What Challenges do Special Education Teacher Educators Encounter While Preparing Novice Special Education Teachers?

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Abstract

Special education teacher preparation programs must ensure that their program requirements sufficiently prepare preservice teachers to become high-quality special education teachers. The purpose of the present study was to address a void in available literature by examining the challenges that special education teacher educators encounter while preparing future special education teaching professionals. A survey research design was utilized to ascertain the viewpoints of special education teacher educators concerning the preparation of preservice teachers. Data were collected among 46 special education teacher educators who were affiliated with university-based special education teacher preparation programs in a state located in the Southern United States. Relevant data were analyzed with three levels of coding and constant comparisons, which generated six categories. Findings for each category were reported, along with implications for internal and external preparation program stakeholders. Limitations with the present study were acknowledged, as well as recommendations for future research studies.

Keywords: preservice teachers, special education, teacher educators, teacher preparation programs

What Challenges do Special Education Teacher Educators Encounter While Preparing Novice Special Education Teachers?

Teacher quality is a significant topic within the area of special education (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). In order to meet the individual needs of students with exceptionalities, special education teachers must have thorough understandings of specialized behaviors, knowledge, and skills (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). In light of ever-changing political and social contexts, special education teachers must also contend with a myriad of complexities, including increased accountability, standardization, and greater diversity among students (Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2016). Unfortunately, the field of special education has been deeply affected by issues related to teacher recruitment and retention, which has subsequently led to critical shortages of special education teachers in the United States (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], 2018; Billingsley, 2004; Holdheide & DeMonte, 2016; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). For example, the ASHA (2018) recently reported a shortage of special education teachers in 49 states and noted that more than half of all school districts had difficulty recruiting well-qualified special education teachers. With these factors in mind, special education teacher preparation programs must ensure that their program requirements sufficiently prepare preservice teachers to become highly competent special education teachers (Vernon-Dotson, Floyd, Dukes, & Darling, 2014).

Sindelar, Brownell, and Billingsley (2010) underscored the need for research that identifies "variables that undermine" high-quality training among special education teacher preparation programs (p. 15). A thorough review of available literature revealed many calls for reform with special education teacher preparation (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015; Markelz, Riden, & Scheeler, 2017; Shepherd et al., 2016), as well as several specific examples of preparation program reform efforts (Beverly, Santos, & Kyger, 2006; Fuchs, Fahsl, & James, 2014; Fullerton, Ruben, McBride, & Bert, 2011; Sayeski & Higgins, 2014; Williams et al., 2009). However, there was little available literature that examined the challenges associated with special education teacher preparation from the viewpoints of those who have direct involvement with preservice teachers—teacher educators. Eliciting the viewpoints among teacher educators is of primary importance because they have an immediate bearing on the development of novice teachers and are often involved with the design and re-design of their respective preparation programs. Furthermore, many special education teacher educators have a background in early childhood and K-12 school settings, understand the realities of the teaching profession, and maintain vast professional networks with which to be informed about current trends in education.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the challenges that special education teacher educators encounter while preparing novice special education teachers. Our aim was to address a limited area of research through the viewpoints of professionals who are directly involved with special education teacher preparation. Examining the challenges encountered by these preparation professionals may help identify internal and external barriers and precipitate solutions that improve and enhance the quality of special education teacher preparation.

Review of Literature

Within a teacher preparation program, teacher educators interact with preservice teachers to "provide the professional education component" (Association of Teacher Educators, 2018, para. 12). Through coursework and other preparation program requirements, teacher educators model evidence-based teaching practices and develop cultural competence among preservice teachers. According to Dukes, Darling, and Doan (2014), the overarching goal of special education teacher preparation programs is "to produce teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively teach core academic subjects to an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student body" (p. 16).

In 2015, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) released a revised set of nationally-recognized professional standards that define the content knowledge, skills, and behaviors required of novice special education teachers. These professional standards provide special education teacher preparation programs with the necessary guidance to ensure that their graduates enter the teaching field as competent professionals. Specifically, these seven standards delineate 28 major elements for (a) learner development and individual learning differences, (b) learning environments, (c) curricular content knowledge, (d) assessment, (e) instructional planning and strategies, (f) professional learning and ethical practice, and (g) collaboration.

Although the CEC (2015) has established a uniform set of evidence-based professional standards for novice special education teachers, there is "enormous heterogeneity" among special

education teacher preparation programs (Brownell et al., 2010, p. 357). Brownell, Ross, Colón, and McCallum (2005) acknowledged that common topics (i.e., collaboration, cultural diversity, inclusion) and program characteristics (i.e., field experiences, philosophical orientation, preparation program evaluation) were addressed differently among special education teacher preparation programs. Similarly, Dukes et al. (2014) noted that special education teacher preparation programs offer different course sequences, field experiences of varying quality, and various performance-based assessments with which to evaluate the understandings and actions of preservice teachers. Brownell et al. (2010) contended that differences among special education teacher preparation programs are largely driven by assumptions and beliefs about exceptionalities, pedagogy, and teachers; political contexts; and research concerning the nature of exceptionalities and the effectiveness of special education services.

Since the research agenda for special education teacher education remains in its early stages (McCall, McHatton, & Shealey, 2014), it is not yet clear how similarities and differences among special education teacher preparation programs impact preservice teacher learning (Brownell et al., 2005) or future teaching practices (McCall et al., 2014). In order to ensure high-quality training, it is important to better understand the "variables that undermine" the preparation of novice special education teachers (Sindelar et al., 2010, p. 15). Currently, overall program quality has predominantly been informed by assessments of preservice teacher learning (Gansle et al., 2015) and feedback provided by program candidates (Robertson, McFarland, Sciuchetti, & García, 2017) and graduates (Lovingfoss, Molloy, Harris, & Graham, 2001). There was little available literature that examined preparation program quality through the viewpoints of special education teacher educators. Examining these viewpoints is of utmost importance because special education teacher educators work directly with preservice teachers and recognize firsthand any challenges that impact the landscape of special education teacher preparation.

Methods

Participants

The present study is part of a state-wide study that we conducted to explore the viewpoints of special education teacher educators concerning the preparedness of preservice special education teachers. We used purposive sampling techniques to establish a research sample of special education teacher educators in a state located in the Southern United States who were affiliated with university-based special education teacher preparation programs. First, we identified all university-based special education teacher preparation programs approved by the state's education agency ($n = 55$). Next, we consulted each university's website and obtained publically available information (i.e., faculty listings on departmental websites, course schedules) to discern the names and email addresses of special education teacher educators, which we stored in a spreadsheet.

Data Collection and Analysis

Once the spreadsheet was completed, we emailed an electronic survey instrument to 283 prospective participants. The survey instrument included three closed-ended questions that collected demographic data (i.e., gender, age, years of experience), and 28 Likert-type items for respondents to rate their viewpoints of preparedness with the major elements of the CEC's (2015) professional standards for novice special education teachers (i.e., Not At All Prepared, Slightly Prepared, Somewhat Prepared, Very Prepared, or Extremely Prepared). The survey

instrument also included several open-ended questions for respondents to provide more detailed information about their preparation practices. The survey period was open for four months, and we tracked participation in the spreadsheet. After sending three monthly follow-up emails to encourage participation, we received 46 completed surveys when the survey period closed.

To achieve the purpose of the present study, we retrieved responses that described challenges respondents encounter during the preparation of novice special education teachers. We first read through all of the responses in order to gain an overall sense of the data set. Next, we analyzed data qualitatively through the use of three levels of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the first level, we used open coding to label initial concepts that emerged from the data. In the second level, we used axial coding to identify relationships among the open codes and create categories. In the third level, we used selective coding to identify the core category and determine its relationship to the other categories. Throughout each level of coding, we made constant comparisons with data and wrote analytic memos to achieve precision, realize greater consistency, and reduce bias as categories emerged. We also met frequently to compare and discuss our coding scheme to further establish reliability and validity with our findings.

Findings

Forty-six participants completed the survey and described challenges that they encounter while preparing preservice special education teachers. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents were female and 40 years of age or older. Additionally, the majority of respondents were affiliated with public universities and had five or more years of experience with preparing novice special education teachers.

Table 1
Demographics for Respondents

Characteristic	Teacher Educators ($n = 46$)
Gender	
Female	36
Male	10
Age	
20-29 years	1
30-39 years	7
40-49 years	13
50-59 years	9
60-69 years	14
70-79 years	2
Institutional Affiliation	
Private	6
Public	40
Years of Experience	
1 year or less	2
2-4 years	3
5-7 years	12
8-10 years	9

In total, data consisted of 1,543 words. During data analysis, six categories emerged: Content and Course Delivery, Field Experiences, Interest In and Support for the Profession, State Education Agency Requirements, Learner Characteristics, and Collaboration among Program Faculty. In the following section, we provided a description of each category and included supportive statements made by respondents.

Content and Course Delivery
Within this category, respondents described challenges they encounter with content and course delivery in their respective preparation programs. Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that there was "not enough courses and time to teach all of the needed knowledge and skills in special education." Respondents linked this challenge to barriers created by the specific content addressed in special education coursework, the sequencing of courses in their preparation programs, the structure of their university's degree plan, and preparation program and course delivery modes (see Table 2).

Table 2
Barriers and Supportive Statements for Content and Course Delivery

Barriers	Supportive Statements
Content	"They [preservice teachers] are trained to teach an extremely broad range of students and content areas. They are very well trained, but there are limitations in not being able to dive deeply into special education topics."
Course Sequencing	"There is a need to better align the sequence of courses."
Degree Plan	"We just don't have enough hours in the state required 120-hour degree plans to teach all they [preservice teachers] really need to know about since our degree plan is also divided up with general education elementary education and secondary education coursework."
Delivery Modes	"Online classes do not prepare anyone for a special education classroom."

Respondents also linked challenges they encounter with content and course delivery to the instructors who teach special education courses. One respondent shared that there were limitations associated with being "the only special education faculty member" and being able to provide preservice teachers with different viewpoints. Alternatively, one respondent described challenges associated with the number of instructors who teach special education courses in their preparation program:

> While many of our courses are well-developed and consistently taught by the same faculty, other courses are not. There is often a last minute rush to find someone to teach certain courses. These adjuncts come from a variety of 'connections' and are given a course syllabus and a contact name, then allowed to teach as they see fit. These individuals are not necessarily experts, or up to date on the latest research, in the area they teach for the semester.

Field Experiences
Within this category, respondents described challenges they encounter with field experiences in their respective preparation programs. Although respondents indicated that there was "not enough field experience hours" required, they identified two specific challenges that impeded effective and impactful field experiences. The first challenge entailed locating "school campuses allowing field experience" and "developing long-standing, meaningful partnerships with local schools." The second challenge involved "securing field placements in inclusive and special education classrooms with teachers who are good instructional models." Respondents noted that there was a "wide variety in the way that school districts handle special education students" and some "poor examples of teaching." Specifically, one respondent noted, "We have very few excellent teachers in our geographic area, so preservice teachers witness a lot of bad teaching."

Interest in and Support for the Profession
Within this category, respondents described challenges they encounter with the lack of interest in special education among preservice teachers, as well as the provision of continuous support for practicing special education teachers. With respect to interest in the profession, respondents indicated that they had "small student numbers" in their respective preparation programs due to "a limited perception of opportunities for jobs" and overall interest in becoming a special education teacher. With respect to support for the profession, respondents noted that "keeping special education professionals from burnout" was greatly affected a lack of adequate teacher preparation and "ever changing roles and responsibilities."

State Education Agency Requirements
Within this category, respondents described challenges they encounter with requirements issued by their state's education agency. Respondents specified that "changes in the certification requirements and their ambiguity" was a constant challenge. One respondent explained, "Special education is a highly nuanced and diverse teaching field that requires specialized expertise. Unfortunately, the way our state has set up certification and higher education programs, we are forced to teach EVERYTHING to EVERYONE."

Learner Characteristics
Within this category, respondents described challenges they encounter with preservice teachers as learners. Respondents commented that preservice special education teachers "come unprepared" and "lack a strong theoretical foundation," which makes "engaging [preservice teachers] in meaningful discussions" a challenge. Respondents also described how their preparation efforts were hindered by specific personality traits (e.g., "Some [preservice teachers] are very hesitant to step outside of their comfort zone or think outside of the box.") and behaviors (e.g., "[Preservice teachers] have changed and are not as willing to read and follow given directions. They expect more from the professor, but they do not hold this same expectation for themselves."). Additionally, one respondent described how learner characteristics affected preservice teachers once they became novice special education teachers:

> I think most preservice teachers graduate understanding best practice skills, but they are prone to adopt the current practices used in school settings. In other words, they often defer to their school's practices, which in many cases are in direct conflict with the practices that they learned in their university classes.

Collaboration among Program Faculty

Within this category, respondents described challenges they encounter with collaborative efforts among their preparation program colleagues. Respondents acknowledged that "a lack of ongoing dialogue and planning" among all teacher educators inhibits the development of "knowledge and understandings of students with disabilities" and prevents regular preparation program "updating" that "could better meet the needs of preservice teachers." One respondent explained that "tenured faculty members make scheduling and course objective decisions," while "non-tenured faculty members actually teach the courses. Therefore a few make decisions, with basically no input from the people in the trenches." Similarly, another respondent recognized that poor attempts with collaboration among other major stakeholders in their preparation program presented challenges:

> [We have] a serious lack of communication between our teaching faculty and our field faculty. Although both have been in place for up to 30 years on our campus, our teaching faculty and program leaders do not know who the field supervisors are by sight. They know their names, but there is rarely communication or planning to benefit our students.

Discussion

Special education teacher preparation programs have a common goal of producing knowledgeable and skilled special education teachers (Dukes et al., 2014) and must ensure that their preparation program requirements prepare highly competent professionals (Vernon-Dotson et al., 2014). Although special education teacher preparation programs are guided by the CEC's (2015) professional standards for novice special education teachers, there are differences in how they address common program topics and characteristics (Brownell et al., 2005; Brownell et al., 2010; Dukes et al., 2014). However, research that examines special education teacher preparation is in its early stages and requires much more attention (McCall et al., 2014), especially with respect to understanding the factors that impact special education teacher preparation (Sindelar et al., 2010).

The purpose of the present study was to ascertain the viewpoints of special education teacher educators concerning the challenges they encounter while preparing novice special education teachers. Obtaining viewpoints from the preparation program professionals who interact closely and frequently with preservice teachers has provided an insider's view of current teacher preparation practices and shed light on an under-researched area. In the present study, we analyzed data provided by 46 special education teacher educators who were experienced teacher preparation professionals. Our findings revealed identified internal and external barriers within six different categories: Content and Course Delivery, Field Experiences, Interest In and Support for the Profession, State Education Agency Requirements, Learner Characteristics, and Collaboration among Program Faculty. These findings have pointed to the following implications for stakeholders affiliated with special education teacher preparation programs.

First, all teacher educators have a shared responsibility to remain current and relevant with content addressed in their respective preparation programs. Brown, Welsch, Hill, and Cipko (2008) recommended that in addition to teaching courses, special education teacher educators

should also share their expertise among all teacher educators, including "faculty teaching regular content courses" (p. 2093). By doing so, internal preparation program stakeholders could potentially function as a professional learning community that promotes pedagogical growth (Brody & Hadar, 2011), reduces isolation (Hadar & Brody, 2010), and provides opportunities for focused "talk about student learning" (Hadar & Brody, 2012, p. 157). These efforts may also reveal opportunities to invite experts beyond the program to lead collective professional learning experiences for specific topics, such as changing early childhood and K-12 special education practices and nuances with state education agency mandates (Fuchs et al., 2014). As a professional learning community, internal preparation program stakeholders reinforce a shared commitment towards effective teacher preparation and are empowered to strengthen interdisciplinary connections throughout the coursework and field experiences offered in their programs.

Similarly, special education teacher educators should establish strong partnerships with external program stakeholders who are early childhood and K-12 practitioners, such as special education administrators, specialists, and teachers. Through these partnerships, special education teacher educators ensure that the content knowledge, skills, and behaviors addressed in their courses and field experiences are relevant and generalize into K-12 settings (Markelz et al., 2017). In this same manner, external program stakeholders develop better understandings of the trajectory of teacher preparation and may identify ways to support novice special education teachers through induction and mentoring efforts offered within their schools and districts (Bettini et al., 2017).

By utilizing more strategic practices among internal and external stakeholders affiliated with special education teacher preparation programs, special education teacher educators will likely discover opportunities to revise preparation program requirements. Rather than perceive these opportunities as "punitive or superficial," they "should view the revision process as an opportunity to make meaningful improvements" (Fuchs et al., 2014, p. 151). Furthermore, findings from the present study have suggested a need for preparation practices that support current and prospective preservice special education teachers with continuous professional learning. We encourage special education teacher educators to consult available literature and identify promising practices appropriate for their specific contexts. For example, Beverly et al. (2006) established a Special Education Ambassador program, which recruits and welcomes preservice special education teachers into their special education teacher preparation program and creates a professional network among graduates of their program. Hoffman et al. (2015) used Torey Hayden's narratives as resources to promote effective teaching practices, shape attitudes and identities, and develop relationship skills among preservice teachers as they progress through their special education teacher preparation programs. Roberts, Benedict, and Thomas (2013) apprised cooperating teachers in K-12 schools of specific strategies that they may use to support preservice teachers completing field experiences in their special education classrooms. These are only a few examples of literature-based possibilities, and special education teacher educators may also identify promising practices through consultations among colleagues affiliated with other special education teacher preparation programs.

Limitations and Areas of Further Research

The present study was exploratory in nature and intended to address a limited area of research. Although reported findings have added new insights concerning special education teacher preparation, they were not tested for statistical significance and cannot be generalized to a wider population. However, we feel strongly that exploring this phenomenon through the viewpoints of special education teacher educators was of great importance. Therefore, follow-up studies should be conducted that are more rigorous and enhance the reliability and validity of findings. For example, future research efforts may employ more comprehensive research designs (e.g., case studies) and utilize data collection efforts that triangulate multiple data sources (e.g., individual and focus group interviews). We also recommend that future studies examine how special education teacher preparation programs prepare novice special education teachers for specialized and unique challenges in the profession, such as the implementation of special education practices in rural schools and communities.

Conclusion

Currently, the field of special education is beset with a number of issues, such as teacher recruitment and retention (Billingsley, 2004; Holdheid & DeMonte, 2016; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008), as well as increased accountability, standardization, and greater diversity among students (Shepherd et al., 2016). Now, more than ever, preparing highly competent special education teachers is of primary importance (Brownell & Sindelar, 2016; Brownell et al., 2010; Sindelar et al., 2010; Vernon-Dotson et al., 2014). The field of special education teacher preparation is dynamic and susceptible to continuous changes that occur in early childhood and K-12 settings. As an early-stage area of research (McCall et al., 2014), it is imperative that the special education teacher preparation community continue engagement with an active research agenda to examine "complexities and to establish a professional knowledge base in teacher education" (Brownell et al., 2005, p. 249).

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