach diverse learners and that beginning teachers often did not feel significant anxiety when faced with teaching students with disabilities—information that was evident in the interviews of recent graduates. Many of the teacher candidates sought out teaching positions after graduation where they were “the” inclusion teacher. Faculty also mentioned the value of collaboration across areas of specialty where elementary education, special education, and reading faculty all noted how much they learned from their colleagues. Faculty members noted that their doctoral programs had not prepared them for the level of collaboration needed across fields of study, and while they all noted the amount of work involved, they all felt that they were part of something special.

## Tips and Recommendations for Small ELEM/SPED Dual Education Programs

After a thorough exploration of the four case study programs, several tips and recommendations surfaced for faculty considering, or working in, dual certification programs.

### *Develop Relationships with Teacher Candidates*

Crownover & Jones (2018) defined relational pedagogy as “construction and maintenance of positive teacher-student relationships” (p.19). Nowhere is this more attainable than in a small education program. With a cohort-based program and classes of less than 25 students, building relationships with students is not only easier, but can happen organically. Scheduling individual conferences

with students throughout the semester is one approach to building these relationships between faculty and teacher candidates. These conferences provide an avenue for discussing course content as well as any issues the student may have with accessing or understanding information. Conferences can also be used as a form of assessment. If these meetings are simply characterized as conversations, then an element of safety is imbedded which alleviates a level of stress for the students.

### *Model Collaboration with other Faculty*

The success of the program depends on the relationships that are formed with the other faculty members in elementary education content areas and their willingness to work collaboratively. Relationships impact not only how program course sequences and course content are developed, but how teacher candidates experience the program. Understand that your general education colleagues do not know what they do not know. They are not clear on the differences between struggling learners in their content areas and students with disabilities. A great deal of time can be spent advocating for the specialized knowledge of special education. Teacher candidates may experience these same issues in their own classrooms in the future, therefore exacerbating the need to demonstrate how faculty can support one another. Faculty can collaborate on pedagogy, teach in each other’s courses, and provide guest lectures in numerous other content areas. This partnership allows faculty to model flexibility and co-teaching strategies which will benefit students in all education programs.

### *Model Nontraditional Pedagogy*

Due to small class sizes, small programs are conducive to encouraging

creativity and outside-the-box thinking when it comes to course content and pedagogy. Faculty should model alternative practices through their own teaching. Faculty can develop opportunities for candidates to engage with integrated assignments, embedded concepts, and collaboration across courses. The more the teacher candidates see how special education practices can be embedded into general education, the greater the opportunities they have to include students with disabilities in their instruction. Endorse an (un)grading approach to assessment (Blum, 2020). Ungrading involves providing students with ongoing feedback and encouraging self-reflection and self-assessment of predetermined goals to gauge student understanding. Principles of Universal Design for Learning are imbedded in (un)grading as students are given choices and ownership of their learning without reliance on traditional grades. Conduct socratic seminars, which prepare future teachers to advocate for students in a group setting, share ideas and best practices, and support their ideas with research. Utilize discussion-based lectures wherein the faculty and students share thoughts on interventions and differentiation and troubleshoot issues that occur in practicum placements. This allows teacher candidates to make connections between their course content in both elementary and special education.

### Think Creatively about Field Experiences

Try to expose teacher candidates to students with disabilities as soon as possible. It is helpful to work closely with elementary school partners to find the ideal placement where teacher candidates can observe a variety of special education models (e.g., inclusive classrooms, resource rooms, push-ins, co-teaching,

etc.). In doing so, teacher candidates will early-on in their program begin seeing the importance of inclusive practices and how students with, and without, disabilities experience educational settings.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, teacher candidates benefit from an ELEM/SPED Dual Certification Program of study. Although these programs, even within the same state, can vary greatly, they prepare future teachers to work with all learners. Dual Certification programs depend on individual faculty knowledge, relationships, and political structures of the individual colleges and/or universities. Elementary classrooms are more inclusive than ever, and teacher candidates must be prepared to teach all students. Failing to provide teacher candidates with knowledge of both general education and special education students is setting them up to be underprepared for the realities of today's classroom. TPPs must be prepared candidates at these universities/colleges to be confident in their breadth of knowledge and preparedness for the inclusive elementary classroom.

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