First-Year Special Educators' Relationships with Their General Education Colleagues

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Teacher researchers have documented the experiences of beginning teachers, describing novices who have been challenged by the responsibilities of managing and organizing classrooms and meeting the diverse needs of students (Blase, 1985; Burden, 1990; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Huberman, 1993; Kagan, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Ryan, 1986; Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996; Veenman, 1984). These beginning years have been described as the "discovery and survival" phase of teaching (Huberman, 1993), characterized as either "easy" (marked by a sense of discovery) or "painful" (a focus on survival). According to Huberman (1993), "easy beginnings are consonant with a sense of discovery and enthusiasm (openness, inventiveness, creativity) and good rapport with pupils. Painful beginnings have to do with exhaustion . . . and coping" (p. 244). These two distinct types of beginnings eventually stabilize, moving either into a phase of increasing commitment to teaching or increasing disillusionment with the profession.

During the past decade, researchers in special education have begun to investigate the unique and complex challenges encountered by novice special educators (e.g., Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Boyer & Lee, 2001; Busch, Pederson, Espin, & Weissenburger, 2001; Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, Hou, & Garvan, 2006; Kilgore, Griffin, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2003; Otis-Wilborn, Winn, Griffin, & Kilgore, 2005; Whitaker, 2000; 2003). These investigations have documented numerous factors in special education settings that contribute to the stresses of the first year of teaching for them, including: role ambiguity, students posing complex behavioral and academic challenges, large caseloads, insufficient curricular and technical resources, inadequate administrative support, inadequate time for planning, few opportunities for collaboration and professional development, and excessive procedural demands. In the following section, we review pertinent literature regarding novice teachers, with a focus on the changing roles of special educators, relationships between novice teachers and their colleagues, and accessibility of the general education curriculum to students with disabilities.

Changing Roles of Special Educators

As novice special educators assume positions in schools, they frequently face ambiguous, conflicting, and fragmented expectations from their colleagues, supervisors, and the families of children they serve. Many educators, as well as some novice teachers, hold traditional views of special education, believing that the role of the special educator is to teach small groups of children using specialized instructional strategies (CEC, 2000). The field of special education, however, is changing. The 1997 and 2004 amendments to the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act) mandate placement opportunities for students with disabilities within general education classrooms and emphasize participation and progress in the general education curriculum. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provides further support for the participation of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum by requiring their involvement in accountability systems (NCLB, 2002). Confusion, however, and sometimes, resistance to the aims of more inclusive educational opportunities for students with disabilities have created challenges for novice teachers (e.g., Conderman & Stephens, 2000). Inclusion requires novice special educators to collaborate and co-teach with their general education colleagues; yet they are also expected to provide intensive, individualized instruction. Juggling these varied, and often, competing responsibilities is a particularly difficult task for a beginning teacher.

Relationships between Novice Teachers and Their Colleagues

According to Darling-Hammond and Sclan (1996), "at all levels and sectors…teachers are more likely to report that other teachers…help them to improve their teaching and …solve [their] instructional or management problems" (p. 86). Too often, however, novice special educators report that they are isolated from their

colleagues and have little time to talk about their practices or to collaborate in preparing curriculum or instructional strategies. Novice special educators rarely have opportunities to collaborate with their general education peers to provide more inclusive settings for their students (e.g., Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Boyer & Lee, 2001; Busch et al., 2001). Effective methods of communication or joint planning time for special and general educators are scarce (CEC, 2000). Moreover, novice teachers lack time to plan with other special educators or paraprofessionals with whom they work (e.g., Carter & Scruggs, 2001). Lack of collegiality increases feelings of isolation and elevates stress levels of novice special educators (Otis-Wilborn, et al., 2005).

Accessibility of the General Education Curriculum

Novice special education teachers report that they have insufficient curricular and technical resources (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). Although it is not completely clear why special educators lack classroom materials, some have conjectured that the heterogeneity of self-contained, special education classrooms may be a factor (Kilgore, Griffin, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2003). For instance, a special education classroom with 15 elementary school students at varying ages and ability levels, could require up to 15 different sets of textbooks for each student in each of the academic areas taught, not including any adaptive equipment or assistive technology that students may require. This demand for a variety of textbooks and high-cost support technology, could create a complex situation for districts with financial difficulties. As a result, special educators may have curricular responsibilities far exceeding those of their general education peers—teaching more subject areas to a broader range of ages and ability levels—but with fewer curricular resources.

The range of challenges faced by novice special educators has most often been reported through qualitative inquiry (e.g., Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Boyer & Lee, 2001; Busch, Pederson, Espin, & Weissenburger, 2001; Kilgore, Griffin, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2003; Otis-Wilborn, Winn, Griffin, & Kilgore, 2005). However, the current study draws from both quantitative and qualitative data. In this study, we examine the influence of first-year special educators' relationships and interactions with general education teachers on the kinds of problems and accomplishments these novice teachers identified. Given that focus, we asked the following research questions: (1) What problems and accomplishments identified by first-year special educators are associated with their relationships and interactions with their general education colleagues?, and (2) What do novice teachers tell us about their relationships and interactions with their general education colleagues that help us understand these associations? In the following section, we review the research methods used to answer these questions.

Methods

We conducted a three-year, federally-funded, research project focused on the

problems and accomplishments of first-year special educators (i.e., HB023C970161). In the first two years of the study, we collected qualitative data from graduates of our teacher education programs in special education at the University of Florida (UF) and the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee (UWM). In the third year, we administered a survey instrument to all first-year special educators teaching in the states of Florida and Wisconsin during the Spring of 2000, regardless of the program from which they graduated. In this article, we present only qualitative and quantitative data related specifically to first-year special educators' problems and accomplishments and *their relationships and interactions with their general education colleagues*. A brief discussion of the two research methods used in our project follows.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative data were collected during the first two years of the project through a series of 36 individual interviews and 36 classroom observations (Berg, 2001) conducted with first-year special educators who were graduates of UF and UWM. The interview protocols consisted of open-ended questions (Spradley, 1979) designed to reveal teacher perceptions regarding their accomplishments, problems, and the teaching context. The teachers were individually interviewed at the beginning and end of the school year in sessions that lasted from 1 to 2 hours, and again following observations in their classrooms. The analysis of qualitative data was accomplished using guidelines suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Participants. Thirty-six graduates participated in the qualitative studies, 24 from UF and 12 from UWM. These beginning special educators taught in a broad variety of settings. Most served in traditional classroom teaching roles in either resource rooms or self-contained classrooms; the remainder worked in a cooperative consultative or inclusive educator role. The types of settings were given initials (E, S, M, R, C, D, I) describing the contexts. Specifically, E = External (or, a segregated setting); S = Self-contained classroom; M = Self-contained with Mainstreaming; R = Resource Room/Teaching subject area content; C = Resource Room & Collaboration; D = "Does Everything"; and, I = Inclusive Education. The participants were given pseudonyms, beginning with the initial of their particular setting. For this paper, we used qualitative data collected from *Sydney* and *Shelby* (Self-contained Classroom), *Martha* (Self-contained with Mainstreaming), *Rita* and *Rhonda* (Resource Room/ Teaching subject area content), and *Iris* and *Irene* (Inclusive education). Table 1 provides additional information about these first-year special educators.

Quantitative Methods and Analysis

We developed a 31-item survey instrument in the third year of the project (Fowler, 2002; Sapsford, 1999). To address whether the instrument measured what it was supposed to measure (i.e., the content validity of the instrument), the survey was piloted on 10 first-year special education teachers teaching in a local school district. Based on

Table 1. Selected Participants from the Qualitative Study.

Study Participant	Classroom Setting	Community Setting	Teacher Preparation Program
Shelby	Learning and Behavioral Disorders, self-contained grades 2-4	Urban, Florida	University of Florida (UF)
Sydney	Learning and Behavioral Disorders, self-contained, grades K-5	College town, Florida	UF
Martha	Deaf/Hard of Hearing; self-contained with mainstreaming; Pre-K and K	Urban, Wisconsin	University of Milwaukee (UWM)
Rita	Learning and Behavioral Disorders, middle school, resource room, grades 6-8	Rural, Florida	UF
Rhonda	Learning and Behavioral Disorders, middle school, resource room, grades 6-8	Urban, Florida	UF
Iris	Inclusive education, elementary school, grades 3-4	Urban, Wisconsin	UWM
Irene	Inclusive education elementary school, grades 3-4	Urban, Wisconsin	UWM

feedback collected from these teachers, minor adjustments were made to the survey, such as changing the wording of individual items and reordering items to improve clarity. In addition, the reliability of the items was established by using a measure of internal consistency (i.e., Cronbach's alpha) that produced alphas ranging from .71 to .89 with a mean alpha of .82. Generally, alpha reliabilities above .70 are considered adequate, those of .80 or higher are considered to be high (Bernard, 2000).

The survey was sent via US mail to all first-year special educators in the States of Florida and Wisconsin in the spring of 2000 asking them to (a) rank order accomplishments and problems they experienced in their first-year, (b) identify their classroom contexts, (c) provide characteristics of the school setting, and (d) report personal and professional characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race, certification areas). Despite the passage of time since the data were collected, our data set is quite opportune given the reauthorization of the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act) in 2004, and the recent release of the final regulations in 2006. School districts are now enabled to implement IDEA 2004 for the first time, during the 2006-2007 school year. Some of the changes in the law were directed at reducing the excessive procedural and paperwork demands associated with serving students in special education programs. This problem, and others, emerged from the data in our studies (Griffin, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2002; Griffin, Kilgore, Winn,

Otis-Wilborn, Hou, & Garvan, 2006; Kilgore, Griffin, Otis-Wilborn, & Winn, 2003; Otis-Wilborn, Winn, Griffin, & Kilgore, 2005), and in studies conducted by others (e.g., Whitaker, 2000; 2003). As school districts respond to the changes in the law, new research studies designed to explore the impact of these changes on the working conditions of teachers are warranted. For now, the data collected from the novice special education teachers in this study continue to characterize some of their current daily experiences in schools.

A total of 596 surveys were received from first-year special education teachers in Florida and Wisconsin. For this article, *relationships with general educators* and *interactions with general educators* became the two school context variables of interest. Teacher responses to the following survey questions: *How would you characterize general education teachers' relationships with you? __very supportive, __somewhat supportive, __somewhat unsupportive, or __ very unsupportive, and How frequently do you interact with general education teachers? __ once a day, __ once a week, __ once a month, or __ never,* provided the data concerning these two variables. Teachers also rank ordered eight different categories of accomplishments listed on the survey (i.e., classroom environment, curriculum, program management, assessment, student learning, collaboration/communication, behavior management, and advocacy for student with disabilities), and eight problem categories (i.e., curriculum, collaboration/ communication, time, specific student-centered concerns, behavior management/discipline, school climate, assessment, advocacy for students with disabilities) to reflect what they perceived to be their most important accomplishments and most pressing problems.

Using the teachers' rankings of the accomplishments and problems, we created two groups of first-year special education teachers for each of the eight problems and accomplishments. One group of teachers included those who ranked an accomplishment or a problem as one of their top three. That is, they identified the accomplishment as highly important to them, or the problem as one of their most difficult. The other group included teachers who did not rank the accomplishment or problem as one of their top three. Using SAS statistical software (Version 8.0, Cary, N.C.), these groups of teachers were compared on the two school context variables of interest (i.e., first-year special educators' *relationships with general educators* and their *interactions with general educators*). The Wilcoxon rank sum test (Howell, 1992) was used to compare the groups on ordinal or ordered data (i.e., data from the *interactions with general educators* question). Chi-square tests (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2002) were used for group comparisons on categorical data (i.e., data from the *relationships with general educators* question). Results of comparisons that yielded p-values less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

Findings from the survey instrument are presented first, followed by data from

the qualitative study. Our graduates' insights gleaned from the qualitative data about their relationships and interactions with their general education colleagues are used here to help interpret and support the quantitative findings.

Survey Data

Two accomplishments emerged as statistically significant: (1) *Student Learning* and (2) *Communication/Collaboration*. Percentages, and the means and standard deviations, are found in Table 2 for the two groups of teachers (i.e., those who chose *student learning* and *communication/collaboration* as a "Top Accomplishment", and those who did not, or "Not a Top Accomplishment"). First-year special educators who ranked *student learning* (p=.031) and *communication/collaboration* (p=.0002) as top accomplishments differed significantly from teachers who did not rank those accomplishments highly in their *relationships with their general education colleagues*. In short, teachers who chose *student learning* as a top accomplishment characterized their relationships with general educators as more positive as indicated by the higher percentage of teachers who rated their relationships with general educators as more supportive. In addition, special educators who chose *communication/collaboration* as a top accomplishment reported having more frequent interactions with general educators, as evidenced by their higher mean rating (see Table 2).

Table 3 presents percentages, and means and standard deviations, for the four problems that revealed statistically significant findings when the two groups of first-year special educators were compared on the two school context variables, that is, first-year special educators' *relationships with general educators* and their *interactions with general educators*. Special educators who ranked (1) *Communication/Collaboration,* (2) *Time*, (3) *School Climate* and (4) *Advocacy for Students* as top problems were significantly different from teachers who did not choose these problems in their *relationships* and in their *interactions with general educators*. That is, first-year special educators who ranked *communication/collaboration* as one of their top problems, differed significantly in their ratings of their *relationships with their general education colleagues* from teachers who did not rank

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Table 2. Results of Statistical Tests for First-Year Special Educators' Accomplishments

	Top Accomplishment		*Not a Top Accomplishment*					
Accomplishments	M(SD)	% (n)	M(SD)	% (n)	df	x2	Wil z	p
Student Learning								
Relationships w. General Educators					3	8.90		.031
Very supportive		68 (132)		32 (61)				
Somewhat supportive		57 (157)		43 (117)				
Somewhat unsupportive		38 (30)		62 (49)				
Very unsupportive		42 (8)		58 (11)				
Communication/Collaboration								
Interaction with General Educators	1.07 (0.79)		0.93 (.082)				3.70	.0002

Note: P-values less than 0.05 were deemed statistically significant. Wil z=Wilcoxon z.
[1] Interactions with general educators were rated on a scale from 0 (never) to 1 (once a month) to 2 (once a week) to 3 (once a day).

Table 3, Results of Statistical Tests for First-Year Special Educators' Problems.

Problems	*Top Accomplishment*		*Not a Top Accomplishment*		df	x2	Wil z p
	M(SD)	% (n)	M(SD)	% (n)			
Time							
Relationships with General Educators					3	9.07	.028
Very supportive		69 (133)		31 (60)			
Somewhat supportive		63 (173)		37 (101)			
Somewhat unsupportive		52 (41)		48 (38)			
Very unsupportive		47 (9)		53 (10)			
Couumication/Collaboration							
Relationships with General Educators					3	17.61	.0005
Very supportive		18 (34)		82 (159)			
Somewhat supportive		23 (63)		77 (211)			
Somewhat unsupportive		34 (27)		66 (52)			
Very unsupportive		53 (10)		47 (9)			
School Climate							
Relationships with General Educators					3	24.69	.0001
Very supportive		14 (27)		86 (166)			
Somewhat supportive		23 (63)		77 (211)			
Somewhat unsupportive		41 (32)		59 (47)			
Very unsupportive		37 (7)		63 (12)			
Interactions with General Educators[1]	2.48 (0.79)		2.63 (0.77)				
Advocacy for Students							
Relationships w. General Educators					3	11.06	.011
Very supportive		7 (13)		93 (180)			
Somewhat supportive		15 (40(		85 (234)			
Somewhat unsupportive		81 (64)		19 (15)			
Very unsupportive		79 (13)		21 (4)			

Note: P-values less than 0.05 were deemed statistically significant. Wil *z* = Wilcoxon *z*.
[1]Interactions with general educators were rated on a scale from 0 (never) to 1 (once a month) to 2 (once a week) to 3 (once a day).

communication/collaboration as a top problem (p=.0005), in general, their ratings were less favorable of their general education colleagues. Furthermore, first-year special educators who ranked *time* (p=.028) and *advocacy for students* (p=.011) as top problems also differed significantly from teachers who did not choose these as top problems in their ratings of their *relationships with general educators*. For *time,* relationships with general educators were quite favorable and for *advocacy for students*, the relationships were mostly unsupportive. Finally, first-year special educators who ranked *school climate* as a top problem differed significantly from teachers who did not make that choice, in their ratings of their *relationships* (p=.0001) and *interactions with general educators* (p=.045). Their relationships were less supportive, and their interactions were fewer.

Accomplishments

To explore further the differences found between the groups of teachers, we looked to both the descriptive statistics from the survey results and the qualitative data gleaned from our research project.

Student learning. Irene, a participant in the qualitative study (see Table 1), perceived student learning as an important accomplishment during her first year

of teaching special education students served in an inclusive elementary school. Her description below illustrates this finding:

> I have two students with CD [Cognitive Disabilities] who were unable to read, and now they can read books with two and three sentences per page. As long as they are real easy, basic sight words, they are able to read them. Their whole attitude has changed towards reading. Before, it was always, "I don't want to read," and now, "Let's read, let's read." (Irene)

Achieving success in her teaching (i.e., making a difference for her students) contributed to Irene's professional fulfillment (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). However, beginning special educators' relationships with their general education colleagues appeared to play an important role in novices' perceived efficacy. Of those special educators in our study who ranked *student learning* as a top accomplishment on the survey instrument, 68% of them rated their relationships with general educators as very supportive (see Table 2).

As Iris explained, supportive relationships with math and science teachers in her school were important in helping her develop curriculum that met the diverse needs of students with disabilities served in inclusive settings.

> I tried to take all of that, resources from the math and science teachers, and information about the Standards, and matched it all together so I was working on what [my students] needed in science, and what Standards they needed to work on for this unit. And then, I tried to make it a multi-level piece that would accommodate first-grade level through sixth-grade level pretty much. I think I kind of did it. . . I finally felt like, okay, this is how we need to do things. (Iris)

Rita, a resource room teacher in a middle school, attributed her close relationships with general educators, in part, to their proximity to her classroom. She explained,

> Two teachers who are right across the hall from me gave me the most emotional support and general support . . . I'm surrounded by [general educators] . . . There is not an ESE [Exceptional Student Education] unit or hall in this school. (Rita)

In addition, Rita revealed how general education teachers in her school helped her develop curriculum that met her students' academic needs, and went beyond what she called "skill and drill."

> The teachers that I'm talking to and observing [are] the general education teachers . . . I've gone to them more often than my ESE [Exceptional Student Education] department head or peer teacher. The focus in [special education] is classroom management and behavior management. I have that under control. I want to do more things besides skill and drill. [I want my students to have] pen pals from Uzbekistan and read novels. I want to know what's happening [in general education] so I can prepare my students for that setting . . . It's so refreshing to hear what kinds of problems happen in general education; they have the same problems, more or less, and the ideas you get are great! (Rita)

It appears that first-year special educators perceived *student learning* to be enhanced when they experienced strong collaborative relationships with general educators and were located in close proximity to them in the school building.

Communication/Collaboration. The difference in the mean number of opportunities to interact with general educators was significantly higher for the first-year special educators in our study who ranked *communication/collaboration* as one of their top accomplishments (see Table 2), compared to those who did not. In short, first-year teachers in Florida and Wisconsin who interacted more frequently with their general education counterparts viewed *communication/collaboration* as an important achievement. A quote from Martha reveals how collaboration with first grade teachers at IEP meetings actually helped her improve her understanding of long-range planning, and curriculum and instruction.

> The other first grade teachers gave me resources and books and just modeling from them . . . watching how they do it, how they instruct and set up lessons. I think by watching them, I understand how you can plan ahead of time what you were going to teach the whole year. I would get a lot from the IEP meetings when they would have a regular education teacher there telling me everything a child learned during kindergarten or first grade. (Martha)

Problems

First-year special educators who ranked *time*, *communication/collaboration*, *school climate,* and *advocacy for students* as top problems of practice differed significantly from special educators who did not chose these four problems as particularly difficult for them, on their *relationships* and *interactions with general educators* include (see Table 3). A discussion of each of these findings follows.

Time. Most special educators who chose *time* as a pressing problem of practice rated their relationships with general educators as either very or somewhat supportive, as evidenced by the percentages, and raw numbers, presented in Table 3. That is, the support new special educators received from general educators in their school buildings did not appear to offset the lack of time they perceived. This finding might be explained by a constellation of factors including, inexperience, the myriad of tasks to be completed each day, and challenging classroom assignments new teachers tend to receive (Darling-Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn, & Fideler, 1999), making it difficult for first-year teachers to complete their work in a timely manner, even if they do receive helpful assistance. In short, under highly demanding situations, even supportive relationships with colleagues may not be enough to help first-year teachers accomplish their goals and solve their problems.

Communication/Collaboration. When supportive relationships between general education teachers and novice special educators did not develop, *communication/ collaboration* emerged as a significant problem. Of those first-year special educators

who ranked *communication/collaboration* as a top problem, very few rated their relationships with general educators as supportive. Shelby shared her frustrations related to poor communication and collaboration in this way.

> The music teacher doesn't even know my students' names. She gave all my students Ns [Needs Improvement] because she didn't know who they were. I even asked her why certain students got Ns, students I knew were doing fine. She didn't even know who they were. It's maddening to see this actually happen. (Shelby)

Unfortunately, children are affected in negative ways when relationships between teachers are unfavorable. A lack of collaboration and communication can also contribute to feelings of isolation, or worse, to a lack of knowledge of school events and activities. Rhonda related the problem in this way.

> There needs to be more communication and information with general education. I'm left out because I'm in ESE [Exceptional Student Education]. I'm in the back of the school, in the annex, and we don't hear anything out here, no one drops by. (Rhonda)

Advocacy for Students. First-year special educators who chose *advocacy for students* as a top problem, also reported having unsupportive relationships with general educators (see Table 3). In the following example, Shelby related how first-year teachers sometimes need to advocate on behalf of their students with disabilities to ensure that they are included in school-wide events.

> It is frustrating. These kids are ostracized. The other teachers weren't going to let my kids go on field trips. For weeks I was sending the music teacher a letter asking for the permission slips for my kids to go to the symphony and she wouldn't give them to me. So I had to go to the principal to get her to cooperate. And I said these kids can earn it—and 9 earned the right to go. And then they weren't going to let me go with them; they were going to split the kids up and put them with different classes so that they wouldn't cause trouble. I think the symphony trip was so good. I took my kids, the ones who earned it, and they were so good. (Shelby)

Shelby's description suggests that first-year special educators find themselves assuming the role of advocate, campaigning on behalf of their students in ways they may not have expected, despite the role that advocacy for students with disabilities plays in the pre-professional preparation of special educators (CEC, 2005). Situations like this one are exacerbated by poor relationships with other teachers, and take valuable time out of a day already filled with more duties than many first-year teachers can manage.

School Climate. *School climate* addresses the broader school atmosphere, mood, and spirit. A positive climate is associated with norms of collegiality and continuous professional improvement (Little & McLaughlin, 1993). First-year special educators who chose *school climate* as a top problem generally had poorer relationships and less frequent interactions with general education teachers than teachers who did not

chose *school climate* as a top problem (see Table 3). Molly and Sydney described ways that problems with *school climate* were manifested in their schools.

> Mainstreaming is up to the special education teachers. It's up to you, the special educator, to approach the general education teachers. We are now as a faculty trying to expose people to special education—teach them what all the initials mean. But people here don't come up to you to say, I would like to have the ESE [Exceptional Student Education] kids in my classroom. I have to approach them and that's hard to do as a first year teacher. (Molly)

> I just found, in general, that special educators were a lot more willing to help out with my kids. The regular education teachers have bigger classes, less time, and less flexibility . . . Special educators were a lot more sympathetic, more aware, and helped more. They [general education teachers] would say, 'Oh you are doing a great job. Better you than me. I don't see how you can do it.' They can be very sympathetic. But, they would not want the job—they think you are a saint for doing it. (Sydney)

School climate may affect whether students with disabilities are embraced within a school or whether they are avoided, thereby hindering relationships between special and general educators.

Discussion

Findings from this research, drawn from both quantitative and qualitative studies, focus on issues related to novice special educators' relationships and interactions with their general education colleagues and the influence of these relationships and interactions on special educators' accomplishments and problems during their first year of teaching. We have found that the first year of special education teaching can range from "refreshing," as in Rita's case, to "frustrating," like Shelby's experience. Clearly, the nature of novice teachers' experiences is significant because of the tendency for their commitment to teaching to improve or decline depending on how well they performed during their first-year (Huberman, 1993). If the first-year is successful, beginning educators are more likely to approach teaching with a positive attitude, if not, they may contribute to the disturbing attrition rate (e.g., Billingsley, 1993). Findings from this study of first-year special educators lend credence to previous research efforts in this area and extend them in an important way.

In the current study, special educators who chose *student learning* as an accomplishment and felt supported by colleagues through *communication* and *collaboration*, reported having positive relationships with general educators. Novice teachers informed us that these positive relationships enhanced their own learning, allowing them to improve curriculum and their teaching practices. It appears that beginning teachers are capable of improving their teaching if they are placed in schools that provide opportunities to work with assistance and support from other teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Lieberman,

1990; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Pugach & Johnson, 2002; Whitaker, 2000). Our findings uphold prior research suggesting that collaboration among teachers is important for nurturing the growth of novice teachers. In particular, children with disabilities may reap the benefits of collaborative efforts between teachers who work together to address the special needs of these students (Hobbs & Westling, 1998; Idol, 1997; Stanovich, 1996).

Special educators who participated in this study also identified problems in their first-year. When novice teachers chose *communication/collaboration* as a significant problem, they frequently rated their relationships with general educators as very unsupportive. This finding may be explained by studies that have a) documented the limited opportunities first-year special educators have to collaborate with their general education colleagues (e.g., Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Boyer & Lee, 2001; Busch et al., 2001; Carter & Scruggs, 2001; Conderman & Stephens, 2000), and, b) demonstrated how a lack of collaboration with colleagues can lead to intensified feelings of isolation in novice teachers (e.g., Mastropieri, 2001; Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2000).

One explanation for this lack of collaboration could be the lack of time experienced by many beginning special educators. The problem of *time* was identified by a majority of novice teachers in our study. Generally, a lack of time creates a barrier to collaboration (Pugach & Johnson, 2002), even if teachers report that they have supportive collegial relationships with colleagues in their schools. The difficult conditions under which teachers work to design and deliver programs for students with disabilities were addressed with the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 by (1) altering aspects of the IEP (Individualized Education Program), (2) expediting the process of making changes to the IEP, and (3) piloting the development of a 3-year IEP (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). These changes were designed to streamline procedures associated with delivering special education programs, and may potentially provide teachers with more time to collaborate. However, the possible benefits of these changes are yet to be realized.

Although the needs of first-year teachers have been reported in the special education literature (e.g., CEC, 2000; Whitaker, 2003), the influence of the school context on beginning teachers has been largely ignored. Our findings extend what is presently known about the experiences of first-year, suggesting that the *school climate* can be a critical problem for special educators. First-year teachers in this study, who identified *school climate* as a significant problem, also had low ratings for their relationships with general educators and interacted with them less frequently.

The literature in general and special education may offer insights to help explain this dilemma. School climate is characterized by a school with a culture of collaboration, defined as "evolutionary relationships of openness, trust and support among teachers where they define and develop their own purposes as a community" (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990, p. 227). Schools that foster a "culture of collaboration" (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lieberman, 1990; Pugach & Johnson, 2002) are better able to support the growth of beginning teachers because teachers in these schools

share what they know, have high standards for their work, and promote continuous learning by all (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Rosenholtz, 1989). Collaboration is "something people come to accept"; it also involves "continuously inviting expanded participation" (Pugach & Johnson, 2002, p. 19).

Some of the first-year teachers in this study were fortunate enough to teach in schools that could be characterized as places of collegiality and continuous improvement; for others, these characteristics were absent. A collaborative school is particularly important for novice special education teachers because they are at greater risk of being isolated than their general education colleagues (e.g., Boyer & Lee, 2001). Exacerbating the problem of isolation is a mandate to work with others to design and implement programs for students with disabilities that allows access to, and progress in, the general education curriculum (i.e., IDEA, 1997; 2004; NCLB, 2002). Resolving this predicament (i.e., little interaction but a mandate to interact) deserves prompt and thoughtful attention. Deliberately placing first-year special educators in schools that are identified as collaborative, may provide novices with a better opportunity for enhancing their professional relationships, thereby allowing them to better address federal mandates, and ultimately, the needs of their students.

Implications for Teacher Education and School Districts

Findings from this study suggest that supportive relationships with general education teachers are important to the professional lives of novice special educators. Helping beginning teachers develop the skills to work in, and advance, a collaborative school culture may be one way that teacher educators and school administrators can begin to foster these relationships. To achieve this goal, Kennedy (1999) recommends that pre-service teachers be provided opportunities to "enact" ideas like this one in practice. This notion of behavioral enactment has been referred to as *situated knowledge*, or knowledge that is made known through specific situations rather than understood in the abstract. Learning about collaboration in schools is one such concept that may require both abstract learning, and an approach that is situated in real world experiences. Involving school districts in this process is essential.

One particular way to move ahead with this objective is to develop in beginning teachers the ability to affect change (Paul, Epanchin, Rosselli, Duchnowski, & Cranston-Gingras, 2002) and, eventually, become teacher leaders (Patterson & Patterson, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNutty, 2004) with the clear aim of improving their schools. The role of life-long learning in this kind of teacher development may be important to consider given the link between teacher learning and student learning (Hawley & Valli, 1999).

Fostering relationships between first-year special educators and their general education colleagues may also require different ways of thinking about how we mentor novice special educators. The research on induction in special education provides some direction to those designing supports for beginning special education teachers (see Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003 for a review). Results

suggest that mentors should understand first-hand the demands that new special educators face, and be able to establish a supportive relationship with the novice teacher that avoids evaluation associated with the renewal or termination of a teaching contract. Assessment that allows the mentor and mentee to identify areas to address, and provides the new teacher with formative feedback and frequent opportunities for face-to-face meetings, both planned and spontaneous, is preferred. Finally, the timing and intensity of certain kinds of support should match the developmental needs of novices as they move through their first year.

Life-long learning is best accomplished in school contexts where collaborative cultures are fostered and nurtured, and teachers are continually involved in promoting their own and others' development. Settings like these hold promise for creating opportunities for beginning special educators and their general education colleagues to collectively improve their teaching, and have potential for impacting the development of their students in positive ways.

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