

Pre-Service Special Education Candidates: Preparing to Teach in Diverse Cultural Settings

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service special education teachers are defined as undergraduates or graduate students preparing to be teachers of students with a learning disability of various cognitive, neurological or psychological disorders that interferes with the ability to learn mathematics or develop language skills, a developmental disability or a behavior problem, or that of gifted students noted as those students with an exceptionally high IQ. Special education candidates are faced with challenges of entering the teaching profession and addressing the achievement and cultural gaps that may exist in the general education and special education classrooms. This article focuses on addressing pre-service special education candidates' preparation for student teaching in diverse cultural settings.

Introduction

The promises of closing the achievement gap rest in the implementation of multicultural education and cultural responsive practices (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005; Gay, 1996, 2000; Kozleski, Sobel, & Taylor, 2003) and actualizing learning theories (Bandura, 1977; Bruner, 1960, 1996; Lave, 1996; Piaget, 1972, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Along with the teaching of an appreciation and tolerance of differences (Khon, 2005; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008), there are goals of fostering respect for family (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Stuart, Flis, & Rinaldi, 2006) and adopting and implementing effective teaching practices, (Bulger, Mohr, & Walls, 2002) so that all students experience success in the classroom.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article is to address pre-service special education candidates' preparation for student teaching in diverse cultural settings.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

According to the guidelines that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) endorsed for developmentally appropriate practice, pre-service teachers can best enhance each child's learning and development by creating a warm and responsive environment where children are motivated to engage in activities that are both personally meaningful and intellectually stimulating (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Huling (1998) contends that through field experiences, teacher candidates observe and work with actual students, teachers, and curriculum in a natural setting. In this authentic environment, pre-service special education candidates should be able to observe and critique teachers' beliefs, attitudes and dispositions (Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Anthony, Witcher, & James, 2002), including their effective use of strategies and learning theories for student success (Bandura, 1977; Bruner, 1960, 1996; Lave, 1996; Piaget, 1972, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

Special Education Teachers and Exceedingly Demanding Roles

The beginning years for pre-service special education teachers can be exceedingly demanding (Larson, 2006). Pre-service special education teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) will likely persist and stay the course in the teaching profession with positive support from administrators and experienced teachers (Ebmeier, 2003; Larson, 2006). In addition, pre-service special education candidates with the assistance of cooperating teachers, related information from college courses, and direction from supervising teachers will be able to set high goals and maintain them throughout the authentic field experience.

Assessing the Situation

There is an appearance in today's educational settings that seasoned teachers fail to utilize the tools and strategies (ie., learning theories, culturally responsive teaching, identifiable learning styles, etc.) that assists in students' learning. An explanation for the

“seasoned” teachers’ deficiency in preparedness may include: infrequent in-service/workshop training, school culture, cultural barriers (ie., language, social class, traditional customs, etc.), district policy and parent involvement. However, the pre-service special education candidate’s classroom experience is highly dependent on definable strategies, methodologies (Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Anthony, Witcher, & James, 2002) and an understanding of cultural diversity demonstrated during their field observations (Groulx, 2001).

To teach successfully, pre-service special education candidates should study and have knowledge of the curriculum taught as well as a strong foundation in education and human growth and development. Pre-service special education candidates must also have opportunities to study, examine and implement best practices in culturally and linguistically diverse settings during their clinical and field experiences (Page, 2003). However, that is not always the situation. Pre-service special education candidates have suggested that they do not have the latitude to address the needs of special education students or students who may be at risk for special education services from diverse cultural backgrounds, although these students are integrated in multicultural classrooms. These pre-service candidates are restricted by district policies, lack of effective preparation and/or attitudes of administrators and staff who teach in the schools.

While school professionals often lack evidence-based knowledge and skills to identify and intervene with students at risk for special education, they also lack the personal resources to understand their own concerns, which include how to effectively cope with job stress while increasing teaching effectiveness (Howard, 2002) and job satisfaction. Therefore, there is a call for a paradigm shift at the university level to diligently assist in collaborating with schools to prepare all school-based personnel, including teachers, administrators, counselors, psychologists, social workers and nurses to proactively confront the challenges of today's youth as they service this diverse population (Howard, 2002; Ebmeier, 2003).

Accommodating Pre-Service Teachers

The main element needed in recognizing and accommodating students from diverse backgrounds is the execution of major revisions to teacher education programs (Lombard, Miller, & Hazelkorn, 1998). Teacher education programs are in a position to ensure that pre-service candidates acquire the knowledge, dispositions, and performances required to succeed in educating students with disabilities before they enter the classroom. The special education standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) acknowledge that “professional education programs should prepare all school personnel to contribute to the education of exceptional learners” (cited in Connard, 1984, p.1). Teachers set the tone of classrooms, and as such, students’ achievements may well depend upon the prevailing attitudes of teachers as they interact with students from diverse backgrounds (Delpit, 1995; Larson, 2006). This has implications for cooperating teachers in their role of supporting and advising pre-service

special education candidates. As schools across the country move toward more inclusive models of education, both pre-service and in-service teachers must be prepared to meet these challenges through a sound knowledge base and culturally responsive attitudes to teach in multicultural settings.

The need for improved teacher training arises from the limitations of many current teacher training programs (Wallace, 2000; Reynolds, Ross, & Rakow, 2003). In many universities, general and special education programs continue to operate under a dual system. That is, many teacher training programs continue to use a model that ensures separation between regular and special education teacher trainees. Teacher training is thus segregated with each discipline being viewed as different and special (Reed & Monday-Amaya, 1995). With this orientation, there are no opportunities to integrate materials taught or to experience the transdisciplinary nature of education as it should be practiced in classrooms today.

Pre-service teacher candidates rarely see or experience the process of collaboration between general and special education modeled (Mastropieri et. al., 2005; Cramer & Stivers, 2007) nor the integration of the two areas of expertise (Villa, 1996). With educators working together, all students would benefit from various teaching approaches, instructional styles, and perspectives by two or more educators collaborating (Cook & Friend, 1995). Unfortunately for pre-service special education candidates, teacher collaboration is not always visible in the classroom. This lack of authentic classroom experience (Andrews, 2002) does not support the multicultural inclusive classroom (Gay, 2002) and may not support a connection between supervising teachers and pre-service candidates.

Pre-service teacher candidates will most likely be placed in situations where they will teach in ways not only contradictory to their educational preparation, but to students who differ from them in language, culture, and experiences (Sobel & Taylor, 2005). These teacher candidates crave authentic real-world experiences about how to implement inclusive teaching practices (Sobel & Taylor, 2005). They need explicit modeling and demonstrations of how to accommodate instruction for diverse learners and more guided exposure to realities and perspectives different from their own (Sobel & Taylor, 2005).

In a survey of 48 American public and private institutions of higher education, teacher educators were asked to determine the extent to which pre-service general and special education teachers received instruction relevant to inclusion of students with disabilities. It was shown that many of these institutions had failed in their attempts to prepare teachers for the challenges of inclusion and collaborative teaching environments (Trump & Hange, 1996). Similarly, in a study of teachers in rural British Columbia, it was established that both their in-service and pre-service education had inadequately prepared them for the realities of inclusion (Bandy & Boyer, 1994). Teachers reported a high percentage of children with special needs in their classrooms who had a wide range of disabilities. They revealed a grave concern pertaining to the lack of support services available to the students and themselves, and disclosed a perceived inability to provide optimal educational programs to children with special needs because of inadequate teacher preparation and lack of adequate resources.

Given what we know about the nature of new teachers' learning and development, how might pre-service preparation courses respond to the challenges of a first year

special education teacher? To address this question, we need some understanding of the sources of beginning teachers' struggles. Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko (2006), offered three common explanations: First, new teachers believe that the theoretical grounding learned in teacher preparation does not equip them sufficiently for the demands of daily classroom life; second, they wrestle with the emotional intensity of teaching; and third, they often teach in workplaces that are not adequately organized to support their learning. In addition, there is the concern if they will be hired in workplaces that support their development and learning (Larson, 2006).

Pre-service teachers argue that teacher preparation programs devote too much attention to theory and not enough to the practical skills of teaching. These teachers leave their teacher preparation with an understanding of the democratic purposes of education, learning theory, a curricular vision and a basic repertoire of teaching strategies. However, they often need support drawing on this foundational knowledge to plan and implement curriculum within their particular classrooms (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006).

Research on induction and professional development shows organizational contexts vary and some are much better places for new teachers to continue their development. Many beginning teachers do not find themselves in workplaces that are organized to support their learning; more important, for many, this is a critical factor in whether they remain at a particular school or in teaching as a career. Therefore, it is with the utmost urgency that teacher preparation programs re-evaluate how to support pre-service candidates in teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds and how to communicate their concerns to cooperating university supervisors.

Getting it Right

What can and should we expect of teacher preparation programs as we look toward the future for pre-service special education teachers? During the past 30 years, scholars have articulated a knowledge base for what teachers should know and offered models for how they learn to teach. Pre-service preparation programs can do more to build linkages across the pre-service and induction contexts for learning to teach and to nurture professional communities. This effort starts by taking a careful look at programs to ensure that they model the norms and practices of a learning community. It is suspected that many teacher educators can do more to foster pre-service teacher's abilities to collaborate and be mutually respectful.

Although traditional teacher preparation programs include the theories of educational learning; embracing culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) is also vital to students' success. To accommodate this teaching style, university teacher preparation programs and schools that welcome pre-service special education candidates must begin to communicate collectively so that there is meaningful dialogue. Verbal and non verbal communication cues (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997) are the cornerstones to understanding and forming collaboration between educators and special education candidates entering classrooms.

Often, the terms “collaborative culture” and “culture of high expectations” (Reeves, 2007) are buzz phrases that impede educators from actually collaborating and communicating with one another. These terms tend to mask the realities of facing and supporting diverse classrooms. What needs to occur is an acknowledgement of the diverse student body by school faculty and cooperating supervisors, as well as an understanding of culturally responsive teaching in multicultural classrooms.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, with the philosophical orientation of today's educational system, every classroom will include a student with diverse needs and every teacher will be required to meet the needs of these students. This will necessitate that teachers have confidence in their ability and the knowledge and skills in inclusive education to meet the individual challenges that they will encounter in the present school climate. Pre-service teacher education programs and school districts must collaborate to ensure that instruction is based on the use of research-based methodologies and learning theories that would support students' learning; thereby honoring culturally diverse and creative classrooms with teachable and sustainable moments.

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