Beginning Teacher Quality in Special Education - Implications for Initial Preparation

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Teacher Quality Research

Teacher quality is on the forefront of policymakers’ minds:

- Research demonstrates that teachers can make a difference in student achievement growth
  - Value-added assessment studies (Ross, Stringfield, Sanders, & Wright, 2003)
  - Exemplary teacher studies (Pressley & Allington, 1998; Wenglinsky, 2002)
  - Policy studies employing teacher characteristics (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Rice, 2003)
  - Classroom observation research (Haager, Gersten, Baker, & Graves, 2003)

Teacher Quality Research in Special Education

What do we know?

- Early process-product research linking discrete teaching behaviors with student achievement gains (Sindelar, Smith, Harriman, Hale, & Wilson, 1986)
- SPeNSE and SEELS research linking aspects of teacher quality to student achievement

What do we need?

- Studies describing practices of beginning special educators
- Studies linking the practices of beginning special educators to student outcomes

Why is this important?

- In a policy context that emphasizes student outcomes and questions teacher preparation, we need to know:
  - Relationships between teacher preparation, teacher effectiveness, and student outcomes
  - But first, we need to establish what effective beginning teacher practice looks like

Beginning Teacher Quality Study

- Validate an observation instrument correlating student outcomes, knowledge and preparation
  - 38 reading teachers of 3rd-5th grades in 3 states with multiple settings, delivery models and curriculum
  - Collected quantitative and qualitative data
**Teacher Quality Research in Special Education**

**Rationale for Study Highlighted today:**

- We decided to examine what beginning teachers do to promote student engagement during instruction
- We selected student engagement because of its strong link to academic achievement (Guthrie, 2000)

**Struggles Beginning Teachers Encounter**

**Novice teachers may have difficulty promoting student engagement in reading curriculum**

- Superficial understanding of how to address individual student needs within broader curriculum
- Demonstrate difficulties with student discipline
- Lack strategies to engage students in their work
- Content specific pedagogical understandings limited (Reynolds, 1995)

**Teacher Quality Research in Special Education**

**Purpose of Highlighted Study:**

- To identify moments of student engagement during reading instruction
- To examine practices of beginning special education teachers that result in student engagement
- Part of a larger COPSSE study linking beginning teacher practice and reading achievement

**Methodology**

**Teacher Pool**

- Nine teachers chosen from a sample of 38 teachers
- 1-3 teaching years in high poverty urban and rural schools
- Class size, delivery model, and teacher preparation vary
  - Preparation backgrounds varied considerably
  - Class size varied from 3 to 25 students
  - Half of the teachers used highly structured curriculum
  - In all but two cases, the sped teacher was responsible for total reading instruction for her children

**Data Collection**

- Observations
  - 73 reading lessons observed
  - Three to five observations per teacher
  - 5 trained observers
  - Field notes
  - Observation tools rated (scale 1-4)
  - Interrater Reliability: average 74%/80-60%
- Multiple interviews about preparation, context, and practice

**Study Participant Selection Criteria**

We considered the rates of the following items from the observation tool

- An overall teacher rating
- Items specifically related to student engagement
  - Organization of the lesson, allowing opportunities for most students to respond
  - Extent to which students are highly engaged
  - Fostering student motivation and engagement
  - Continuous and intensive instruction
**Methodology**

**Study Participants**

Based on the scores related to the selection criteria, study participants were selected:

- High (above 3.5): 3 teachers
- Moderate (3.5-3.0): 2 teachers
- Low (below 2.0): 4 teachers

These were scores on engagement factors which correlated with their total teacher quality scores. And based on new student achievement data, student scores tend to correlate with observed quality and the knowledge teachers have about reading.

**Methodology**

• Additional background information
  – Teachers who were highly engaging described having more access to meaningful preparation activities, both at preservice and inservice levels
  – Teachers who were not engaging described a mismatch between their preparation and first job, and less opportunities to practice and apply knowledge

**Methodology**

Analyzed individual lessons through field notes to:

- Determine points at which students were engaged or not engaged
- Determine practices that result in student engagement or non-engagement

**Methodology**

Data Analysis

- Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
- Coding procedure
  - Open-coding: reducing data
  - Axial coding: reassembling data
  - Selective coding: integrating data and developing core category
- Trustworthiness
  - Triangulation: multiple observations and observers
  - Peer debriefing

**Findings**

Teaching behaviors linked to high student engagement during reading instruction

Theme 1: Teachers use pedagogy that promotes versus regulates student participation and learning

Theme 2: Teachers demonstrate a responsiveness to student learning and understanding

Theme 3: Teachers provide cohesive, well-coordinated lessons

Theme 4: Teachers create a safe and warm environment for participation

**Explanation of Theme 1**

Teachers use pedagogy that promotes versus regulates student participation and learning

- Create a willingness to respond and stay engaged through specific teacher actions
- Help students think on own and work independently
- Foster higher level thinking
- Monitor student behavior unobtrusively to encourage participation
Explanation of Theme 2

Teachers are responsive to student learning and understanding

- Recognize when students need assistance
- Provide specific help when needed
- Adjust instruction based on student need
- Reinforce student achievement using specific feedback

Explanation of Theme 3

Teachers provide cohesive, well-coordinated lessons

- Balanced instruction incorporating all elements of reading
- Fast-paced transitions to new activities
- Connections between ideas and activities

Explanation of Theme 4

Teachers create a safe and supportive environment for participation

- Employ effective behavior management techniques
- Arrange and manipulate learning environments to foster participation
- Use peers to assist student responding and learning

What We Learned

- Techniques and structures used to promote engagement demonstrate an integration of what we know from the process-product and motivation literature
- Teachers can foster high engagement even when using highly structured curriculum

Implications for Preparation

- Knowing pedagogy as well as reading content matters in fostering engagement during instruction, suggesting that preparation matters
- Beginning teachers provide glimpses of expertise suggesting need for on-going learning on the job

Next Steps

- Determine if beginning special educators who create consistently engaging lessons also foster student reading achievement or do other factors get in the way
- Quantify practices that best promote student engagement and reading achievement
- Look for relationships between teachers’ reading pedagogy and opportunities to learn in preparation programs and schools