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**Preparing Special Education Teachers in Low-Incidence Populations – The
Teachers’ Perspectives
By**

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Abstract

A critical issue in the preparation of special education teachers working with students with significant disabilities is the lack of commonality in what preparation programs include in their academic plans of study. This lack of standard may result in some special education teachers entering the workforce unprepared to provide high quality instruction to students. Through this phenomenological study, early career special education teachers working with students with significant disabilities will describe their preparation program and how it influenced their instruction in the classroom. This will provide a framework for how school and district administrators can support the needs of these teachers.

Aim

The purpose of this study is to identify the gaps in knowledge and skills of early career special education teachers working with students with significant disabilities, defined as “an individual who has a severe physical or mental impairment which seriously limits one or more functional capacities” (Rehabilitation Act, 1973, 29 U.S. C. § 705 (21)(A)(i)). By exploring the essential skills needed by special education teachers for the effective instruction of students with significant disabilities, this study seeks to identify components of practice that contribute to the proficiency of early career teachers and the support provided to them by administrators.

Problem

The field of special education continually evolves as the legal interpretation and implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) becomes more refined. Educating low incidence populations has shown little consistency over the last 45 years due to the varied nature of what students with significant disabilities have been taught (Delano, Keefe, & Perner, 2009). Variation in state certification is also a factor in the content of teacher preparation programs (Geiger, Mickelson, McKeown, Barton, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Steinbrecher, 2014). The problem is a lack of agreement as to the common elements to be included in academic programs of study preparing special education teachers. As a result, special education teachers may be entering the workforce unprepared to provide high quality instruction to students with significant disabilities.

Insufficient teacher preparation impacts the quality of instruction provided to students once early career teachers enter the workforce. This becomes a needed area of support from the administrator(s) supervising the teacher. Understanding the needs of the teacher and developing a structured method of support is essential in furthering the knowledge and skills necessary for instruction. Without a system of support, an early career teacher may deliver instruction that is not rigorous, he/she may have low job satisfaction, and the workload may become unmanageable. These issues could lead to poor work performance or attrition.

Research Purpose

The researcher seeks to answer two primary research questions. First, what gaps, if any, exist in the content of teacher preparation programs and the needs identified by

teachers working with students with significant disabilities? Second, what support do special education teachers need from their administrator to gain the skills necessary to provide high quality instruction to their students? This question becomes the basis of recommendations for school districts seeking to develop programs that support early career teachers.

The conceptual framework that informs this research focuses on three streams of theory, research, and practice. First, the study will explore special education teacher preparation programs. The researcher will seek to identify universal competencies in special educator personnel preparation. Prior to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), students with significant disabilities were educated in segregated settings. It was not until the passage of EHA that all students were afforded the opportunity to receive a public education (Yell, 2016). The early work of Whitten and Westling (1985) demonstrated the establishment of instructional priorities in the field of severe disabilities as outlined in the 1975 IDEA. This research is grounded in the work of Darling, Dukes, and Hall (2016), Lignugaris/Kraft and Harris (2014), Westling et al. (2015), and Whitten and Westling (1985).

Next, the research will identify the evidence-based practices needed by teachers for educating students with significant disabilities based on the work of Browder, Wood, Thompson, and Ribuffo (2014). This research focuses on the shift in educational trends from the 1950's through 2016 as the education system moved from segregation of students with significant disabilities to inclusionary practices. Evidence-based practices should guide programs of study and directly influence what pre-service teachers learn to be prepared to provide high quality instruction to students with disabilities.

The third stream included in this study will seek to explore what support early career special educators need from their administrator during their initial experiences working with students with significant disabilities. The literature reviewed describes various mentoring, coaching, and professional development activities that assist in the development of proficient teaching skills of educators. Other factors include the amount of time teachers have to plan instruction and collaborate with general education teachers as well as complete legally required paperwork often associated with special education. Of importance in this stream is the literature that examines the perspectives of teachers related to their level of preparedness as an early career teacher (Ayres, Meyer, Erevelles, & Park-Lee, 1994; Urbach et al., 2015).

Discussion

In this study of special education personnel preparation, hermeneutic phenomenology will be used to provide a rich description of the experiences of early career teachers. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to use the data collected to convey the essence of the phenomenon being studied by allowing the meaning of it to evolve (van Manen, 2014). In this type of study, the researcher must be aware of his/her own beliefs and bracket those from the research so it does not influence the research).

The use of phenomenological methodology in this study will allow the researcher to document the life experiences of the participants. This approach to exploring a single phenomenon will focus on the emotional human experience, thus creating a basis for drawing common conclusions regarding the future practice of special education preparation (Merriam, 2009). Vagel (2014) noted that phenomenology asks, "What is it

like to experience this phenomenon?” (p. 58); therefore, this study will allow the researcher to describe the perspectives of the teachers in relation to the topic, reflecting their personal experiences.

Research Implications and Significance

This research seeks to identify a common set of skills needed by novice special education teachers working with students with significant disabilities by exploring the perspectives of early career special education teachers and the body of literature in existence. As suggested by Westling, Salzberg, Collins, Morgan, and Knight (2015), this study will help create “an essential body of knowledge” that expands on previous work reflecting current trends and expectations for the academic achievement of low-incidence populations (p. 315). Building on previous work, the study will contribute to the field by exploring teacher perceptions of essential skills needed and how the attainment of, or lack of, those skills contributed to their competency as a teacher.

The results of this research will serve as a professional resource to both school districts and institutions of higher education that have special education teacher preparation programs. By understanding the urgency of the identification of best practices in the field of significant disabilities in special education, program courses of study can focus on those skills needed for high quality teachers. School districts can also be prepared to create individualized professional development plans to support teachers working in the field.

This phenomenological study will focus on the lived experiences of teacher participants within one large, southern school district. The results, while not generalizable, can be replicable for other school districts interested in supporting early career special education teachers working with low incidence populations. Future research could focus on participants representing a larger geographical region, thus creating a larger base of knowledge collected from both teacher participants and IHE.

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Author Information and Biography

Shannon O'Neill has worked in the field of special education for 15 years. Having spent several years as a leader in a program for students with significant disabilities, she has come to realize that teacher preparation is crucial for both the educational and functional outcomes of students with the most severe needs. As such, Shannon's research is focused on understanding the needs of early career special education teachers working with low incidence populations and how administrators can support those needs. Shannon is currently in her last quarter of coursework in the Ed.D. program at Drexel University and looks forward to defending her proposal in the next few months.