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ABSTRACT
        Research suggests that training programs for early
intervention practitioners are not providing sufficient field
experience and are not meeting actual training needs perceived by
practitioners. Opinions about the roles of early childhood special
educators and needs for training relevant to practice were obtained
through interviews with 11 practitioners from rural and suburban
southern California and through group discussions at a conference of
early childhood special educators. Data analysis revealed the
following emerging themes related to child, teacher, and system
aspects of early childhood special education: (1) failure of training
to cover the diverse range of handicaps encountered in the field; (2)
practitioner uncertainties about how to facilitate family
involvement, especially in rural areas and with culturally different
families; (3) uncertainties about the relative effectiveness of
prescriptive teaching methods versus child-initiated instructional
techniques; (4) stress arising from the role of coordinator of
services among the many agencies involved with young handicapped
children; (5) lack of time, resources, and peer networks; (6) lack of
support from K-12 administrators who do not understand the specific
program needs of early childhood special education; (7) lack of
interagency cooperation; and (8) lack of appropriate placements for
preschoolers with disabilities, particularly in rural areas. (SV)

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Practitioner Perspectives of Early Childhood Special Educators: Implications for Personnel Preparation

Both theoretical constructs and policy initiatives in early intervention are ultimately defined through the efforts of practitioners. It is the role of the practitioner to translate policy and theory into educational programs and activities that will help to bring about optimal growth and development in the young children they serve. Similarly, personnel preparation programs must translate theory and policy issues into programs and activities that will prepare professionals to assume the roles that are required. However, the processes of optimal professional preparation of early childhood special educators in rural settings are poorly understood in part because the roles of early childhood special educators are rapidly evolving and are very different from the roles of special educators who work with school-age children.

Continuing shortages of personnel trained in working with young children with handicaps and their families have impacted the implementation efforts of mandates in early childhood special education (Bruder & McLean, 1988; Hanson, 1990). Although training programs for professionals in early childhood special education existed prior to passage of P.L. 99-457, they had been relatively small in number and scope and have not provided the field with the number of trained professionals required for an expanding field. Under these circumstances, states and licensing boards may be less stringent when qualifying professionals for early intervention practice (McLaughlin, Valdivieso, Spence & Fuller, Burke, 1986). Examination of the events in teacher licensing following the passage of P.L. 94-142 reveals that great number of emergency licenses were issued to professionals who had only minimal qualifications or training in special education. This situation appears to be repeating itself in the present with teacher shortages occurring in general special education as well as on early childhood special education (Hanson, 1990; McLaughlin et al., 1986). The result of this pressure is that early interventionists currently in the field are quite likely to have had training that is not specific to early intervention. These licensing procedures have the potential to substantially define the effects of mandates for service delivery. While the field is critically in need of personnel, establishing standards is also needed in order to preserve the integrity of programs and carry out the intent of the law. A clear description of the roles required for effective practice in the field is necessary to establish these standards. By defining role requirements, prospective practitioners as well as training institutions and licensing boards can understand what knowledge, competencies, and skills are required to perform the required roles.

Expert opinion has been used to describe the role requirements in early childhood special education (Bailey, Palsha & Huntington, 1990; McCollum, 1982). These roles required for practice have also been described by competency lists (Hutinger, 1984; McColum & McCartan, 1988; Zeitlin, Verglas, & Winhover, 1982) Although competency-driven personnel preparation may contribute considerably to the initial definition of professional role, the validity of conceptualizing teacher training around the notion of competency lists is problematic for several reasons. In general, competency lists reflect more closely the particular philosophy of the program that generated the list than competencies established by observing competencies used in practice. Commonly accepted practice in the field may be included in such lists, but listed competencies are seldom validated by ascertaining what competencies effective practitioners actually display. Further, the connection between knowing or even demonstrating the competencies listed and effective teaching after completion of a teacher training program is not well-established. Competency lists frequently focus on observable skill-based facets of the teaching role (Bruder & McLean, 1988). Such lists fail to address goals of teacher preparation that are less observable but equally important (McCollum & McCartan, 1988). .

Initial efforts to train personnel in early intervention have been examined to establish role requirements. Bruder and McLean (1988) reviewed 40 federally funded personnel preparation projects for infant specialists across several dimensions and noted that, although over 1,000 infant specialists have been trained through the efforts of these federally funded training programs, most programs lacked coursework and field experience in team process. Similarly, Bailey, Simeonsson, Yoder & Huntington (1990c) conducted an integrated analysis across 8 disciplines that train professionals to work in early intervention. Major gaps in curriculum were evident in the area of family assessment and intervention skills. Additionally, although many programs reported opportunities for students to have clinical experience with families, very few programs required such practicum experiences.

Although these efforts at role definition and examination of initial efforts at personnel preparation may assist the framing of professional preparation activities, the perspective of professionals in the field is critical to validate both the definition of roles and suggest personnel preparation activities. Gathering practitioner perspective may serve to help personnel preparation programs avoid common pitfalls in both preservice and inservice teacher preparation in which "top-down" methods of providing training activities not only fails to address the actual training needs perceived by practitioners but, in failing to acknowledge the unique perspective of practitioners, undermines a professional sense of autonomy and competence about their roles (Guskey, 1986).

Professionals who work in the field of early childhood special education have a unique vantage point from which to describe the roles, competencies, and requirements for effective practice in early childhood special education in rural settings. These perspectives of early childhood special educators in service in the field are crucial for guiding personnel preparation efforts. Descriptions of the types of daily problems they face as well as their attempts to problem solve in their roles implies the kinds of skills required for practice. This paper reports a research effort to ascertain the perspective of early childhood special educators in practice. Specifically, practitioner perspective regarding early childhood special educator roles and training activities seen as helpful in solving the daily problems of practice was sought.

Method

Subjects

In the initial phase of this study, 11 practitioners in early childhood special education from a three county area in Southern California participated in individual interviews. This three county area includes suburban and rural school districts and has a substantial ethnolinguistic minority population receiving early childhood special education service. As shown in Table 1, practitioners were selected for interview randomly except that an effort was made to assure that the interviewed group was representative of the specific role description (i.e., infant specialist, preschool specialist) in the area.

Insert Table 1 About Here

In the second phase of this study, subjects were participants in discussion groups at a "best practices" workshop sponsored by a local university, the special education local planning agency and the state department of education. 2 participants including two of the original 11 practitioners participated in group discussions. As shown in Table 2, the majority of group discussants were employed in preschool positions; infants specialists were somewhat underrepresentated as compared to the population of early childhood special educators. Preschool specialists are special educators who serve in consultant type roles and may provide direct service in either home-based or general early childhood settings. Program coordinators serve administrative roles in this case, but they also provide direct service to families especially in regard to assessment. Therefore, it was deemed important to include their perspective in our sample.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Data Sources and Procedures

The nature of the data to be collected suggested that qualitative research design by employed. Data were gathered initially not to support or refute a specific hypothesis but rather as a means of developing concepts surrounding the perspective of practitioners in the field in terms of their own professional roles descriptions and the specific problems they encountered in practice (Karnes & Johnson, 1988).

The initial part of the study consisted of individual interviews ranging from 30-90 minutes in length. Interviewees were told that the researcher was interested in their opinions regarding necessary skills and competencies required to be effective in their roles as early childhood special educators in order to help direct training efforts. Interviewees were asked to describe their roles as early childhood special educators and to reflect on e problems they encountered on a daily basis. Each interviewee was asked to think of at least three problems and discuss them in terms of how training might help professional better address these problems.

For the second phase of the study, data was collected during group discussions of issues and problems in the field at a local conference of early childhood special educators. The purpose of these discussion groups was to identify training needs. Topics for discussion were selected by a planning committee consisting of special education local planning area directors, program specialists, practitioners and university faculty. Discussion topics included: 1) program evaluation; 2) service delivery; 3) least restrictive environments; 4) transition; 5) family involvement; and 6) curriculum. Participants self-selected group membership. Each discussion group addressed one of the topics. Groups ranged in size from 10.

All group discussions lasted about 2 hours. They were lead by a facilitator from the planning committee who assisted the group in defining issues and who kept public notes from the group discussions. Facilitators also asked participants to verify the accuracy of their notes.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed in their entirety. Three researchers independently read the transcripts in order to identify emerging themes. Topics common across several interviews were identified and discussed by the research team. All comments were categorized, sorted, and placed in envelopes according to topic labels tentatively given by the research team. A small number of comments (less than 5%) were deleted as irrelevant to the process. Envelope contents were reread to check if each comment was appropriately assigned to the topic. Disagreements among the research team regarding assignment to topics were discussed to achieve consensus. These procedures were followed in order to establish internal validity as well as reliability (Guba &Lincoln, 1981; Summers, Dell'Oliver, Turnbull, Benson, Santelli, Campbell & Siegel-Causey, 1989; Stainback & Stainback, 1984).

In phase two of the study, the research team examined the notes taken during group discussion with the specific goal of checking whether themes identified during interviews would also emerge during group discussions. It was reasoned that if issues raised in interviews were valid, then these issues would also emerge during group discussions of problems in the field. The presence of the themes identifed during interview transcript examination was established by the research team who read the group discussion notes both independently and jointly. Procedures similar to those employed in the first phase of the study were employed to resolve disagreements about the presence of themes.

Results

Emerging themes from the interview and group discussion data were characterized by the research team as those related to child, teacher, and system aspects of early childhood special education efforts (See Table 3).

Insert Table 3 About Here

Child Aspects

Heterogeneity of Population

Interview - Interviewed practitioners discussed the difficulties of responding to the diverse needs of young children and their families. In this regard, 6 of those interviewed stated that their teacher training was specific to certain kinds of handicapping conditions and that, as a consequence, they felt unprepared to deal with children who were experiencing the impact of handicapping conditions not specific to their training.

Group Discussion - The inherent difficulties of attempting to provide activities for students who were experiencing the impact of many different kinds of handicapping conditions were discussed in regard to curriculum issues and evaluation. Professionals expressed concern that the severity and diversity of handicap in the young children they served had not been expressly addressed by their training.

Teacher Aspects

Lack of Knowledge about families

Interview - Interviewees expressed concern about how to participate in the IFSP process in rural settings where resources for meeting family and child needs were often unavailable.

Group Discussions - Participants in group discussion about transition issues agreed that while important benefits were derived from family involvement in assessment procedures as well as intervention efforts, they felt uncertain how to facilitate this involvement. The extent of family involvement was felt to be determined by cultural values that were different from those of the early interventionist and, thus, at times not easily understood.

Additional Training

Interview - 9 of 11 interviewees expressed that the new roles and responsibilities of early intervention have led them to feel that they lack adequate background and training to meet the child and family needs that they see. A major professional dilemma is that Early Interventionists are so immersed in the demands of their jobs that it is difficult to find the time and training resources necessary to acquire new skills and knowledge.

Group Discussion - Discussions regarding curriculum revealed tensions between beliefs that effective curriculum includes prescriptive direct teaching methods and the belief that effective curriculum in early childhood favors more child-initiated instructional techniques. Professionals felt they needed training in methods of adapting regular early childhood methodology to the needs of children with disabilities who may require more direct teaching methods.

Service Coordination

Interview - Both interviewees who work with infants and those who work with preschool children reported that great deal of their energies were spent on coordinating efforts of several different agencies involved in intervention efforts. Interviewees stated that the effective management of the many support personnel who may have substantial interaction with children and families but may lack specific training in working with young children was a major responsibility for which they felt poorly trained.

Group Discussion - Early childhood special educators in discussion groups revealed that they are often required to act as service coordinators for a multitude of individuals who have regular contact and substantial responsibilities to the young children they serve. Managing the interactions between these individuals and the children and families they serve in rural settings is a major stress for professionals working with young children with handicaps.

Time

Interview - Every conducted interview included expressions that the time and resources available for the multidimensional tasks involved in their roles were almost always inadequate. Responsibilities that go beyond direct contact with children were seen as leaving professionals with personal and professional choices regarding which needs to meet and how to set boundaries between their personal and professional lives.

Group Discussions - Discussants in evaluation agreed that, although networking and peer evaluation might be most help in solving problems, the lack of time for such peer support was problematic. Similarly, in discussions about service delivery, practitioners felt that their inability to search out most effective service delivery options was limited because of the time required for so doing.

Systems Aspects

Support and Understanding in K-12 Settings

Interview - Five interviewees described difficulty in acquiring resources or support from K-12 administrators who, they felt, did not understand the specific program needs of early childhood special education such as placement close to bathrooms or mainstreaming activities. Concern about the IEP/IFSP process as typically conducted in K-12 settings was an expressed issue for 7 interviewees.

Group Discussion - Difficulty in acquiring adequate program evaluation was discussed by group participants. Typically, programs are evaluated by K-12 administrators who lack expertise in early childhood programs. The importance of system-wide mechanisms for effective transitions was seen as crucial for early childhood special education programs but not well understood in K-12 systems. In general, group discussants in the topics of service delivery, least restrictive environments, curriculum and transition, described difficulties in obtaining adequate placement options in systems that were not especially aware of the needs of young children with handicaps.

Interagency Relations

Interview - All interviewed practitioners described attempts to mediate the differences between the needs of children and families on the one hand, and the differing priorities, procedures and

regulations of multiple agencies on the other. Recurring and inevitable conflict was described.

Group Discussion - Participants in group discussions regarding service delivery remarked that both overlap or gaps in services occurred because of the lack of interagency cooperation and collaboration. The lack of training in group process skills in all professional fields related to early intervention was discussed by these professionals.

Mainstreaming

Interview - Three preschool specialists in itinerant placements expressed concern over the lack of available preschool placements available to preschoolers with disabilities. Private preschools or Head Start agencies willing to accommodate preschoolers with disabilities were described as needing training in order to effectively integrate young children with disabilities.

Group Discussions - Service delivery and least restrictive environment discussions expressed concern regarding the availability of appropriate preschool placements for mainstreaming. The lack of available funding to provide support for mainstreaming was problematic as described by group participants.

Early interventionists in rural settings have difficulty accessing general early education settings because of both logistical (e.g., location) and administrative barriers. Teachers attempting to mainstream young children with disabilities are confronted with dilemmas in attempting to create normalized educational experiences for children, on the one hand, and in attempting to maintain intensive and individually-focused instruction on the other.

Discussion

The data from this study begin to describe the perceived roles and responsibilities of early childhood special educators as they implement the mandates of the law. The initial phase of the study served to highlight professional beliefs and concerns about their professional roles that were reflected in group discussion. These findings extend earlier research (Vailey et al., 1990a; Bricker & Slentz, 1988; Bruder & McLean, 1988) in that the data describe important aspects of the roles and responsibilities of early childhood special educators that are not yet adequately addressed in personnel preparation programs.

In regard to specific training needs, practitioners in this study expressed the need for further training in service coordination and family involvement. Personnel preparation programs need to expand coursework and more importantly, fieldwork in team process and consultation skills. Perhaps even more critical is collaborative effort in training programs themselves. University programs must solicit and form partnerships between and among both professional training programs and community agencies involved in early intervention services. In this way, professionals from different occupations may develop common understanding and vision about the possibilities of collaboration in practice.

Professionals in both phases of the study who worked with infants and preschoolers expressed the need for training in working within the context of the family, especially when the young children they served were from diverse cultural backgrounds. The importance of the family in the life of all young children is clearly acknowledged by these practitioners who see that the way to improve thier services to young children with disabilities is to strengthen the linkages between intervention efforts and families. Bailey (1989) and others have pointed out the barriers in early childhood special education training programs to increasing the family service aspect of both coursework and practicum experiences. Given the importance of this domain in early intervention efforts as revealed by practicing professionals in the fields as well as by experts in training professionals, these barriers must necessarily be removed.

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Interviewees and participants in group discussion frequently reported serving a heterogeneous group of children. While the practice of placing children in non-categorical service delivery options in early childhood special education may be appropriate practice, practitioners expressed anxiety over their inability to understand the implications of different kinds of handicaps for growth and development and often felt uncertain as to what types of instructional activities might be appropriately designed. The implicit assumption of non-categorical placement of young children is that age is a more important factor than the type of disability. Clearly, however, non-categorical placement of young children must necessarily be reflected in personnel preparation efforts for young children that are similarly non-categorical for optimal benefits for professionals and the young children they serve.

Bailey et al. (1990a) noted that while professionals in early intervention report substantial discrepancies between typical and desired practices in family involvement, the greatest proportion of these discrepancies are not seen by practitioners as their own skill limitations, but as limitations of the systems in which they practice. Similarly, our data suggest that, while practitioners acknowledge their own skill limitations, system level factors have a major impact on the practice of early childhood special educators. Both groups of practitioners in is study who were employed in K-12 school systems reported difficulties in acquiring the resources and support necessary to effectively conduct virtually every aspect of their roles as early childhood special educators. These practitioners described the larger system in which they were employed as failing to understand and support their efforts.

The lessons learned from the implementation of P.L. 94-142 have clear implications for the effective implementation of practice in early childhood special education. As Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) point out in their clas.ic review of implementation of the P.L. 94-142 in the state of Massachusetts, practitioners ultimately determine the extent and nature of implementation of mandates. The considerable local variation in the degree of successful implementation of the provisions of P.L. 94-142 in the state of Massachusetts depended to a large extent on the personal and organizational resources available to the practitioners whose job it was to implement these provisions. Similarly, the personal and professional resources available to practitioners assigned to carry out the provisions of mandates in early childhood special education will considerably impact the implementation of the law.

The need for innovative programs of preservice and inservice teacher training is suggested by our practitioner perspective data as well as other work in the field. Our data support recommendations for focusing training in early childhood special education on e role requirements of working in the context of families and team effort as well as in direct service to young children. Providing specific training in early child development as opposed to disability specific training appears warranted and necessary.

Finally, the extent to which the larger systems are supportive of the efforts of early childhood special education will to a large degree help decide the success of early childhood special education efforts. Less than adequate resource allocation in terms of time and support for the effort change entails will doom implementation efforts to failure even if professionals are very well-trained. As Bailey (1989) states, it is clear that efforts to improve the training of practitioners will create only limited change in practice, if improvements sin training efforts are not accompanied by parallel change in the systems that support early intervention efforts in rural settings.

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