

Critical Features of Special Education Teacher Preparation: A Comparison with Exemplary Practices in General Teacher Education

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

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INTRODUCTION

Chronic teacher shortages in special education combined with concerns about a dwindling teacher work force have many special education professionals concerned about the ability of school districts to implement a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities. Fears about impending shortages have led many states, local districts, and institutions of higher education to develop alternative routes to the classroom. The nature of these alternative routes and their capacity to ensure that qualified special education teachers are available to serve the increasing population of students with disabilities is largely unknown. Moreover, the development of these alternative routes comes at a time when teacher education is coming under fire for its perceived inability to prepare teachers adequately for the realities of the classroom.

Critics argue that teacher education programs are not intellectually challenging and act as deterrents to bright young people interested in entering the classroom. Moreover, the federal government recently lent considerable credence to their position. The U. S. Secretary of Education, in a highly controversial 2002 report, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*, claimed that a teacher's verbal ability and subject matter knowledge are key factors in improving student achievement but that the role of teacher education is questionable. Teacher education advocates counter that there are positive relationships between teacher certification status and student achievement, demonstrating that teacher education plays a role in teacher quality. Researchers critical of teacher education, however, suggest that alternatively certified teachers are just as effective in positively influencing student achievement, particularly when they have content expertise in the subject they are teaching. The critics of teacher education conclude that teacher education provides a hurdle to qualified persons interested in pursuing a career in teaching rather than enhancing student achievement.

Parallel to the debate about certification and teacher quality, we have seen a spate of national reform reports targeted at teacher education since the mid-1980s. Although the recommendations from these reports vary, each is focused on the importance of the quality of the teaching force and on the quality of the preparation of teachers. The strongest consensus has been on the importance of content preparation in the discipline and multicultural emphasis. The national reform reports accept the premise that teacher education makes a difference and, therefore, view highly specified reforms in teacher education as the most appropriate path for improving programs. Yet, a debate continues among researchers and policy makers about the value and impact of teacher education, because we lack powerful, definitive studies about its impact. Available study results show that teachers with pedagogical preparation in particular content areas compared to teachers with subject matter preparation only:

- are better able to engage students in the learning process and tend not to teach as they were taught
- attribute their knowledge of instruction and management to their educational course work
- are able to reorganize their knowledge of subject matter in appropriate ways in education course work that focuses on content area pedagogy.

However, because of data limitations, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the features of effective courses or programs across institutions to generalize about characteristics of effective teacher education. Despite these limitations, a number of studies in general education provide information about features of effective teacher education, reinforce some recommendations from national reform reports, and provide clear evidence for how recommendations might be operationalized in teacher education programs. However, special education has no similar conceptual or research base on which to draw. This situation is quite problematic, given the critical need for teachers in special education and the emergence of multiple alternative paths to the classroom.

This paper: (a) presents a framework for analyzing literature on special education teacher education and (b) uses this framework to analyze literature in special education that focuses

largely on program descriptions and evaluations. The paper compares program practices identified in an exhaustive review of special education teacher education program descriptions and program evaluations to practices deemed as exemplary in general teacher education and concludes with steps to improve the special education teacher education research base.

FRAMEWORK FOR DEFINING EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

The conceptual framework described in this section includes features that characterize 15 teacher education programs nominated as exemplary by other teacher educators, school-based professionals, and graduates of the programs: 7 institutions with three different levels of teacher preparation (i.e., graduate level, undergraduate 4-year programs, and 5-year masters programs) and 8 institutions selected by a panel of teacher education experts for their excellent undergraduate programs in reading education. Across the two program groups, there are seven features common to effective teacher education programs in general education:

- coherent program vision
- conscious blending of theory, disciplinary knowledge, and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge and practice
- carefully crafted field experiences
- standards for ensuring quality teaching
- active pedagogy that employs modeling and promotes reflection
- focus on meeting the needs of a diverse student population
- collaboration as a vehicle for building professional community.

METHODOLOGY

Special education teacher education is not an established area of inquiry. We found no solid syntheses of available programs and their features. Our research included literature on special education teacher education published in the last 11 years. All special education personnel preparation programs and programs within a program, both traditional and alternative programs at undergraduate and graduate levels, were included. Strategies used to locate relevant literature for the review were: (a) searches of ERIC, PROQUEST, and PsycInfo databases, (b) searches of the Library of Congress collection, (c) searches of the five top refereed journals in teacher education, and (d) identification of ancestral citations. We limited our search to program descriptions and evaluations in special education published from 1990-2001. We assumed that publications in the last decade would reflect best practices in special education teacher education and provide information for ancestral citations. Eighty (80) publications were gathered, and 74 reviewed; 6 publications with insufficient information were discarded.

FEATURES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS DESCRIBED IN THE LITERATURE

We reviewed a variety of programs across many institutional contexts to determine if common features would emerge. The literature described both undergraduate and graduate education programs at Teacher Education, Research I, and Research II institutions. Program descriptions also highlighted an alternative university program, a part of the traditional program offered, or an account of an entire program, as well as the nature of the program (e.g., categorical, noncategorical, or blended across general and special education). Although many of the program descriptions were not sufficiently rich, we assumed that frequently mentioned program features represented valued practices.

Crafting Extensive Field Experiences

Well-crafted, extensive, carefully supervised field experiences seem to be an important marker of teacher education practice in special education. In at least one third of the programs, faculty described extensive field experiences that were well supervised and incorporated practices acquired in course. Creating links between theory and practice also seemed to be a high priority

for faculty: at least one third of the programs indicated that knowledge and skills acquired in course work were integrated with experiences in field placements.

Working Together

Collaboration is clearly a valued component of teacher education programs in special education. Over half of the program descriptions provided information about how their program addressed collaboration, including: (a) knowledge of collaborative skills, (b) faculty-to-faculty collaboration, (c) school-to-faculty collaboration, and (d) use of student cohorts. Over half of the authors described course work that provided students with information about working with other professionals and families. Many teacher educators also acknowledged the important role that schools play in the education of preservice and inservice teachers.

Evaluating the Impact of Teacher Education Programs

Many authors described their methods for evaluating the effectiveness of their teacher education programs. These methods varied widely and focused on different outcomes, e.g., student satisfaction with the program, observed teaching performance, faculty perceptions of the program, and cooperating teachers and administrators' perceptions of the student teacher and program. If they used assessment, the majority of programs used indirect assessment techniques that included surveys or interviews with current or former students as the single method for providing feedback about the program. Other programs created a more robust assessment by combining several indirect assessment methods. Direct student assessment was used to evaluate teaching competence in more than one fifth of the teacher education programs. Most of these programs combined direct and indirect assessment methods

Focusing on Inclusion and Cultural Diversity

Widespread attempts to address inclusion and cultural diversity reflected the prominent role of inclusion in the national debate on how best to serve students with disabilities and the overrepresentation of children from ethnic and linguistic minority groups in special education.

Maintaining Positivist or Constructivist Orientation toward Learning and Teaching

Many program descriptions reflected positivist, constructivist, or blended orientations toward learning and teaching. These variations are to be expected, considering the strong role that behavioral theory has played in special education and the emergence over the past two decades of more constructivist practices in special education. A strong competency-based approach to teacher education reflected in many programs is perhaps one indicator of the role that positivist thought has played in special education. This approach assumes that a specific set of knowledge and skills exist and should be disseminated to students.

The vast majority of program descriptions included competencies that faculty expected students to acquire by graduation; however, the manner in which competencies were addressed was either not clear (as in 30% of the descriptions) or varied depending on the orientation of the program. Faculty in positivist programs viewed competencies as knowledge and skills to be acquired in course work and then applied in practical settings. A positivist orientation was also evident in programs that required students to use behavioral methods to demonstrate the effectiveness of their teaching. Instead of teaching students to apply research-based methods and interventions, more constructivist programs employed a variety of pedagogical techniques to help teachers consider their beliefs about teaching and learning as well as the diverse needs of their students when planning for and evaluating instruction. Teacher-educators used a combination of belief inventories, case studies, weekly seminars, teaching portfolios, coaching, and various assessment projects to help students: (a) examine their beliefs about instruction; (b) integrate the knowledge they were acquiring in course work with prior knowledge; (c) acquire academic, social and cultural knowledge about their students; and (d) reflect on the impact of their instruction. Interestingly, many of the programs that embraced more constructivist orientations were focused on cultural diversity or were unified, blended, or dual certification programs.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE TWO LITERATURE BASES

The special education programs we reviewed appear to share features with programs considered exemplary in general education. In both fields, teacher education is labor-intensive, carefully crafted, focused on connecting theory and practice, collaborative, and invested in creating teachers who can respond to the needs of children and youth, particularly those with diverse needs. However, not all special education faculty use the same methods as their general education counterparts. Moreover, some of the qualities of the exemplary teacher education programs (e.g., clear programmatic vision, integrating subject-matter pedagogy with educational theory and field experience) are referred to minimally in special education. Similarly, special education teacher education programs have unique features differentiating them from exemplary general education programs.

COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO LITERATURE BASES

Faculty in the exemplary general education programs and special education programs reviewed realize that extensive, well-planned field experiences are important if teachers are to apply content from their teacher education programs. Additionally, faculty from both fields are aware of the importance of ensuring that preservice and inservice student teachers have opportunities to practice what they learn in well-supervised settings so that they can make connections between theory and practice. Thus, special and general education teacher-educators have worked to craft programs that integrate course work with well designed and supervised fieldwork.

Similarly, faculty in the special education and the exemplary general education programs stressed the importance of collaboration between faculty, school personnel, and preservice/inservice teachers. As in the exemplary teacher education programs, special education faculty worked closely with other faculty in their disciplines and general education to integrate program content, plan their course work, sometimes even co-teach course work, and work with students in the field. Additionally, both groups worked to create connections between the university and schools so that students had opportunities to learn in high-quality field experiences, and school personnel became invested in the teacher education enterprise. Special education programs, in some cases, demonstrated an even greater commitment to collaboration than the exemplary teacher education programs by offering course work designed to help students acquire collaborative skills. Program descriptions in both areas, however, omit a focus on improving collaboration with families.

Preparing teacher education graduates to meet the needs of a diverse student population is clearly important to teacher educators across both disciplines. All exemplary teacher education programs and many special education programs reviewed offer experiences that focus on diversity; however, special education faculty place greater emphasis on the inclusion of students with disabilities. Additionally, all the exemplary teacher education programs provide course work and field experiences that are likely to promote conceptual change about diverse learners. Only about one third of the programs reviewed described practices that were similar to those employed by the exemplary teacher education programs.

Teacher educators in the programs reviewed demonstrated that it was important for their programs to have an impact on student learning; however, the manner in which they determined program impact varied. Like general education, special education program descriptions mentioned employing evaluation data to determine program effectiveness; however, the majority of those programs relied on interviews and/or surveys to determine graduates' satisfaction with the program and their preparation regarding key competencies, or faculty members and school supervisors' perceptions of the program and its graduates. It was encouraging that approximately one fourth of the special education programs employed direct student assessments. Because teacher education programs have come under increasing pressure to be accountable for demonstrating that their graduates are competent teachers (e.g., Title II reporting requirements under the Higher Education Act and the National Association for the Accreditation of Colleges of Education requirement for evidence of student performance), we now expect to see more focused

efforts on evaluation in both general and special education and more research about how best to accomplish this task.

Program orientation varied more widely in the special education programs than in the exemplary teacher education programs. Constructivist-oriented programs in special education used a variety of methods (e.g., journals, beliefs inventories, and discussions in weekly seminars) to help students reflect on their beliefs about learning and instruction as well as the effect their instruction was having on the children/youth they taught. Programs adopting a constructivist orientation were usually integrated or dual preparation programs or programs focused on preparing teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Programs with more positivist orientations tended to focus on helping students learn skills (e.g., curriculum-based or functional behavioral assessment skills) to evaluate their instruction.

In the special education program descriptions, we saw limited evidence of two defining features of exemplary teacher education programs: (a) a strong programmatic vision and (b) a heavy emphasis on subject matter pedagogy (e.g., reading, mathematics, science). Exemplary programs in teacher education also placed heavy emphasis on subject matter pedagogy and its interface with educational theory and field experiences. Special education programs tended to focus on more generic pedagogy (e.g., instructional methods, assessment, individualized education plans, and collaboration). Many unified programs accomplished this integration by infusing special education competencies into subject-specific pedagogical course work or teaching courses in integrated blocks.

Special education programs were distinguished from the exemplary teacher education programs (and we suspect general education teacher education programs overall) in terms of the amount federal funding received. These funded programs typically focused on specific needs within special education, such as preparing sufficient numbers of teachers to serve students with severe disabilities or preparing teachers to work in inclusive environments. This demonstrates OSEP's commitment to ensuring an adequate number of special education teachers for all children/youth with disabilities and that students are educated successfully in inclusive environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research in special education teacher education is almost non-existent. Only a few experimental studies have examined the effects of different pedagogical approaches on the learning of preservice students in special education. As in general education, the special education community desperately needs comparative research that documents the characteristics of effective teacher education programs. Researchers need ways to characterize programs for further study so that more useful comparisons can be made, e.g., the common characteristics identified in this literature review. The paper gives extensive recommendations for future research. The teacher education enterprise is incredibly complex, particularly in special education where beginning teachers play so many different roles and serve students with such diverse needs. Consequently, the special education research community needs sufficient support to address these complexities and to establish a professional knowledge base in teacher education that can rival the knowledge base for the instructional innovation literature for students with disabilities.