

Traditional and Test-Only Routes to Special Education: How Experiences and School Variables Influence Classroom Practice

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The Demand for Teachers

- ◆ Meeting the challenge of creating and sustaining a quality workforce in special education is overwhelming.
- ◆ Chronic shortages in special education are prevalent and predicted to worsen (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004).
 - ◆ Shortages of special education teachers are reported in 98% of school districts nationwide. (Fidelar, Foster & Schwartz, 2000).
 - ◆ The Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999) projected that between 1998 and 2008 a need for more than 135,000 special education teachers.

Who are we hiring?

- ◆ When faced with difficulties in obtaining suitable candidates, principals often do three things:
 1. hire less-qualified teachers (Boe & Cook, 2004)
 2. assign teachers trained in another field or grade level to teach in understaffed area (Boe & Cook, 2004; Ingersoll, 1997)
 3. make extensive use of substitute teachers (Ingersoll, 1997)

Teacher Education as Potential Solution

- ◆ Teacher education infrastructure is insufficient to meet demand
 - ◆ only 46.5% of beginning teachers come from teacher education programs (Boe & Cook, 2004)

Teacher Education as a Potential Solution

- ◆ Controversy over effectiveness of teacher education
 - ◆ Power of teacher education to produce high quality teachers has been questioned:
 - ◆ Teachers with subject matter knowledge outperform those certified in education, although research findings are inconsistent (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Monk, 1994)
 - ◆ Teachers' background and experience as well as socialization into the school house mediate effectiveness of teacher education in positive or negative ways (Flores, 2001; Anderson & Holt-Reynolds, 1995; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2005; Lortie, 1975)

No Child Left Behind

- ◆ Concerns about teacher quality, adequacy of teacher education, and extreme shortages led to the definitions of highly qualified and regulations guiding the certification of highly qualified teachers in NCLB and now IDEA.

What is Highly Qualified and How do you get there? NCLB and IDEA Response

- ◆ Highly qualified teachers have subject matter knowledge appropriate for the age level and type of students they are teaching
- ◆ NCLB and IDEA encourage states to ease entry requirements to teaching permitting teachers to become certified by:
 - ◆ simply taking certification tests and content tests
 - ◆ completing an alternative route to preparation

Assumptions Behind NCLB and IDEA Regulations

- ◆ Subject matter knowledge is primary and pedagogical knowledge is less important
- ◆ Extended teacher education is unnecessary for securing highly qualified teachers

How valid are these assumptions?

- ◆ Limited evidence does support the effectiveness of teacher education; however, the background and experiences of participants are important mediators (IRA, 2001; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2005; Monk, 1994; Nouraget et al., 2005)
- ◆ Effective teachers have knowledge of their content, but they also have knowledge of how to enact that content (Brownell et al., 2005; Hill, Rowan, & Ball, 2005)

Rationale for this study

- ◆ In special education we have limited evidence about the role that teacher education, prior experiences and background, and school context might play in a special education teachers' classroom practice.
- ◆ As such, we do not understand the various influences on special education instruction and how they might interact.

Research Questions

- ◆ What role do previous experiences with students and opportunities to learn about teaching play in a beginning teachers' knowledge and classroom practice?
- ◆ How does school context influence teachers' ability to enact their understandings of special education teaching in the classroom?
- ◆ How does previous experience, opportunities to learn, and school context interact to shape what teachers' do in their special education classroom?

Methodology

Participants:

- ◆ Eight first year special education teachers in eight different middle schools across one county in Florida.
- ◆ These teachers represented all the first year teachers in the medium sized district selected.

Methodology

- ◆ Participants' Information
 - ◆ One Art teacher switched to special education
 - ◆ Bachelors in art
 - ◆ Five test-only teachers
 - ◆ 4 Bachelors degrees in English, business, criminal justice and sociology
 - ◆ 1 PhD in wildlife ecology and conservation
 - ◆ Two traditionally prepared teachers
 - ◆ 1 graduate from four year special education teaching program
 - ◆ 1 graduate from masters in special education

Methodology

- ◆ Data collected:
 - ◆ 9 in depth interviews
 - ◆ length range: one to three hours
 - ◆ member checks
 - ◆ 16 classroom observations - multiple observers
 - ◆ Observers have degrees in special education, have combined classroom experience of 45 years, and are trained in Pathwise Observations.

Methodology

- ◆ Qualitative analysis:
 - ◆ Using constant comparison methods (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).
 - ◆ Coding responses into categories
- ◆ Trustworthiness determined through:
 - ◆ triangulating multiple sources of evidence
 - ◆ peer debriefing throughout analysis and writing
 - ◆ involving teachers reviewing in interview transcripts.

Portraits of the Teachers

Andrea

Andrea is a 23 year old graduate of a four year teacher education program. She teaches at the same middle school as her mother. Her enthusiasm and motivation are evident upon meeting her. She is organized in her approach and goes well beyond curriculum to support student learning. She finds that her school is not as supportive as she would like it to be. She has problems securing curriculum and advocating for her students. None the less, Andrea is not shy in reporting that her students have made achievement gains in math and reading.

Ben

Ben is a 26 year old graduate of a masters program in special education without any particular content expertise. He accepted a position at a rural 6-12 school, and it is apparent that Ben is frustrated with his school setting. He has struggled to secure supplies and support for behavior. Despite the hurdles, Ben is able to engage his students in explicit math instruction, seems very reflective about his students, and his struggles do not seem as alarming as he believes they were.

Rachel

Rachel has an bachelors degree in English. She spent the year following graduation as a paraprofessional at a charter school for students with learning disabilities and other disabilities. This experience led her to take a position teaching at a local public middle school. This school is renowned for its staff support and consequently there is very little teacher turnover. Rachel's classroom is a READ 180 classroom and is equipped with 8 computers to support this program. Her writing instruction demands engagement and higher level thinking. She is able to move students through instruction in an effective manner, keeping them engaged.

Lynda

Lynda has an bachelors degree in business. She stayed home with her children when they were young but after they started school she began substitute teaching. Her primary reason for seeking this position was that it fit her children's schedule. Lynda also worked for a year as a paraprofessional for the special education department. The teachers that she worked with encouraged her to apply for a teaching position. The school where Lynda teaches is predominately CLD, and her classroom is at the end of a special education wing. She started the year with no curriculum but has since gathered an array of various programs. Upon entering her classroom it is apparent that she has a good relationship with her students. Her instruction goes beyond very scripted curriculum to help students engage in more interesting practice. Although her instruction is engaging, she sometimes finds it difficult to engage students for a full period.

Joe

Joe has a degree in criminal justice. He worked various jobs including law enforcement officer, national safety council representative and insurance salesman. He made the switch to teaching because he loves working with children and his wife is a teacher. He started in the school system working as a long-term substitute for general education classrooms. The following year he accepted a position in special education. Joe is not timid about sharing his trials and tribulations during the year which include curriculum support, lesson planning, and behavior. Joe's reading instruction is supported by a scripted program; however, he did not implement it appropriately. His instruction in history is unorganized and lacks evidence of explicit instruction or content knowledge.

Sabrina

Sabrina holds a bachelors in Psychology. She has worked at a variety of positions in her field such as a caseworker for a youth offender program and a home school liaison for head start. Sabrina found that a lot of the children she worked with in the juvenile justice system had disabilities. She wanted to be a special education teacher so that she could reach this student population before they entered the justice system. Although Sabrina teaches math, her focus is on fostering a safe sense of classroom community. She obviously has great rapport with her students; however, her instruction is based mostly on a question and answer approach. Her frustrations deal primarily with meeting the needs of her diverse learners. Although she works in a suburban school, she has few resources available to assist her.

Eduardo

Eduardo holds a doctorate in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. He spent ten years in the rainforest on a grant. He has a teenage son and can not move due to this family situation. Eduardo has been unable to acquire a position in his field. His wife is a special education teacher and suggested he take a teaching position to support the family. Eduardo teaches at a middle school that is both high poverty and predominately minority. Although Eduardo has a scripted reading curriculum available to him, he has had no training in implementation. His science instruction is based on rainforest topics but primarily involves watching videos and answering questions. Eduardo also has a great deal of difficulty with discipline. His workplace supports are minimal.

Betty

Betty holds a bachelors in art education. She stayed home with her two children for twenty years before becoming a teacher. Betty taught middle school art for seven years until the art program was eliminated. Since she is a tenured teacher, the administration moved her to a special education opening despite her strong feelings against it. Betty has difficulty connecting with her students and finding ways to motivate them. When teaching, she relies heavily on lecturing, asking questions, and seatwork. Even when using a more scripted curriculum, she struggles to engage them. She is frustrated with the school support, curriculum issues and continuous behavior problems.

Results & Findings

Previous Experience with Students Influence how Teachers Enact Instruction

Although all teachers had some previous experience with students with disabilities, previous employment had the largest impact on the classroom practice of those teachers without formal preparation in special education

Sabrina

"I had one student who had a problem with taking things. I really spend time talking to him about his [problem], identifying the problem and helping him recognize it. He has not taken (stolen) anything all year...I feel like that is a success."

" My goal this year was to try to make a difference in the life of a child whether it was academically, socially or emotionally."

Eduardo

"I have done a lot of work based on the rainforests because I have a lot of knowledge in that area. I also did a lesson on mapping. I used mapping when I worked on my grant so I showed my students how to pull up aerial maps"

Joe

“I had substituted in a general education classroom, but really had no interaction with special education students, certainly not this population. I came into this position with no idea about what to do. I didn’t know how else to teach other than what I had experienced in my education. Some of the things worked well and some of them didn’t.”

“My area of interest is mostly social studies. I wasn’t worried about this at the beginning of the year. I did a lot of work out of the history book at the beginning of the year because it was something I could talk about.”

Betty

“I really didn’t deal with students with disabilities when I taught art. There was always one or two students in each class, but they had to be there and they really didn’t participate or do any work. They really just say in class and I didn’t deal with them much.”

“Even though I taught for seven years walking into a special education classroom was a lot like being a beginning teacher. I didn’t know what to expect or have any idea what to do”

Rachel

“Experience in classroom management helped me to know how to deal with my students and set up my classroom”

“Working at the charter school definitely influenced how I am as a special educator. I would not have been ready without it. The intense behavioral problems really prepared me. You have to learn how to make it happen. I learned how to effectively manage a classroom better, so they understand the rules, they know where I am coming from; they know what to expect them to do.”

Lynda

“I had spent a lot of time in the classroom before I had my own. This really helped me in dealing with students. Behavior has not been an issue.”

Opportunities to Acquire Pedagogy Influence the Ways in Which Teachers Enact Instruction

Teachers with opportunities to learn describe being able to implement effective pedagogy and their self-reports hold up in observations.

Traditionally Prepared Teachers Learned about Curriculum and Strategies through Class Work and Internships

Andrea

“The last class I took was Elementary Math. It was actually extremely helpful because I became familiar with blocks, anagrams, and other things that really help students with disabilities learn. This level of kids really has to see it to understand it and so when we started division we got out blocks and we had a mat. I learned that in the college of education because I don’t know where else I would have picked that up. If I hadn’t been exposed to that I would have been lost on math.

“ My internship greatly helped me. I knew what to expect. I knew what type of students I would be dealing with and what type of strategies worked with these students. For example, I knew what EMH was and how to work with this disability. I already knew some ways to support and nurture academics for this population.

Ben

“I am using connecting math. It fits really well with the special education teaching strategies that I know. It is explicit teaching and that is important for my kids. In every class I was in they hammered that fact into your head.”

“Having time (in my internship) to spend in the classroom with students with disabilities and practicing instruction and strategies really helped me prepare and know what to expect.”

Test-Only Teachers had Opportunities to Learn Pedagogy through Available Curriculum and Professional Development

Rachel

“The improvement in my students is directly related to corrective reading and the read 180 program. We read stories, discuss them, fill in story maps. There are reinforcing lessons...I went to trainings for both of these programs that really helped me in implementing it. I wouldn't have known what to do otherwise.”

Lynda

“Even though I had been around kids, I really didn't know a lot about instruction. I am so glad I went to the SRA training. It gave me a base for my instruction. Now I use a lot of those same strategies in my other classes.”

What happens when teachers do not have these opportunities?

Sabrina

"I have some connecting math materials, but I haven't had any training. I just read through the materials and tried to figure it out."

"I have on student that was very hard to deal with. . . I had never worked with a student like this in this capacity (as a teacher) He was very challenged academically and nothing I did with him really helped, he didn't understand. If I had just had training in teaching students with disabilities."

Eduardo

"I knew coming in that I would have children with problem behaviors, but I didn't know what that involved. I had no training in how to deal with this and I have students with severe behavioral problems."

" I have the biggest problem helping kids learn to read. Each of them have different disabilities and trying to help each of them seems impossible. I don't even know how to teach reading."

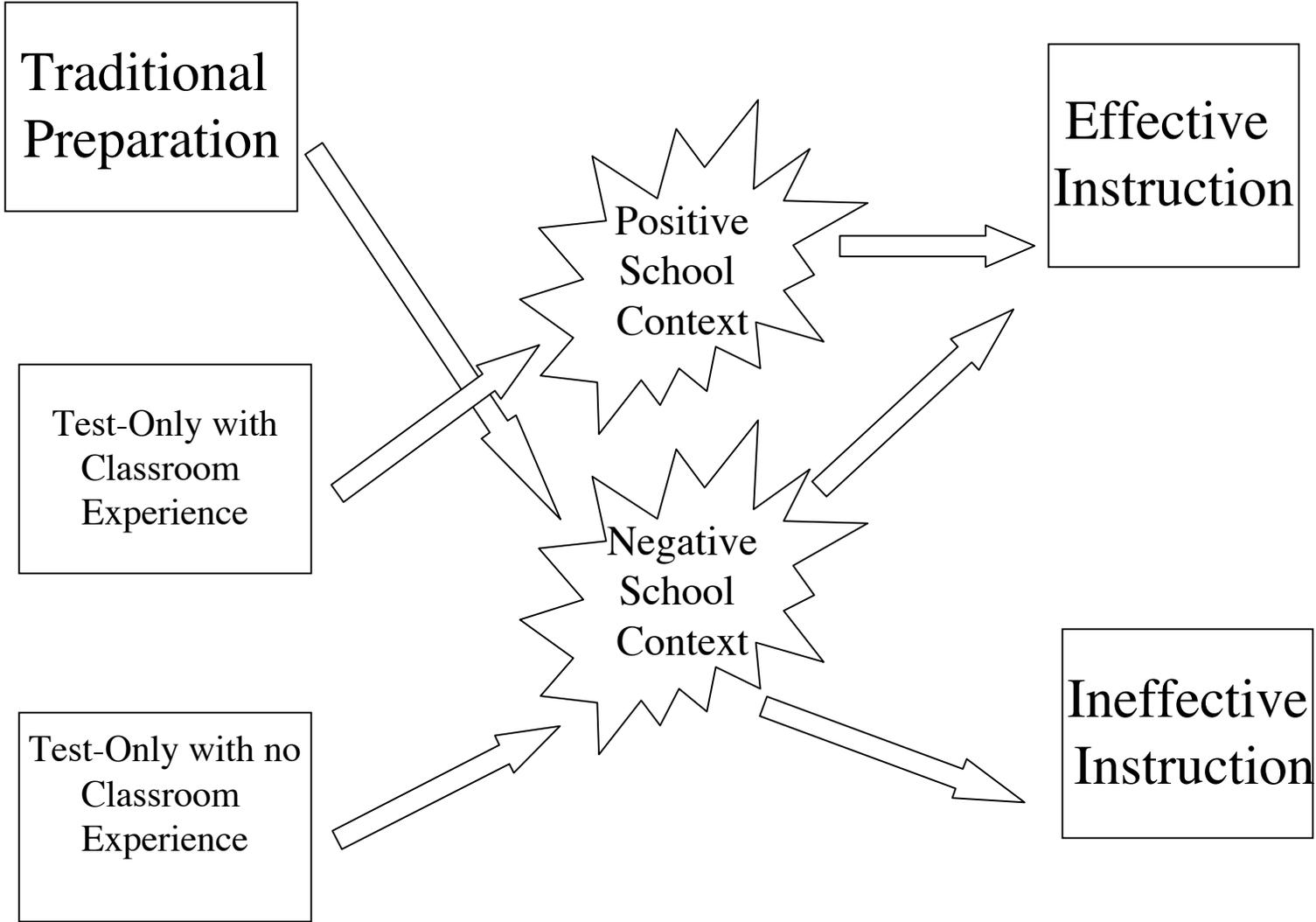
"I have zero math training. I have come in and been winging math all year. I definitely need math training if I am expected to teach it. I honestly don't have any idea how to teach math. So, my kids probably haven't learned much in math this year."

Betty

“The biggest challenge I have had this year is teaching reading. I have never taught reading never mind finding ways to teach reading to students with reading problems. I really got thrown in and had no training.”

“I would have been more prepared if I could have received a lot of training that I never got. I needed training in teaching strategies and behavior management. Just because I could teach art doesn't mean I know anything about special education. You can't just throw anyone into these classrooms....I think that is probably why a lot of this kids are not making progress. It is sad.”

How does prior
experience,
opportunities to learn
about teaching and
school context interact?



Examples of Positive Interactions

Rachel

Rachel felt supported in every aspect of her teaching. She noted assistance from the district staff, administrators and teachers. When asked if Rachel would continue as a special educator, she indicated she would continue only at her current school because she didn't think any other school could provide the same level of support.

Lynda

Lynda discusses the family oriented environment at her school. Teachers approached her throughout the year to provide assistance. Her administration supported her by providing development in areas Lynda felt she needed additional help. Lynda felt that anything she needed was there for her.

Although Rachel and Lynda both indicated they were initially concerned with delivering curriculum and lesson planning, their previous classroom experience and supportive school context provided a positive interaction that led to effective instruction.

Ben

Ben was promised a small class and an aide in his interview. Ben's reality was primarily large classes, no aide, and no support at all. Ben had no materials even though he persisted with administrators about this issue. His mentor canceled meeting with him and consequently they rarely talked. Ben did not feel a part of the school community.

Andrea

Andrea was given \$300 for materials for the year. Unfortunately this was supposed to cover curriculum for all of her four preps. Her school faculty rarely communicated. In fact, general education teachers openly disparaged the special education teachers and students. Andrea felt no collegiality. She did not feel that anyone at the school really cared about what went on in her classroom.

Although Ben and Andrea had less than optimal school contexts, they fell back on their previous class work and internship experiences in order to provide effective instruction

Examples of Negative Interactions

Sabrina

Sabrina has large class sizes and no materials. At the beginning of the year her administrators directed her to the book room where she was told she could have any of the old books she wanted. She can't remember having a real conversation with anyone in general education all year and consequently feels isolated.

Joe

The first day of school, Joe's administrators told him that his main goal should be to keep his students in his classroom and not in the office in trouble. He was allowed free reign with the curriculum, but no materials were provided. He was given little direction on where to start and felt like he was out on his own. Since he taught a unique population, Joe felt there was no one at his site that could provide him with assistance.

Betty

Although Betty had been at her school for seven years, she felt alone. She had general education friends, but none could offer her help with her new student population. Additionally, she felt she had different teaching styles than the only other special education teacher and therefore they did not talk often. She felt her administration extremely critical.

Eduardo

Eduardo's school provided nothing in the way of support. He was never assigned a mentor. He was not given supplies. Eduardo discussed with his administrators his concern about teaching subjects he knew nothing about, and was still not provided help. Although all the other 7th grade teachers taught together in a group, Eduardo was in a portable by himself. He did not feel a part of the school at all

Sabrina, Joe, Betty, and Eduardo all had unfavorable school contexts. The setting interacted negatively with the fact that all these test-only teachers had no previous classroom experience and consequently all four teachers provided ineffective instruction.

What We Learned

-  Previous employment had the largest impact on the classroom practice of those teachers without formal preparation in special education
-  Opportunities to Acquire Pedagogy Influences the Ways in Which Teachers Enact Instruction
 - ◆ Traditionally Prepared Teachers Learned about Curriculum and Strategies through Class work and Internships
 - ◆ Test-Only Teachers had Opportunities to Learn Pedagogy through Available Curriculum and Professional Development
-  Prior experiences, opportunities to learn about teaching and school context interact to influence classroom practice.
 - ◆ Teachers with previous classroom experience and a positive school context provided effective instruction
 - ◆ Teachers with traditional teacher preparation with a negative school context provided effective instruction
 - ◆ Teachers with no previous classroom experience and a negative school context provided ineffective instruction