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Field-Based Experiences in Special Education Teacher Training: What Teacher Educators Do (and Should Do)

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Keywords

field-based experiences, preservice teachers, special education, teacher training

Introduction

Teachers in today's PreK-12 classrooms shoulder a great amount of responsibility for student achievement. The shift towards standards-based instruction and assessment has increasingly emphasized the importance of teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Emerson, Clarke, & Moldavan, 2018; Goldhaber, 2016; Scheeler, Budin, & Markelz, 2016; Zeichner, 2006; Zeichner, 2012). In turn, researchers have suggested that the path to improving student achievement lies in strengthening teacher training (Hiebert & Morris, 2012; Zeichner, 2012). Beginning special education teachers leave the field at an alarming rate due to accountability demands and a lack of adequate training to address the specialized needs of students with disabilities (Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). For a beginning special education teacher to experience success, they must be able to "plan, instruct, and assess students' learning needs" (Kent & Giles, 2016, p. 1).

Over the past 150 years, special education teacher training has evolved significantly in response to viewpoints about the profession, politics, and research findings in relation to the nature of disability and effectiveness of special education services (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). Similar to PreK-12 schools, teacher education programs currently operate in an accountability era and are under constant levels of scrutiny from different organizational entities (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2019). Critics of the traditional model of university-based teacher training contend that preservice teachers have limited opportunities to connect their knowledge of teaching practices in authentic PreK-12 school settings (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2012). More specifically, researchers have also queried the extent in which current preparation practices in special education teacher training promote the generalization and maintenance of specialized teaching skills and techniques from the university into PreK-12 classrooms (Markelz, Riden, & Scheeler, 2017; Scott, 2017).

Review of Relevant Literature

Beginning in 1922, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2015) began the work to develop a set of performance-based standards for teacher education programs to advance high quality special education teacher training. In its seventh edition, the most current version of the CEC's Initial Preparation Standards consists of seven standards that define 28 key elements describing the desired behaviors, knowledge, and skills for beginning special education teachers. In teacher training, teacher educators use the CEC's Initial Preparation Standards to guide the design and redesign of coursework and field experiences required by

teacher education programs to ensure that preservice special education teachers enter the field as competent beginning professionals (Sayeski & Higgins, 2014).

A significant aspect of special education teacher training is the inclusion of field-based experiences (Kent & Giles, 2016; Richards, 2010). During field-based experiences, preservice special education teachers practice the application of teaching skills under the guidance of a practicing professional that address the academic, behavioral, and socioemotional needs of students with disabilities. The field of special education can be extremely complex, and Nagro and deBettencourt (2017) noted that supervised field-based experiences have educators as “the most important learning experiences within teacher preparation” (p. 7). Furthermore, high quality field-based experiences may potentially improve academic outcomes for diverse students (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017) and the retention of special education teachers in PreK-12 schools (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2019).

Given the considerable influence of field-based experiences during special education teacher training, recent literature has described efforts among teacher educators to strengthen the field-based experiences offered within their respective teacher education programs (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2019; Fuchs, Fahsl, & James, 2014; Sayeski & Higgins, 2014). During these efforts, teacher educators aligned their field-based experiences more closely with professional standards, PreK-12 curriculum standards, and teacher licensure requirements. Additionally, teacher educators ensured that their field-based experiences increased in rigor throughout their programs and provided preservice special education teachers with frequent opportunities to work among a wide variety of students at various ages in distinct types of PreK-12 school environments. With these redesign efforts in mind, we conducted the present study to examine ways in which teacher educators implement field-based experiences with preservice special education teachers. Specifically, our purpose was to show current preparation practices and evaluate their alignment with recognized professional standards.

Methods

Research Design

The present study employed a cross-sectional survey research design to collect qualitative data related to current preparation practices for field-based experiences during special education teacher training (Ruel, Wagner, & Gillespie, 2016). The researchers developed a researcher-created electronic questionnaire using Google Forms and included closed-ended questions to collect demographic information for respondents (e.g., gender, age range, years of experience in teacher education) and open-ended questions for respondents to supply descriptions of preparation practices in their own words.

Research Sample

Due to nuances with teacher licensure, the present study was a state-level analysis. The researchers used purposive sampling techniques to create a homogenous research sample of teacher educators who specialized in special education teacher training. First, the researchers retrieved a directory of state-accredited, university-based teacher education programs that offer special education teacher certification from the state's teacher licensure website. This listing consisted of 55 teacher education programs. For each teacher education program, the researchers conducted extensive web searches to access publicly available information on their university's website (e.g., class schedules, course syllabi, departmental faculty listings) to find teacher educators who specialized in special education teacher training. When a potential respondent was found, the researchers added their name, university affiliation, and email address to a database stored in Google Sheets. At the conclusion of these web search efforts, the database consisted of 283 potential respondents.

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect data from respondents located across a wide geographic area, the researchers created an electronic questionnaire in Google Forms. The questionnaire included: (a) closed-ended items to collect demographic information for respondents, (b) Likert-type items for respondents to indicate their viewpoints of preservice special educators' preparedness for each of the key elements associated with the CEC's (2015) preparation standards, and (c) open-ended items for respondents to describe in their own words specific preparation practices they use to develop preservice special educators' understandings with each of the CEC's standards. The researchers in the current study were colleagues who were affiliated with the same teacher preparation program located in the Southern United States. Throughout the research process and during questionnaire development, researchers cross-referenced proposed quantitative and qualitative questions with the CEC's Initial preparation standards guidelines for teacher education preparation program field-based experiences (CEC, 2015). Researchers used reflexivity to check questionnaire alignment with CEC standards.

The researchers sent an initial email to all potential respondents that included information about the present study, their rights as research participants, and a hyperlink to the questionnaire. Once a potential respondent clicked the hyperlink, they had to provide consent electronically before they could access the questionnaire. The researchers collected data for four months and tracked participation in the Google Sheets database. To address nonresponse bias, the

researchers sent three monthly email reminders to potential respondents who had not yet completed the questionnaire. When the data collection period closed, the researchers received a total of 46 completed questionnaires.

To achieve the purpose of the present study, the researchers retrieved qualitative data that pertained to preparations practices concerning field-based experiences from completed questionnaires. The researchers agreed upon a systematic coding scheme using two levels of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the first level, the lead researcher reviewed all data independently and used open coding to assign preliminary codes to initial concepts. In the second level, the lead researcher used axial coding to organize related codes together, form categories, and identify the presence of any sub-categories. The lead researcher made anecdotal notes, developed a codebook to document the occurrence and frequency of codes, and consulted with the second researcher to discuss internal thoughts, explore emerging ideas, and ensure consistency with interpretations throughout both levels of coding (Saldaña, 2016). When the lead researcher completed their independent analysis, the second researcher performed a thorough review of data to cross-check and corroborate findings.

Results

As shown in Table 1, 35 respondents were female, 38 respondents were 40 years of age or older, and 41 respondents had more than five years of teaching experiences in special education teacher training. Of the 46 respondents, 27 respondents supplied descriptions of preparation practices about field-based experiences. These descriptions consisted of a total of 917 words, which generated the following four themes during data analysis: Field-Based Observations, Experiential Learning Activities, Service-Learning Components, and Reflective Practices. A description of each theme, along with verbatim excerpts from respondents, is provided below.

Table 1
Demographic Information for Respondents

Characteristic	<i>N</i>
Gender	
Female	35
Male	10
Age	
20-29 years	1
30-39 years	6
40-49 years	13
50-59 years	9

Characteristic	<i>N</i>
60-69 years	14
70-79 years	2
Teaching Experience	
Less than 1 year	2
2-4 years	3
5-7 years	12
8-10 years	9
More than 10 years	20

Field-Based Observations

Within this theme, respondents referenced field-based experiences that involved observations of teaching practices. Respondents described different requirements for “observation hours” or “field hours” in coursework and other programmatic elements, such as clinical teaching. Overwhelmingly, respondents commented that behavior and behavior-related courses were ideal complements for field-based observations. Respondents emphasized the importance of accurate documentation for completed field-based observations to ensure that preservice special education teachers meet the state’s minimum requirement for field-based experiences. Respondents also identified distinctive settings in which preservice special education teachers completed field-based observations. The majority of these settings were located in actual PreK-12 schools and included instructional classrooms for “special education,” “general education,” “deaf education,” “life skills,” “PPCD [Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities],” “ESL [English as a Second Language],” “PE [physical education],” and “fine arts,” as well as school cafeterias during “lunch.” Additionally, respondents noted that preservice special education teachers completed field-based observations in “university classrooms” and settings located within “the community.” With respect to PreK-12 school settings, respondents specified that preservice special education teachers completed field-based observations for students of various ages in “elementary school” through “high school” at both “public” and “charter” schools.

Experiential Learning Activities

Within this theme, respondents described field-based experiences that involved specific experiential learning activities. Respondents reported that experiential learning activities engaged preservice special educators with specific tasks related to instruction and assessment, such as “curricular modifications” and “data collection” for student assessments. Additionally, respondents made specific

reference to students not only engaging in certain learning activities (i.e. assessment, data collection, curricular modification) but several respondents highlighted the importance of preservice special education teachers completing experiential learning activities among diverse student populations, particularly for each area of special education eligibility, including students with intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional disorders, as well as among students who meet categorical criteria in the areas of low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities. Lastly, one respondent articulated that experiential learning activities in their respective teacher education program were aligned with state standards and CEC professional standards. This respondent further clarified that these alignments also provided a method for evaluating competency among preservice special education teachers.

Service-Learning Components

Within this theme, respondents identified field-based experiences that included service-learning components. According to respondents, these types of field-based experiences included an experiential endeavor that connected learning to broader societal contexts. For example, respondents shared that preservice special education teachers work with PreK-12 students with disabilities in their local communities through a “[university-based] student CEC organization” and coordinate events, such as a “Special Olympics.” One respondent provided an overview of two field-based experiences with service-learning components associated with special education coursework in their respective teacher education program. In one field-based experience, preservice special education teachers practice pedagogical techniques in a general manner among small groups of individuals with disabilities in PreK-12 schools and community-based organizations. In the other field-based experience, preservice special education teachers work in a more focused manner among PreK-12 students with disabilities in a tutoring clinic. This respondent further explained that both field-based experiences go beyond the state’s minimum requirement for field experience hours.

Reflective Practices

Within this theme, respondents underscored the importance of developing preservice special education teachers as reflective practitioners during field-based experiences. Respondents acknowledged that field-based experiences were opportune times for preservice special education teachers to engage in reflective practices that deconstruct complex teaching processes. Respondents highlighted that preservice special education teachers had to complete reflections every time they took part in field-based experiences, regardless of whether the experience

encompassed observations or experiential learning activities. In reflections, preservice special education teachers made connections between content addressed in coursework, educational theory, and teaching practices.

Discussion

Findings from the present study have provided fresh insights for special education teacher training and generated a preliminary snapshot of field-based experiences. Respondents who shared viewpoints were teacher educators who specialized in special education teacher training and had several years of relevant professional experiences. Data analysis generated four themes, which revealed current preparation practices for this aspect of special education teacher training. Findings suggested that teacher educators use field-based experiences in special education teacher training to introduce preservice special educators to the work of special educators, provide them with opportunities to practice teaching tasks, and help them grow as reflective practitioners.

The most current version of the CEC's (2015) Initial Preparation Standards states all teacher education programs must demonstrate that preservice special education teachers "progress through a series of developmentally sequenced field experiences for the full range of ages, types and levels of abilities, and collaborative opportunities," which "are supervised by qualified professionals" (p. 20). Since only one respondent explicitly referred to these professional standards, the extent in which teacher educators used these professional standards as a guide to design and implement high quality field-based experiences was unclear. It was also unclear how individual teacher education programs sequenced field-based experiences or how their field-based experiences increased in rigor as preservice special education teachers progressed through programming. Furthermore, respondents in the present study did not offer information about collaborative opportunities during field-based experiences or how field-based experiences were supervised. Clearly, more research is needed in this area to ensure teacher educators align field-based experiences with professional standards.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As with any research study, there were methodological limitations that may impact the generalizability of findings in the present study. First, there was low response rate during administration of the electronic questionnaire. A low response rate may have also been affected by the accuracy of information published on university websites, use of spam filters for unsolicited emails, and human behaviors (e.g., infrequent email checks, hesitancy to participate, workload). Although many of these factors are beyond the control of researchers, future researchers who

employ a similar research design should consider using strategies to increase participation. For example, researchers might partner with professional organizations or state education agencies to cultivate stronger interest among potential respondents. Additionally, methods for monitoring questionnaire response rates could be improved by employing tracking metrics, such as open rate and click rate, allowing researchers to gain an understanding of whether the email invitation reached targeted participants and/or if the participant engaged with the email invitation.

Other methodological limitations in the present study involved the selection of participants, as well as location (i.e., the inclusion of teacher educators who were affiliated with university-based teacher education programs located in one state). As mentioned previously, the researchers opted to create the geographic restriction due to nuances with teacher licensure. However, future researchers could address this limitation by eliciting viewpoints among teacher educators from wider geographic areas. Additionally, future researchers may opt to include teacher educators who are affiliated with diverse types of programs for special education teacher training. By doing so, future researchers have the potential to gain a wide range of viewpoints from which they may also be able to make comparisons.

Conclusion

Teacher education programs have a responsibility to ensure that field-based experiences sufficiently prepare preservice special education teachers for their future classrooms. With this in mind, the researchers strongly encourage teacher educators to emulate the work of well-respected colleagues in the field (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2019; Fuchs et al., 2014; Sayeski & Higgins, 2014) and lead efforts that re-envision and strengthen the field-based experiences offered within their respective teacher education programs. These efforts should align all field-based experiences with state and professional standards, as well as best practices found in existing literature.

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