

Special Education Teachers' Perspectives on Tutoring by Local College Students

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To provide information for university special education faculty and special education teachers, we present the perspectives of three special education teachers regarding the tutoring of their students by local college students. The special education teachers describe their needs as teachers, their students' needs, and how universities can be useful and productive in their schools with regard to tutoring or other potential partnerships. These teachers provide their perspectives on what universities need to consider when preparing college students to tutor in local schools, how this experience can be useful for college students, and how this partnership can benefit special education teachers and their students with disabilities.

Keywords: special education teachers, college students, tutoring

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' Views on University Tutoring Partnerships

In the United States and many other countries, teachers are under pressure for their students to perform at a high level on standardized tests (Berliner, 2011; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; von der Embse & Mankin, 2021). Students' test scores are often used to judge teachers on their performance without regard to other struggles and challenges that students may be facing both inside and outside of school (Guarino et al., 2015; Wang & Degol, 2016). Teachers provide tremendous support for students as they learn (in addition to academics and instruction); teachers are often tasked with (and succeed with) supporting students with regard to social, emotional, and other needs beyond what the academic curriculum demands (Ruzek et al., 2016).

Recognizing the expanding demands placed on teachers today, universities are tasked with providing high-quality training for education majors to

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prepare them for their future work as teachers. A key component of this training is field experience in classrooms (Leko et al., 2015; Maheady et al., 1996; Watt & Wasburn-Moses, 2018). Education researchers and their colleagues, both at universities and in the field (e.g., teachers, administrators, etc.), have developed partnerships to provide support for schools in ways that also provide research and educational benefits for the university (Bernay et al., 2020; Clarke & Winslade, 2019). Bernay et al.'s research on such partnerships has indicated that both schoolteachers and university students recognized the importance of connecting theories learned in universities to practices within schools, as well as their improved exposure to new ideas and experiences gained. Ideally, these partnerships provide opportunities for universities to gather information for research, gain an understanding of how to best prepare to teach preservice teachers, and simultaneously provide a valuable service to the community. Tutoring programs are one example of such partnerships that research has shown to be of benefit to students and universities (Nickow et al., 2020).

Universities can provide crucial support to school teachers working to meet the pressing needs of preparing students for high-stakes tests, nurturing and challenging students to maximize their potential, as well as the many other tasks teachers are expected to complete in the classroom. As universities work to meet the challenge of preparing preservice teachers for the challenges that await them in the field of education, local schools can support universities by providing valuable opportunities for college students to work with children (in addition to their student teaching experience) often in the role of tutors for struggling learners (including students with learning disabilities).

In this article, we consider how these mutually beneficial partnerships are perceived by practicing teachers of students with learning disabilities. The authors are a combination of a university professor, a doctoral student (who is a research and teaching assistant and former teacher with many years of experience), and the professor's former students who were highly successful in their undergraduate teacher preparation work and have since experienced a great deal of success as teachers in their own classrooms. The focus of this paper is to provide readers with these teachers' perspectives on their needs, their students' needs, and how universities can be useful and productive in their schools with regard to tutoring or other potential partnerships.

We selected these particular teachers to represent the perspectives of special education teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. We sought to learn from these teachers because they were successful in college, as students of the first author, and later in their careers as teachers. They currently serve as important mentors for college students preparing to be teachers. To gather these teachers' perspectives and share their ideas with readers of this journal, the first author, a university professor, asked these teachers (via email)

questions about the potential need for tutors in their schools such as “Is there a need for tutors in your classroom or the school in general for students with learning disabilities (or other struggling learners)?”, and “If tutoring is needed, how should it be done?” Each teacher provided written responses to the questions. The first author selected quotes from the teachers’ answers based on relevance to the key points made by each teacher. The teachers then approved the representation of their ideas in this article. Over the next sections, we will present three cases from the perspective of these teachers.

Mrs. Vogt

Erin Vogt has taught high school mathematics to students with learning disabilities for several years in an urban school district. She participated in tutoring programs for junior high school students (i.e., 8th grade students) when she was in college, that were designed and implemented by the first author of this study. She provided valuable insights as a former tutor and an established teacher in a local high school:

If students had a point person they could build a relationship with and possibly do some academic work with, that would be great. I’m thinking about our practicum we did [at a nearby school], that was awesome and I am so grateful for that experience. I also know that students/teachers in any building would love the support.

Tutoring or classroom support would be great. Our building/district struggles a lot with students who are in very terrible home situations, don’t have food, are unsafe at home, and come to school for support from trusted adults, etc. A huge area of challenge is students seeing academics as necessary, when their basic needs aren’t met. It’s then hard to motivate these students to work, so often working with a tutor or a fun college student/new person can be a lot more motivating than working with a teacher who tells you what to do all the time. On the inverse, it can often be hard to push further the students who are doing extremely well and do all of their coursework on time or early, so tutors or college professors/students could work as a reward for these students to give one-on-one small group academic enrichment or just to build a relationship with.

In addition to these comments about the need for help with supporting and motivating her students, Mrs. Vogt commented on some ways tutors could provide support for teachers with data collection to ease some of the burden placed on special education teachers.

Taking behavioral data on students with disabilities could also be a huge help for all classrooms with students with IEPs.

Counting the number of redirections a student needs per bell, or setting a timer for an individual student break is hard when teaching a full class. It would be so helpful if in a difficult class, teachers had a support student to track certain data.

She commented on how this helps with data collection and can also be helpful for her students from a motivational standpoint.

Tutors could possibly support with tracking student progress monitoring. Students enjoy seeing their growth and they can learn how to track this growth in certain classes or skill areas by creating/using visuals with their tutor. For example, I have a student now who works with a 1:1 tutor for writing. With this tutor, she's able to track the amount of sentences she's able to write and see her growth through the year. This can help students find the "why" behind academic tasks.

Mrs. Vogt's perspective supports the work we have done and provides more information that university faculty can use as they train their tutors to consider and adapt to the academic and socioemotional needs of students. She points to the importance of tutors developing relationships with students that allow them to be seen as a fun person to work with or even a reward for students who may benefit from added enrichment. Additionally, Mrs. Vogt described the benefits of having college students help with data collection and progress monitoring, experiences that would be very helpful for students majoring in special education.

Mrs. Hoehn

Leah Hoehn has been a successful middle school teacher of students with disabilities for several years. She was also an outstanding student during her undergraduate work and experienced immediate success as a teacher in her first teaching position. She co-teaches mathematics with a general education math teacher. Mrs. Hoehn commented on the pressure she is under due to state testing as well as how she is evaluated as a teacher and how this relates to what university students might do in her school.

As part of my teacher evaluation, student test scores play a large role in the final summative rating of teacher effectiveness, more specifically, did the student "grow" from the previous year or not? This growth is strictly seen in test scores, which puts a lot of pressure on the teacher; at least, I know I feel that pressure. In addition, districts are expected to perform at a certain level in order to move towards "closing the gap" and/or growing from the year before, and although everyone across the district, at all levels, shares that responsibility, at the end of the day, it's the teachers who are directly working with our students and

who feel that direct responsibility of ensuring growth.

As far as tutoring goes, the tutor needs to be familiar with Ohio's Learning Standards and understand the skill at hand with regards to the standard. Every year, Ohio releases test items from the previous school year(s) which are a great resource to use as bell ringers or early finishers in the classroom (these can be found on Ohio's Department of Education website). It would also be of great benefit for these items to be reinforced by a tutor because as much as we as classroom teachers would like to spend more time on these state-test-like-questions, we have a responsibility to maintain focus on and continue to move through the curriculum.

In addition to supporting students who are struggling and reinforcing test preparation, Mrs. Hoehn elaborated on how the tutors can be effective within the context of her classrooms and in her school.

There is absolutely a need for tutoring in my classroom and throughout the school, in general, for students with [learning disabilities] and other struggling learners. For my own personal classroom needs, I prefer to have a tutor actively present during instruction. That way, I can pair them with a student 1:1 or place them in a high needs small group. By being in class, the tutor will be better equipped with reinforcing the content at hand. Before coming into the classroom, though, the tutor needs to be provided with a pacing guide so that he or she can examine prior content discussed, as well as, content to be taught. This way, they have a better idea of what prior knowledge the student(s) should possess as well as what's to come. Even if the individual is tutoring outside of school hours, he or she still needs to have access to the pacing guide and needs to be communicating with the classroom teacher. Both parties have to be willing to have a team-like mentality. Even something as simple as the teacher sharing the material or the standard(s) that is being worked on in class... I prefer current content being taught to be reinforced during tutoring sessions versus the more basic skills, such as arithmetic, even if that is something the student may be struggling with. The reason being is that although arithmetic would absolutely be an area of concern, accommodations can be put in place to support that student so that he or she can access the grade-level curriculum (i.e., calculator, multiplication chart, number line, etc.).

Mrs. Hoehn's insights can be applied to a variety of situations regarding the necessary preparation of tutors before working with the students that day, integration of the tutors into part of the classroom discussion, and ways to provide one-on-one or small-group support for their students. Mrs. Hoehn sees tutoring as a method to extend student understanding of classroom content, pointing to a need for tutors to build connections with classroom teachers. She emphasizes the need for tutors to understand and be familiar with current state assessments and sample test questions, which are often used as practice in classrooms.

Mrs. Pescatrice

Stephanie Pescatrice was an undergraduate research collaborator with the first author. She tutored students at a local junior high school, participated in data collection and analysis, and collaborated with the first author on conference presentations and journal manuscripts (Hord et al., 2021). She has taught at a local, urban elementary school for several years and currently collaborates with the university on teacher preparation regarding the fieldwork of special education majors. Students often discuss their fieldwork with Mrs. Pescatrice in their teacher preparation courses. She provided her perspective on her former and current work in our tutoring programs.

I do believe there is a need for tutors for both students with learning disabilities and students who are just below their benchmark score. I believe the tutors would need to use a research-based program to be most effective. I believe the university could provide their students with proper training in a credited research-based intervention program. By providing students with this training in college, they not only can provide tutoring for students while working on their undergraduate degree, but will be more prepared for their teaching career.

In addition to these comments about the need for tutors with research-based intervention training, Mrs. Pescatrice talked about math skills that often warrant extra instruction by tutors.

If I could design a math tutoring program for my students, it would focus on understanding place value. Many of my students in third grade still struggle with this key skill. Additionally, tutoring in areas such as telling time and understanding math vocabulary would be very helpful. If students had more instruction in these areas, I think they'd be more successful. Tutors should reinforce the students' daily lessons. Tutors could use lessons from websites like EngageNY (which is free and accessible to everyone) because they are structured and well thought out (New York State Education Department).

Mrs. Pescatrice's perspective on how to train tutors in determining which content or topic areas of instruction can be applied in many ways to other tutoring programs. She describes the need for universities to provide training and workshops in research-based intervention programs and points to an example website for tutors to use as a resource when tutoring. Her recommendations on specific content areas indicate a need to connect with classroom teachers to determine content areas to focus on when tutoring.

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKE-AWAYS

There is significant research evidence to point to the benefits of school-university partnerships, such as tutoring programs (Leko et al., 2015; Maheady et al., 1996; Nickow et al., 2020; Watt & Wasburn-Moses, 2018). Within this article, we provided a platform to elevate the voices of classroom teachers who participated in this type of tutoring program as part of their undergraduate university teacher preparation. Their unique insights into student and teacher needs can be utilized to improve both teacher preparation programs and school-university partnerships.

Mrs. Vogt pointed to the motivation students of all abilities gain from building working relationships with university tutors. She also noted the need for helpers when tracking behavioral data in the classroom, an experience that would be invaluable for preservice special education students who will need to do the same in their future classrooms. Mrs. Hoehn described how university tutors could help prepare students for difficult state testing and classroom content. She indicated the benefits of classroom observation and knowledge of specific classroom content prior to tutoring for tutors and the students they serve. Mrs. Pescatrice provided feedback on how universities can improve training for tutors in intervention programs and specific content areas.

The perspectives of these classroom teachers provide an understanding of how universities can continue to support local schools through school-university partnerships and tutoring programs to reduce the number of tasks expected of classroom teachers each day, help prepare students for high-stakes testing, and increase student motivation. Future discussions with classroom teachers may need to focus on understanding additional aspects of high-stakes testing pressures and how tutors may help to reduce these, how tutors can help teachers meet the needs of a wide variety of students' developmental levels within the classroom, whether teachers prefer small group or individual tutoring for their students, and additional skills or training recommended for tutors coming into the classroom.

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