

RESEARCH

previews

NEW FINDINGS FROM COPSSE

Successful Beginning Special Education Teachers

What Differentiates Them From Those Who Struggle?

... **A**ll students should have access to highly qualified teachers. Yet, very little is known about beginning special education teachers once they enter the classroom.

COPSSE researchers—**Mary Brownell, Anne Bishop**, and their colleagues—are changing that with research that describes factors that may influence beginning special education teachers' practice. Currently, several studies are underway that investigate what beginning special education teachers know and are able to do. One new study considers selected factors that influence their success in classrooms.

"Closely examining the practices of beginning special education teachers can improve our understanding of what differentiates successful and accomplished beginners from those who struggle," says Bishop. Through extensive observations and interviews, COPSSE researchers differentiated beginning special education teachers in terms of whether they were accomplished or struggling. Such characteristics as high student engagement and solid classroom management were highly correlated with overall beginning special education teacher quality.

"We asked the question, *What made accomplished beginning special education*

teachers so effective?" Bishop continues. "To answer this question, we set out to identify factors—such as personal attributes, preparation, and contextual features of the schools where they teach—that may contribute to beginning special education teacher quality."

What is the interplay between preparation, context, and the personal attributes that beginning special education teachers bring with them to the classroom? Read on to gain insights from COPSSE research.

Preparation Matters

Preparation contributes to the quality of beginning special education teachers' instruction. More accomplished teachers report feeling better prepared than their struggling counterparts.

"All of the teachers we studied felt well prepared in generic special education," Bishop reports. "They felt most unprepared in teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. The concern is that gaps in reading knowledge can result in ineffective, misinformed practice."

Similarly, preparation in classroom management influences a beginning teacher's ability to deliver instruction. "Struggling teachers equated their classroom man-

THIS JUST IN

Research provides an inside look at how certain factors influence beginning special education teacher practice.

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agement difficulties with lack of preparation,” Bishop points out. “They placed more emphasis on regulating the classroom than on promoting learning.”

Having opportunities to practice and apply information in the classroom as part of one’s preparation also contributes to beginning teachers’ sense of preparedness. Beginning special education teachers who struggled most did not believe they had sufficient and/or relevant practice opportunities prior to teaching.

Context Matters

Working conditions influence the nature of instruction. They also can affect a beginning teacher’s ability to thrive and remain in teaching.

Access to the curriculum is an example. “A comprehensive, structured curriculum enhances beginning teachers’ instruction by providing them with a template for putting effective reading practices into action,” says Bishop. “A structured curriculum actually helped to bolster the skills of teachers who were most challenged.”

The availability of sufficient materials affects the nature of instruction. More accomplished teachers reported using a variety of materials and methods, and they were able to articulate why they used them. On the other

hand, struggling teachers had few or no materials.

Having extensive professional development opportunities also affects instruction. More accomplished teachers took advantage of professional growth opportunities provided in the school or district. They also took the initiative to expand their knowledge with additional college courses.

Service delivery models may influence a beginning special education teacher’s ability to provide effective instruction. “Teachers with manageable caseloads and smaller groups tend to perform better than their counterparts with larger groups,” Bishop explains.

Teachers in the study rated administrative support as above average. However, Bishop cautions that general administrative and collegial support is necessary but not always sufficient. “Well crafted, instructionally driven support is preferred for providing beginning teachers with opportunities for real professional growth.”

Personal Attributes Matter

The personal attributes accomplished beginning special education teachers bring to a job can distinguish them from struggling beginners. Accomplished beginning special education teachers are more:

- **Reflective.** Accomplished beginning special education teachers focus less on themselves and more on student learning.
- **Resourceful.** Accomplished beginning special education teachers seek out information, materials, and resources.
- **Relentless.** Accomplished beginning special education teachers find ways to enact knowledge and practice with a “no excuses” approach.

Bishop summarizes: “Accomplished beginners appear to have a can-do attitude, are very clear about their role as a teacher, seem able to solve problems, and make things work. Struggling teachers lack the knowledge or resourcefulness to look beyond the problem. They often lack the commitment or energy to make it happen.”

KEEP AN EYE ON

COPSSSE research has identified a link between certain instructional practices and high student engagement during reading instruction.

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For More Information

Information in this preview was based on research that COPSSSE researchers—**Mary T. Brownell** and **Anne G. Bishop**—crafted into professional presentations (available on the COPSSSE web site at www.copsse.org).



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About COPSSSE

The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COPSSSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The research previews are produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.



Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education.