From Collegial Support to Critical Dialogue: Including New Teachers’ Voices in Collaborative Work

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New teachers enter the field with a passion for making a difference with students, their newly gained knowledge from their preparation experiences, and a sense that there is still much to learn. Faced with the same responsibilities as their experienced colleagues, new teachers also enter the field looking for ways to cope with, adjust to, and survive the challenges they encounter on a daily basis (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). As such, most new teachers desire continued support, guidance, and learning opportunities in their first few years of teaching. They hope that much of this support will come from their colleagues (Costigan, Crocco, & Zumwalk, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Public Education Network, 2003).

A growing research base suggests that many new teachers find the support they need through collegial interaction. Support from peers and mentors is a key influence on new teacher effectiveness (Behrstock-Sherratt, Bassett, Olson & Jacques, 2014; Public Education Network, 2003), and teachers who experience collegial interaction and support tend to exhibit higher rates of retention in the profession (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Odell & Ferraro, 1992; Weiss, 1999). Additionally, meaningful and supportive collegial interactions have been associated with positive outcomes for students and teachers, including higher teacher satisfaction (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012), greater adaptability to change (Nias, 1989), improved teacher development (Borko, 2004; Drury & Baer, 2011; Elmore, 2004; Hopkins, Beresford, & West, 1998) and learning (Goddard, 2000; Horn 2005; Horn & Little, 2010; Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011), and increases in student achievement (Goddard, 2000; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012).

While there is good reason to believe that opportunities for workplace interaction will benefit teachers, it is important to note that there is no guarantee that it will (Levine, 2011; Slavit, Kennedy, Lean, Nelson, & Deuel, 2011). Whether teachers learn what they need to know in the early years of teaching through collegial interaction depends largely on the culture of teaching that new teachers encounter. In her early study of teacher collaboration, Eddy (1969) argued that as new teachers try to make sense of what is going on in their classrooms, the explanation and advice they encounter from
more experienced colleagues affects their professional stance, practice, and attitude. Described as “painful to read,” Eddy’s study illustrated how veteran teachers’ advice led new teachers to create classroom routines that subordinated urban students and to ascribe difficulties they encountered in the classroom to traits they associated with students and families (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p. 3). Rather than creating opportunities for positive growth and development, workplace interaction between new and experienced teachers produced detrimental effects that “perpetuated systemic inequities that still plague education today” (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p. 3).

Guided by research that extols the promise of teacher collaboration while also warning that “much of what passes for collaboration does not add up to much” (Little, 1990, p. 508), this study explores 17 novice teachers’ experiences of collegial interactions in their first year of teaching. Using ideas presented in Little’s (1990) analysis of collegial interactions as a framework, we identified the types of collegial interactions that these new teachers experienced. Two of these types, aid and assistance and sharing, were most frequently described by the new teachers in our study and were consistent with Little’s framework. The third, which we term critical dialogue, was described by only a handful of the new teachers and did not fully map onto any component of Little’s framework. Thus, we present this new category in addition to the other two. While most of these teachers were pleased with the interactions they had with colleagues, their roles in these interactions varied, as did their descriptions of the potential the interactions had in helping them critically examine and improve their pedagogy. Only those who experienced critical dialogue actively engaged in deep conversations about practice and, in so doing, had the potential to gain the necessary learning and support for success and retention in the first few years of teaching (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Critical dialogue creates a venue where all voices are valued and where teachers can work together toward shared answers to problems of practice that are relevant to all. It provides the type of meaningful, context-specific professional learning that is vital for all teachers but especially those launching their teaching career (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Elmore, 2004; Yoon et al., 2007).

Background

New teachers face a host of challenges as they embark upon their first year in the classroom. To effectively meet the complex challenges of teaching, novice teachers need opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills during the induction years (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As noted by Little (1999), “The learning demands that inhere in that work [teaching] cannot be fully anticipated or met by pre-service preparation, even when that experience is stellar” (p. 234). Unfortunately, many new teachers are left without supports for their ongoing learning. While many may encounter brief induction programs or have access to a mentor, they find themselves without the kinds of comprehensive learning opportunities needed for further growth and improvement (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll, 2012; Johnson, 2004). Teachers lacking such support are most likely to leave at the end of their first year (Ingersoll, 2003).

Collegial interaction and support is particularly important for new teachers. In fact, those novices who are unable to create supportive relationships with their colleagues are more likely to leave their schools and leave teaching altogether than those who did establish such supports (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Work on effective supports of novice teachers from the New Teacher Center confirms the importance of collaborative learning and integrating frequent opportunities for dialogue with seasoned teachers as a critical component of their novice teacher support model (Sun,
Opportunity for work and dialogue with a mentor is also a critical component of the model for new teacher induction promoted by Smith and Ingersoll (2004).

Learning in collaboration with one’s colleagues optimizes teacher learning (Borko, 2004; Horn, 2005; Horn & Little, 2010; King & Newmann, 2000; Little, 1993, 1999; Shulman & Shulman, 2004) and is likely to result in increased teacher skills, higher expectations for students, and more pedagogical innovation (Borko, 2004; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002). Collaborative work also presents increased opportunities for learning by allowing teachers to engage in “professional dialogue” (Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986) or “principled talk” (Horn & Little, 2010). Additionally, such work can provide teachers with opportunities for reflection (Rosenholtz, et al., 1986), which Shulman and Shulman (2004) say is “the key to teacher learning and development” (p. 264). Given these benefits, collaboration for new teachers is particularly vital. Not only can it provide crucial instructional support and learning in a teacher’s early years, it also helps these teachers build an understanding of the organizational components of their schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

Little (1990) describes four forms of collaboration: storytelling and scanning for ideas, aid and assistance, sharing, and joint work. She situates these types of interactions on a continuum ranging from independent to interdependent. With each successive shift, Little claims that “the warrant for autonomy shifts from individual to collective judgment” (p. 512). Each form of collaboration is briefly described below.

When engaging in storytelling and scanning for ideas, according to Little (1990), teachers exchange experiences, gather information, and nourish friendships. Such interactions preserve the independence of the teachers involved. With aid and assistance, teachers independently seek out advice from one another, a move that may yield teaching ideas but fails to provide opportunities to discuss those ideas with others. When teachers engage in sharing, they exchange ideas and materials, but the results of this sharing often differ depending on the schools’ norms and culture. With sharing, teachers still determine the utility of shared ideas largely independently. When teachers engage in joint work, they share responsibility for the work of teaching, adopt collective conceptions of accountability, and support teacher initiative and leadership; as such, joint work is inherently interdependent.

Little’s (1990) continuum also identifies the degree of interdependence in teachers’ interactions. Task interdependence varies on a continuum from low to high. Interactions that are low on the interdependence scale require individual contributions to others but not direct interaction with others. High task interdependence exists when each individual’s outcome is affected by the actions of others, enabling individuals to interpret cues in a similar manner, make compatible decisions, and take appropriate action (Katz-Navon & Erez, 2005, p. 444). Recent research underscores the importance of task interdependence in collegial interactions that produce teacher learning (Runhaar et al., 2010).

We used Little’s (1990) framework to analyze the experiences of new teachers in this study. Ultimately, as noted above, novices in this study generally fit into two of the categories outlined by Little: aid and assistance and sharing. While the novices did not share any accounts of joint work with colleagues, there were rare accounts of interactions that went beyond aid and assistance and sharing. During these interactions, novice teachers and their more experienced colleagues engaged in “risky” behaviors associated with instructional improvement, namely publicly reflecting on their own practice and seeking feedback from others (Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011). These
interactions went beyond simple sharing in that teachers invited a critical examination of their work. Yet, the consequences of these interactions were felt only by individual teachers and lacked the interdependence needed to meet the standard that Little lays out for joint work. Thus, we identified a new category, critical dialogue, to tell a story about the specific needs and supports experienced by the novice teachers in this study.

The Study

This study draws on longitudinal interview data from 17 novice teachers, all who graduated from the same university-based teacher education program, leading to an M.Ed. Each of the 57 graduates of the program was invited to participate in the study. Of those 57, 22 responded to our initial call to participate. Due to geographic limitations as well as graduates’ teaching plans post graduation, we chose to include 17 individuals in our sample. Among them were 14 women and 3 men. Two identified themselves as people of color, and 15 identified themselves as Caucasian. In all, the sample of novice teachers in this study mirrors that of the teaching force in the country, with the large majority being White and female (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013).

We conducted two semi-structured, one-hour interviews with each participant using a protocol comprised of open-ended questions that asked participants to reflect on their experiences as first-year teachers. The first set of interviews, conducted shortly after program graduation in May, revealed that most hoped they would find jobs in schools with collegial and collaborative work environments. They hoped to rely on colleagues to “learn the ropes” and to continue to develop their practice during their first years on the job. We interviewed participants again toward the end of their first year of teaching. During this second round of interviews, we investigated how they described the 15 different schools in which they ultimately took jobs and whether these school contexts fulfilled their hopes for collegiality and collaboration. Our work was driven by the following research question: How do 17 first-year teachers describe the collegial supports that they received in their first year of teaching?

Data analysis took place in multiple phases. Following transcription, we piloted a set of codes to apply to the data. We used both emic and etic codes, following a hybrid approach to the development and use of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This allowed us to draw not only on themes that emerged from the data but also to look for ideas present in the literature on new teacher support and learning. After piloting our codes and agreeing on a common set, multiple members of the research team coded transcripts to ensure that codes were applied accurately. Following initial coding, we looked across novice teachers’ interviews to uncover patterns and consistencies among their experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Our initial analytic process revealed the importance of different types of collegial interactions in these new teachers’ induction experiences. Based on these early patterns, we introduced Little’s (1990) framework of collegial interactions to guide our next phase of analysis. In parsing out different types of collegial interactions, the framework allowed us to look more closely at the variation in novice-colleague interactions experienced by our participants. Ultimately, however, we determined that the continuum did not fully account for the range of novice-colleague interactions we were observing in our data. This led to the creation of a new category capturing novice interactions.
Findings

Little (1990) argued that most interactions among teachers actually do very little to diminish the culture of isolation that teachers experience in many schools. Indeed, though, teachers in this study described each type of collegial interaction as a source of support. In most instances, they did not have opportunities to evaluate and critique practices with their colleagues—opportunities that we argue have the most value for new teachers’ practice—and thus, independently made decisions about whether to implement the ideas shared by their colleagues. For any new teacher, such decisions are informed by little experience in the field and may be driven more by the opinion of colleagues, perceptions of what others in the school do, or a perceived pressure to comply with a school’s culture.

In only a few instances were new teachers in this study engaged in discussing and critically evaluating practice with their colleagues. We term these interactions critical dialogue and distinguish them from Little’s conception of joint work as they did not seem to entail shared responsibilities for teaching nor deeply rooted, collective conceptions of accountability. At the same time, we also acknowledge that a few of our participants did not experience supportive collegial interactions at all, resulting in an experience of isolation. Though not a narrative of collegial interaction, we believe isolation is an important novice experience to capture and present alongside narratives of interaction. Highlighting this isolation points to the detrimental nature of such an experience for some new teachers.

Analyzing Collegial Interactions

Isolation. Unlike the majority of our participants who described being supported by one or more types of collegial interactions, four participants experienced isolation from their colleagues. These novices largely found themselves alone in their work, and most seemed unprepared for and disheartened with the experience.

Kim represented the sentiments of the other three isolated teachers. She described her surprise at just how isolated she was during her first year: “I know that a lot of teaching time is alone, but I don’t think I realized how much alone time I’d have and I don’t think I realized how much I’d miss some of the collaboration last year” [in her teacher education program]. Kim went on to explain that she sees her new school as void of conversations about teaching practice. She said, “We never talk about practice at the school I am at now. We have not had one conversation about anything related to teaching, and that is kind of killing me.” As a teacher whose preparation program included working collaboratively with other preservice teachers and experienced mentor coaches, the experience of isolation was particularly shocking and disheartening.

Aid and assistance. Most of the teachers in our study who experienced some type of supportive collegial interaction described at least one instance in which a colleague offered assistance or aid of some form or another. This is to be expected—most teachers expect to give advice when colleagues ask for it, but only when they ask for it (Little, 1990). As Little points out, “the principle limitation is that questions asked by one teacher of another are interpreted as requests for help” (p. 516). In these interactions, participants were the recipients of ideas and resources for curriculum and pedagogy that they deemed useful, but they did not contribute to the exchanges themselves. In the end, they took colleagues’ advice, but in line with the norms of privacy that continue to dominate the profession (Lortie, 1975), they still made decisions about pedagogy and practice independently, figuring out how best to use the ideas from their colleagues (if at all). Although the new teachers who described aid and
assistance appreciated the ideas and resources they received and felt supported by them, the independent nature of novices' evaluations of their colleagues' ideas is particularly challenging for teachers just entering the career, as they do not yet have a fully developed sense of quality instruction.

Jenny, for example, described many interactions with colleagues that we consider examples of aid and assistance. She had a mentor teacher and an assistant principal who checked in with her, asked what she needed, and provided ideas for planning and classroom management. She noted, “I feel like everyone’s always looking out for us [the new teachers]. I have teachers sometimes who just come up to my classroom and say, ‘How’s it going?’” In all of these collegial interactions, Jenny’s role was exclusively that of recipient of ideas and resources. During the interactions, Jenny did not share her teaching ideas with her colleagues. Moreover, once she received suggestions and resources from her colleagues, Jenny was left alone to make decisions about how or whether to use them.

Our analysis revealed that participants experienced aid and assistance in many different ways. Some participants were expected to participate in planned, regular meetings with mentors, department heads or other novices, and they received ideas and resources in these settings. Other participants experienced aid and assistance informally and spontaneously, such as when teachers checked on Jenny to see how she was doing. In some cases, the participants themselves initiated these interactions. For example, Jill said, “I feel like I have the power to sort of ask for the help that I need... I don’t feel isolated with my questions or problems.” According to participants, both formal and informal aid and assistance were equally helpful. They described feeling supported with ideas about curriculum and pedagogy as well as knowing that other teachers were looking out for them. Furthermore, participants believed all of the forms of aid and assistance they experienced provided them opportunities to learn new teaching strategies and acquire the resources they needed, even though the interactions did not indicate a real shift away from the isolated practice that many of the new teachers in the study did not want to experience upon entering the field.

Sharing. Many of our participants also mentioned at least one collegial interaction that Little (1990) defined as sharing. These interactions differ from those categorized as aid and assistance because they involve a reciprocal exchange between new teachers and their colleagues, where both the new teacher and her colleagues shared ideas related to teaching. However, like aid and assistance, new teachers who experienced sharing still made decisions about pedagogy and practice largely independently. Though there was an exchange of ideas, participants did not describe discussions about how to implement or revise the ideas to fit their needs or their students’ needs.

Jenny, for example, described how she participated in an exchange with other members of her department through weekly correspondence. She said, “[T]he other physics teachers there are really supportive, and we meet every week and we email everything around to each other. I haven’t had to create ... a totally new curriculum. I take stuff and modify it.” In emailing curricular ideas and plans to one another, Janet was both a recipient and contributor in the exchange of ideas with members of her department. It is important to note, however, that even with this reciprocity, Janet was ultimately left alone to “take,” “modify,” and decide how and whether to use these ideas.

Jenny’s descriptions of collegial interactions show how what begins as aid and assistance can evolve over time into exchanges more appropriately characterized as sharing. Jenny described her interactions with her mentor this way: “I can talk to her [my mentor] about anything, and she is a good listener and provides a lot of advice, when I feel like I need it. So, it’s been very, very helpful ... and now she asks me for advice. It’s a really reciprocal relationship.”
Not only did Jenny receive advice from her mentor, but over time, Jenny’s mentor also started asking Jenny for advice. Jenny liked the fact that she not only had support from her mentor, but that her mentor also saw her as a source of knowledge about teaching.

**Critical dialogue.** Three teachers described collegial interactions characterized not only by a reciprocal exchange of ideas and information but also by critical conversations about these ideas. These instances were characteristic of the “critical colleagueship” referred to by Lord (1994) and allowed the new teachers to give and receive ideas with their colleagues and engage in dialogue about those ideas. Since no teachers in the study described the type of shared instructional undertaking and interdependence in large segments of their work outlined by Little (1990) as joint work, we do not use that category here. Instead, we describe these novices’ interactions as *critical dialogue*.

Carl described such critical dialogue with his colleagues: “Teachers [are] working together and solving problems and do progressive thinking about teaching rather than like the closed door, ‘Just let me do my job’ mentality. The English Department is a ... team.” Carl thought *with* his colleagues about teaching and how best to meet students’ needs. He felt supported by the process. The interactive component that he described as “solving problems” with these colleagues set apart his supportive collegial interactions from those who experienced *sharing* and had to evaluate the utility of colleagues’ ideas independently.

Among teachers in the sample, only Josh’s collegial experiences were overwhelmingly characterized as *critical dialogue* and may have also approached Little’s conceptualization of joint work. Unfortunately, this indicates the overall scarcity of such experiences by novices in the sample. Like Carl, Josh used the word *team* to describe his interactions with his colleagues. His interactions were largely centered on improving practice—his own and that of other teachers. This was exemplified when he described working with his history colleagues in the following way:

> And so ... we talk about ... how are we going to move students from A to B, how do we set our grades? How do we evaluate student work? All these conversations we’ve had. I’ve not only been supported in “this is how we do things,” but also “what do you think about that?” “Should we, is this the best way to do things?”

In becoming part of this team, Josh had an opportunity that only a few novices in this study shared. He and his colleagues worked collaboratively toward improving his practice and the practice of others by discussing and reflecting critically on each other’s ideas. These opportunities took place through conversations in which Josh’s contributions were expected and solicited. Ultimately, these conversations resulted in shared decisions where everyone determined together “the best way to do things.”

**Learning Through Collegial Interaction?**

Research on professional learning points to the importance of working with colleagues as teachers seek to gain new perspectives and approaches to their instruction (Borko, 2004; Elmore, 2004). Certainly for new teachers, opportunities for on-the-job learning are vital. Yet, few participants described the types of ongoing, in-depth conversations focused on practice that we know are crucial for learning among both novice and more veteran teachers (Borko, 2004; Parise & Spillane, 2010). Instead, participants’ descriptions of collegial interactions all arose when answering questions about ways in
which they felt supported as novice teachers. Though the novice teachers in this study portrayed their interactions with colleagues in a positive light and conceived of them as supportive, the variety of interactions they experienced differed dramatically in their actual potential to provide support and shape these novices’ professional learning and instructional practice. In this section, we explore the varied ways that aid and assistance, sharing, and critical dialogue shaped potential learning opportunities for new teachers.

**Integrating new ideas into practice.** Our analyses suggest that all types of collegial interactions we identified have the potential to convey subject and practice knowledge from one teacher to another, providing new teachers with ideas and resources to use as a basis for developing their curriculum and pedagogy. In this way, all of the supportive collegial interactions have the potential to contribute to new teachers’ ongoing learning, an experience of particular import for novices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Feiman-Nemser, 1983, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Yet, the very fact of being novices means that these teachers require guidance in how, when, and if to utilize the ideas shared with them by colleagues. Without a space to discuss ideas together and shape them to best meet the unique needs of their students, suggestions from colleagues are unlikely to translate into meaningful learning and practices for novices.

Though sharing and critical dialogue seem to provide more valuable learning opportunities for novices, participants who experienced aid and assistance also praised the valuable curricular resources and information that these interactions provided them during their first few months of teaching. For example, Laura received aid and assistance from her department head that supported her curriculum planning. She said,

> The head of the U.S. government team who’s two doors down, I can go to her any time I need help planning U.S. government. She’s been extremely helpful about giving me any materials she has, telling me what she’s done, what she’s doing.

It is no wonder our participants found exchanges such as this one supportive, as research shows that acquiring curricular resources is a primary concern for novices (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002), and curricular ideas were most often the focus of these exchanges.

Though experiences of aid and assistance provide novices with ideas and resources, they do not offer the new teacher opportunities to contribute to bi-directional exchange of information or to see herself as possessing a specific area of expertise, both of which are important for developing a sense of importance and worth and a place for oneself within the professional community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Johnson, 2004; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002). In this way, sharing and critical dialogue have the potential to influence new teachers’ experiences in ways that aid and assistance do not.

From the participants’ perspectives, both sharing and critical dialogue address their basic needs for curriculum and information. Peggy described the added benefit of sharing that new teachers can experience when they feel that they are integral and valued members of a school or department. Peggy felt valued for her expertise and included within her professional community as a result of sharing her knowledge of physics with her colleagues. She described herself as a leader in that area of the curriculum when she said, “I’m the only person in the school I think with a physics background. So if there are physics questions, they come to me and ... I really feel like a leader in that.” Unfortunately,
many new teachers are seen as “ailing” and in need of assistance; consequently, they are put in positions where their ideas and knowledge are undervalued, ignored, or even dismissed (Long, 2004; Meyer, 2002). When novices work in communities where their input is valued, it seems natural that other teachers would be more willing to learn from them. Thus, establishing that “new teachers … have much to offer their colleagues” (Johnson, 2004, p. 162; see also Putnam & Borko, 2000) is a necessary antecedent to new teachers joining their colleagues in both sharing and critical dialogue.

Though the sense of being a valued member of a professional community is crucial, our analyses illuminate the fact that even active novice participation in collegial exchange (as with sharing) does not seem to have much bearing on encouraging a new teacher to reflect and think critically about her practice. When new teachers experience aid and assistance, its advantages are limited to the provision of curricular and pedagogical ideas and resources. When the exchange is bi-directional, new teachers are both providers and recipients of knowledge, but they may still be making most decisions about how to implement their newly received ideas independently. As novices, such decisions are necessarily novice decisions, informed only by their preparation, experiences, and their own time as students. Though extensive, such a foundation fails to provide a thorough knowledge base from which to make meaningful decisions with one’s specific students in mind. While teachers may be engaging in it independently, bi-directional exchanges may not promote critical reflection any more than unidirectional exchanges. In this study, critical dialogue, on the other hand, provided novices with opportunities for collective consideration of instructional practice. Yet opportunities for this were limited and seemed to occur only with the right combination of context and colleagues.

**Bringing a critical perspective to collegial interaction.** Even when participants were involved in the exchange of ideas and information in supportive collegial interactions, more often than not, they made decisions about whether and how to use the ideas and information on their own. For example, Molly described interactions with her colleagues that were clearly bi-directional. She said, “It’s very community-based. This unit is really in sync with each other. We always know what we’re doing, which is great, even just as far as planning. If I’m giving a big test, the other four teachers in the unit won’t.”

It is clear that these collegial interactions were supportive to Molly. In line with the norm of egalitarianism in the profession (Lortie, 1975), Molly did not, however, describe collaboratively reflecting on and critiquing curricular ideas and practice with her colleagues. Instead, it seems they were telling each other what they were doing but continuing to make decisions about pedagogy independently.

Similarly, Ruth described collegial interactions that fostered independent decision-making. She explained, “We have weekly meetings … everybody always shares … ‘do you have a lesson for this, a worksheet for that?’” Ruth may have picked up tips and ideas from such exchanges, but without critical, reflective conversations about these shared resources, it is unlikely that she improved her ability to decide how, whether, or when to utilize these lessons and worksheets. This lack of critical conversation about teaching practice is particularly glaring since opportunities to evaluate lesson plans, assessments, and student learning with colleagues are vital parts of all teachers’, and particularly novices’, learning (Borko, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Johnson, 2004; Lieberman, 1996).

Josh—the only participant who discussed extensive examples of critical dialogue—described frequent opportunities to reflect and deliberate about his practice with his colleagues. He seemed motivated by being seen as a valued contributor (Johnson, 2004; Kardos, 2004) but also recognized that
the collegial interactions he experienced benefitted him beyond his personal acquisition of new resources and ideas. Josh explained, “[My school is] a really good environment in which you can learn … right from the start we [Josh and his department chair] were talking about content.” Josh went on to describe how they would deliberate the pros and cons of various curricular decisions. In discussing the way that he and his department chair puzzled through what they “were going to do,” Josh illustrated how this dialogue with his colleague provided him important opportunities for professional learning as he worked in concert with his department chair to make and then reflect on curricular decisions (Borko, 2004; Elmore, 2004; Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Goddard, Goddard, Tschannnen-Moran, 2007; King & Newmann, 2000; Little, 1993; 1999; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Rosenholtz et al., 1986). These experiences created a context in which “new collaborative relationships [were] being constructed that replace the novice-expert relationship” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 278), thus including Josh as an equal and valued member of a professional community.

Unfortunately, few participants experienced the in-depth support that stems from opportunities for critical dialogue, where they were able to discuss in an in-depth fashion the pros and cons of teaching ideas as well as ways to implement these ideas. In fact, only three participants described critical dialogue as a component of their collegial interactions. However, such occasions are vital to novice learning and growth. These types of interactions provide a space for new teachers to co-construct knowledge with their colleagues. Given the central role that collaboration plays in teacher learning (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Elmore, 2004; Horn, 2005; Horn & Little, 2010; King & Newmann, 2000; Little, 1993, 1999; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Rosenholtz et al., 1986; Smylie, 1996), schools that do not provide such opportunities to their teachers, and particularly their novice teachers, place their staff and students at a disadvantage.

Looking for More Support

Despite the overwhelmingly positive picture of collegial support described by participants, some still spoke of a desire for more. For some, this was a desire for more instances of aid and assistance, sharing, or critical dialogue. For those who were isolated, it was a desire for any collegial interaction. While meaningful collaboration in which teachers discuss, evaluate, and create together has been linked both theoretically and empirically to optimized teacher learning (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Horn, 2005; Horn & Little, 2010; King & Newmann, 2000; Little, 1993, 1999; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Rosenholtz et al., 1986; Smylie, 1996), participants were not specifically seeking out opportunities for such collaboration. Since participants mostly asked for additional aid and assistance or sharing, it did not appear that they considered the benefits and drawbacks of various types of collegial interactions.

Jessie was one participant who did not experience very much collegial support; in fact, she described a context of isolation within her school. However, she did feel that it was possible to reach out for aid and assistance within her department: “I know … the whole [science department] staff in general I could ask a question if I have [one]. I don’t feel afraid to ask questions, which is a good thing.” Jessie’s ability to seek out more support by going to colleagues to have her questions answered falls squarely in the domain of aid and assistance. While Jessie felt supported with the knowledge that she could ask her colleagues questions if necessary, such collegial interactions are unlikely to be a source of feedback (Smylie, 1996) or to lead to the kinds of “professional dialogue” (Rosenholtz et al., 1986) that result in powerful learning experiences. In all likelihood, Jessie was unsure of what questions to ask, or
even of what questions she might have, thus diminishing the ability to even seek out aid and assistance.

While some participants described reaching out to other teachers for aid and assistance, none of them described initiating critical dialogue with colleagues. The fact that few novices sought out such interactions is not surprising. As Peggy noted, “I don’t even know what I need.” It seems that these novices recognized their most immediate need for resources and ideas, but like Peggy expressed, they did not know how to seek critical exchanges; nor did they recognize the potential for learning and finding a home within a professional community held within such exchanges (Elmore, 2004; Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Little, 1993, 1999; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Smylie, 1996). Unfortunately, Peggy exemplifies the majority of novice teachers who do not even know what they need in the domain of support. Without a sense of the benefits of critical interactions derived either from teacher education or induction experiences, one cannot hope that these teachers will seek out the types of learning experiences that would most benefit them. In fact, we believe that the responsibility for helping novices realize the benefits of such exchanges does not lie with them at all. Instead, preservice and in-service experiences must be explicitly structured for novices to build an understanding, over time, of the benefits of critical dialogue.

One participant, Naomi, did seem to recognize that differences exist in the kinds of support she could receive from her colleagues; however, she also recognized that her school and the teachers in it were not attuned to these differences: “… there are lots of people that I can go to for help, but teachers here are quite isolated from one another and ... their classrooms are their fiefdoms.” In Naomi’s case, though the teachers in her school may have been receptive to assisting her, she recognized and was disappointed in the fact that they still worked independently. It remains rare to find professional cultures that support teacher learning or that provide opportunities for a critical, collaborative examination of teaching practice (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Little, 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that the majority of teachers in this study found themselves in such cultures and did not seem to advocate for more critical interactions.

Finally, some participants wanted more collegial interactions, but the workload in their first year of teaching provided a disincentive for them to advocate for more time with their colleagues. For example, Kim said, “I think one of the challenges is just trying to find the time, because the end of the day comes and I’m exhausted and I just need a break.” Because time is such a precious commodity for new teachers everywhere, when novices ask for more support, they may seek out less time-consuming interactions with their colleagues.

Whether participants expressed a desire for more supportive collegial interactions, our analyses show that though many of our participants felt very supported in their new roles as teachers, almost all of them needed more support. As Feiman-Nemser (2003) points out, there is a tension that often exists between satisfying the survival need of new teachers and encouraging their growth and development. Having basic survival needs met through aid and assistance and sharing, most of our novices did not seem to miss or call for the types of interactions that would arguably benefit their practice the most. What’s more, participants who were best positioned to critique their induction experiences as a result of their isolation seemed to call only for support that addressed their survival needs as opposed to their growth needs.
Conclusions and Implications

Educational researchers agree on the important role collaboration plays in promoting teacher learning and development (Borko, 2004; Elmore, 2004; King & Newmann, 2000; Little, 1990, 1993, 1999; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Similarly, as more and more schools across the country implement professional learning communities (PLCs) as structures for teacher learning and instructional improvement, it is clear that policymakers and school leaders, too, value the potential that lies in collaborative structures and the conversations they can facilitate. Yet, we found that the new teachers in this study rarely experienced the deeply meaningful collegial interactions that hold this potential. Few novices noted or criticized the absence of critical dialogue during their initial months at their schools. While we are struck by the paucity of critiques by novices of their collegial interactions, we believe that the burden of educating new teachers about the benefits of critical dialogue lies not with the new teachers themselves but with their teacher education, induction, and school site experiences. Our findings reveal that it is imperative that these three entities attend to providing preservice and novice teachers with meaningful learning opportunities that include critical dialogue and arm them with the theoretical foundations that speak to the necessity and benefits of such in-service learning.

Learning in the Preservice Setting

The formal journey of learning to teach begins in preservice settings. As Feiman-Nemser (2001) notes, the goal of preservice teacher education is meaningful teacher learning. However, teacher education programs are too often bereft of opportunities for candidates to “cultivate habits of analysis and reflection” through collaborative work or by other means (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1020). It is imperative for prospective teachers to be introduced to the benefits of critical dialogue during their preservice years. New teachers must learn to identify collegial interactions that are truly collaborative and understand that carefully structured, critical conversations with peers can deepen their knowledge of pedagogy and practice. Candidates might, for example, come together to collaborate in planning a unit of study for a methods class. They would receive guidance in the skills of careful collaboration, learning to think critically about each idea presented, giving thoughtful feedback, and creating a more rigorous unit responsive to students’ needs than would be possible if the work had been undertaken individually (Goddard et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2012; Thoonen et al., 2007). Exposure to opportunities such as this during teacher education programs may allow teacher candidates to directly experience the benefits of critical dialogue, which in turn may encourage them to look for such learning and support options in prospective job settings.

Learning Through Induction

Induction programs rely primarily on mentors to support new teachers. While frequently valuable as a source of aid and assistance or sharing, this support often does not include opportunities for critical dialogue about practice, where the mentor and novice puzzle through questions of curriculum and pedagogy together (and where the mentor, too, may take away great benefit from the interaction). This can be catalyzed through the creation of reflective, critical professional communities that include mentors and mentees, primarily novices, or teachers of mixed experience levels. We believe that induction programs provide fertile ground for the creation of such communities of teachers in which novices can be exposed to the benefits of critical dialogue.
This can be accomplished in at least two concrete ways. First, induction programs need to move beyond the traditional mentor-mentee dyad. Mentors need to be trained to support new teachers not just by providing them resources and ideas, but also by engaging them in critical and evaluative conversations about pedagogy and practice. For example, a novice may encounter opportunities in her weekly conversations with her mentor to reflect on the ways that they both have been introducing the concept of fractions to their classes, and they may plan together how best to take students’ understanding to the next level. This type of conversation may take some time as novices acclimate to their work. However, we believe that critical dialogue within a mentor relationship can serve as a powerful learning source for both new teachers and their mentors by pushing these teachers’ thinking and helping them to develop new approaches to their craft.

Second, induction programs should provide structured opportunities for larger groups of teachers to participate in critical conversations, as opposed to placing the entire responsibility for such dialogue on the mentor-mentee dyad. By incorporating opportunities for new teachers to articulate their ideas about curriculum and pedagogy and to critically discuss these ideas and those of others with different groups of colleagues (perhaps with the use of structured protocols or in PLC settings), induction programs can become loci of teacher learning as well as new teacher support. Furthermore, novices who receive induction that includes opportunities such as these may be more likely to see the benefits of such collaboration, and thus, they would be more inclined to seek out similar collegial interactions in their daily work in schools.

Learning at the School Site

Finally, our findings suggest the need for schools to place collaborative learning opportunities, and particularly critical dialogue, at the center of in-service learning for all teachers. This provides all teachers, no matter their experience level, opportunities for meaningful learning and improvement of their practice (Little, 1993, 1999; Smylie, 1996). Collaborative work among teachers boosts the potential of schools as organizations to achieve change and reform goals (Achinstein, 2002; Johnson, 1990; Johnson et al., 2012; Rosenholtz, 1989). However, despite the schoolwide benefits of collaboration among colleagues, teachers rarely encounter authentic collaborative work opportunities (Borko, 2004; Little, 1999).

Restructuring teachers’ work so that it includes plentiful opportunities for critical dialogue is a challenging undertaking. It requires schools to engage in cultural change, such that all members of a school community come to value collaborative work as a key component of instructional improvement efforts (Kardos & Johnson, 2007). We recognize the monumental nature of such cultural shifts, and like Rosenholtz et al. (1986), we are aware that “norms of collaboration do not just happen” (p. 93) and that school leaders must engage in thoughtful change initiatives in order to reshape professional norms amongst school staff. The move to incorporate PLCs into schools as a source for learning and change represents a strong move in this direction, though facilitation of authentic conversations that can lead to changed cultures within schools is often still necessary. However, the value of cultural changes that embrace critical dialogue as central to all teachers’ work and to schoolwide improvement efforts will, we believe, be worth the Herculean efforts that may be required to get there.

When schools take seriously the role that in-depth collaboration can play in achieving goals for improvement, all teachers (and consequently students) will stand to benefit. New teachers have a greater potential to learn through such interactions with their colleagues. They, and we would argue
their veteran counterparts, too, stand to gain important insight into their practice from participating in such collaborations. For novices already saddled with the challenges of acclimating to life in the classroom, a school that embraces collaborative work will be particularly beneficial. When critical dialogue is an embedded norm within a school’s culture, novices will find opportunities for such exchange scheduled into their workloads, as opposed to requiring them to take extra time out of their already busy lives to work collaboratively with their colleagues—or yet more challenging, to seek out or even create such collaborative work.

References


Dual Certification in General and Special Education: What is the Role of Field Experience in Preservice Teacher Preparation?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a field component that was merged with a new teacher preparation curriculum so that at the completion of the program the undergraduate candidates could be recommended for both K–6 general and special education certification. An examination of the data reveals that the program is challenging to implement, especially in terms of scheduling logistics, but beneficial to the preparation of new teachers. The intense field experiences allowed preservice teachers to face the challenges of meeting a diverse population of students in the areas of academics, culture, and socioeconomic status. Candidates were completing the program in an authentic context with a practical view of the realities of teaching in classrooms today.

Preservice Teacher Preparation

To prepare new teachers to embark on a journey into the world of teaching, it is imperative to provide them with the most critical information that will contribute to their potential as highly effective teachers (Imig & Imig, 2006). The purpose of this study was to determine how undergraduate elementary teacher education candidates adapted to a new curriculum leading to recommendation for both K–6 general and special education certification. Teacher preparation programs offer structured opportunities for preservice teachers to complete a rigorous initial phase of learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2003) that will equip them with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for teaching students with different needs (Cooper, Kurtts, Baber, & Vallecorsa, 2008; Richards, 2010). Generally, new teachers learn and acquire content knowledge; study the learning process and students’ cultural backgrounds; and learn how to plan, instruct, and assess students’ learning needs. Once they begin teaching, however, new teachers are faced with numerous challenges for which they may not be prepared.

A concerted effort by colleges of education is required to meet these challenges. Moreover, it is also important to consider that typical elementary classrooms are filled with students who have an array of learning skills, academic achievements, physical challenges, and social variations. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching will not work (Stotsky, 2006). Too many teacher education programs prepare beginning teachers for a classroom of homogenous students that simply does not exist. Today’s schools have classrooms full of diverse students with different cultural backgrounds and a variety of needs, and while these programs may prepare teachers to reach some students successfully, they fall woefully short in preparing teachers to reach all students.
Preservice Teacher Development

It is important that preservice teachers develop the skills and strategies to ensure that students of all ability levels achieve success in the classroom (Cooper, et al., 2008; Gay, 2002). There is unanimous agreement among educators that in order to be an effective teacher, one must be a master of content knowledge and pedagogical skills. An important part of this knowledge is the understanding of the different cultural characteristics and needs of every learner in the classroom. It is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to help new teachers begin their teaching careers capable of embracing those cherished moments that happen when students ask deep, thoughtful questions that prove the academic content has triggered a connection with a real-world event (Imig & Imig, 2006).

Imig and Imig (2006) consider teacher development as having two basic options: the just and unjust. The “just” path is where the teacher and students are connected through learning. The new teacher is teaching the students valuable and meaningful information while learning with them and embracing the notion that both parties are teachers and learners. Though the “just” path recognizes the value of standards-based instruction, the value of student interests is also considered. Teachers on this path work to keep educational gains tightly connected to student engagement. Arguably as important, the just path allows teachers to be agents of change as today’s classrooms are constantly evolving with students of varying needs and abilities. A new teacher must be able to adjust continuously to meet the individual needs of each student.

The “unjust” path is, unfortunately, commonplace for far too many new teachers (Imig & Imig, 2006). Here, teachers do not grow and thrive along with their students. Teachers on the unjust path are often overwhelmed by challenges that arise and are unable to meet the needs of their students. Rather, they tend to shift into survival mode and give their students’ recited facts and information without motivating or inspiring them to higher levels of learning.

Colleges of education must prepare new teachers to be both teachers and learners. They also need to understand the need to prepare highly qualified teachers who work hard to motivate, inspire, and create appropriate learning environments for every learner.

Inclusive Classrooms

The inclusion revolution began in the United States three quarters of a century ago in the years leading up to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Inclusion became a reality in public schools in 1990 when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) became law (Torreno, 2012). Inclusion is defined as placing students with special needs in a general classroom setting to receive academic instruction (Tilton, 1996). However, Snyder, Garriot, and Aylor (2001) found that many teachers have a negative perception of inclusion, citing reasons such as a lack of appropriate learning material and the presence of increased disruptive behavior as contributing to their lack of confidence in inclusion. In addition, many teachers feel they are inadequately prepared for teaching in an inclusive setting (Cipkin & Rizza, 2000; Snyder, Garriot, & Aylor, 2001). Being ill prepared to meet the needs of students included in the general education classroom who have been identified as having special learning needs can be daunting. It is postulated that novice teachers’ lack of adequate preparation for the realities of today’s classrooms contributes to nearly half of American teachers leaving the profession during their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2001; 2003).

Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs play an important role in the success of any classroom, especially an inclusive classroom. It is vital for teachers to be positive and confident that they can facilitate success for their students (Beacham & Rouse, 2012). In a study by Beacham and Rouse (2012), student teachers
reported that having a course focused on providing the knowledge, skills, and values needed to teach all children, regardless of impairment or learning difficulties, was beneficial and necessary. A learning environment within the inclusive classroom communities is one with peer tutoring, clearly defined areas of interest, meaningful content, and recognition of all students’ abilities and talents (Blessing, Levitz, & Levitz, 2003). These elements, when incorporated correctly and positively, maximize every student’s potential in the classroom while also providing an excellent environment for inclusion. It is important for teachers to celebrate diversity in the classroom and to embed differentiation of instruction into their teaching so that every student succeeds simultaneously. The fact remains, however, that many teachers have not acquired the requisite skills and experiences to be fully prepared. They do not have an understanding of the importance of diversity in the classroom and the correct ways to incorporate inclusive elements into regularly planned lessons.

General and special education teachers must work together to create a successful inclusive environment (Cipkin & Rizza, 2000). It is necessary for general education preservice teachers to acquire the experience and observation of special education teaching that is vital in today’s classroom. Simply stated, teacher preparation programs must focus their efforts on adequately preparing new teachers to teach diverse learners in inclusive classrooms.

Importance of Deep, Rich Clinical Field Experiences

Generally, preservice teachers must experience a wide range of learning opportunities during their preparation program or they report feeling underprepared to manage their classroom when they begin teaching (Küster, Bain, Milbrandt, & Newton, 2010). It is common practice for elementary education teacher preparation programs to require one special education survey course. Though, admittedly, one course is better than not addressing special education at all, it is evident that one course is simply not adequate to impart the fundamental knowledge or develop the skills needed to work effectively with special education students who are part of the general education classroom.

Likewise, preservice teachers who are not preparing to be special student educators feel overwhelmed trying to understand the diagnostic terminologies of various special needs categories, and they are besieged by the range of abilities that each special needs student exhibits (Gerber & Guay, 2006). Though one may argue that is impossible to prepare teacher candidates for every type of disability they may encounter, it is certainly plausible that the more time candidates spend engaged in meaningful field experiences, the better they will be able to adapt to the situations they will encounter. Bain and Hasio (2011) found that authentic experiences in classrooms with special needs students helped preservice teachers examine their own belief systems about working with these students. These teachers in training also learned how to work with diverse groups of students, be flexible, exercise patience, and differentiate their instruction for students learning at different levels and rates.

University Programs

Some universities are making concerted efforts to prepare their graduates to work with special education students, specifically those included in the general education classroom. For example, Central Michigan University designed an inclusion course for both their graduate and undergraduate candidates in an effort to model appropriate practice in inclusive education (Snyder, Garriot, & Aylor, 2001). Arthaud, Aram, Breck, Doelling, and Bushrow (2007) developed a Teacher Preparation Program Collaborative Seminar. The seminar focused on structuring opportunities for general and special education teacher candidates to collaborate, discuss federal and state special education mandates,
discuss local implications within general education contexts, and apply knowledge of the IDEA regulations from the perspective of both general and special education (Arthaud et al., 2007). A study by Spandagou, Evans, and Little (2008) supports the notion that if provided the opportunity to learn how to work with a diverse population of students, preservice teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and their perceptions of their preparation to teach in diverse classrooms improves. Though redesigning coursework to focus on inclusion is undeniably a step in the right direction, a connection must also be made to the fieldwork required of candidates.

The role of field experiences that preservice teachers engage in during their respective programs is critical in preparing them for inclusive classrooms (Kent, Giles, & Hibberts, 2013; O’Brien, Stoner, Appel, & House, 2007). Research points to the power of coupling coursework on inclusion and field experience with special education students, resulting in a more positive attitude regarding teaching in an inclusive setting (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Leyser, Kapperman, & Keller, 1994). Preservice teachers should be given opportunities to practice differentiating instruction for special needs students so they learn how to teach to the unique capabilities of every child (Bain & Hasio, 2011). Considering the premise that teachers’ self-efficacy has been linked to student achievement, motivation, and students’ own self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), the results of a study by Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi (2011) revealed that candidates with experience with special needs students had significantly higher self-efficacy than candidates without the experience. Preparing preservice teachers to meet the needs of all students, ranging from those who are academically challenged to those who are gifted hinges upon the quality and opportunities of their field experiences (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Gentry, 2012).

Method

One university in the southeast United States attempted to address the problem by reorganizing the elementary and special education curricula at the undergraduate level. As a result, all candidates seeking K–6 teacher certification would meet the requirements for obtaining teaching certificates in both general and special education. The study employed a mixed-method research design, including multiple data sources. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the field component of the newly designed curriculum.

Specifically, the research questions for this study were:

1. What is the relationship between university coursework during the two semesters of intensive field experience and classroom practice in special education and general education as perceived by:
   a. teacher education candidates?
   b. cooperating teachers?

2. What are the perceptions of a K–6 teacher education candidate with respect to:
   a. the role of a teacher?
   b. the challenges of teaching?
   c. meeting the needs of a diverse population of students?
   d. differentiating instruction?

3. What are the challenges of implementing a comprehensive K–6 Teacher Education program as perceived by:
   a. university supervisors?
   b. cooperating teachers?
c. teacher education candidates?

d. principals?

Research Study

In response to the need as presented in the global research and local data, the university innovatively restructured their undergraduate teacher preparation programs to merge elementary and special education into a single preparation program. These changes occurred as state certification standards significantly expanded and in the midst of the increasing demands for teachers prepared to work in inclusive classrooms.

In the beginning semester, students preparing to be teachers at the K–6 level were admitted to this new curriculum, the K–6 Teacher Education Program. The program leads to dual certification in elementary (K–6) and collaborative special education (K–6) without lengthening the time for degree completion or adding additional credit hours.

The restructured curriculum includes both special education and general education standards in some courses, while allowing other courses to remain purely special or general education. The merging of the curriculum also allowed for the elimination of some courses entirely. Although candidates may focus more heavily on general education or special education through field hours, the mantra of the new merged curriculum is the preparation of preservice teachers for an inclusive classroom.

Critical to the new program was the change in the field requirements. College of Education and school district administrators met to discuss the new program, specifically the field requirements. These meetings resulted in the joint selection of 18 participating schools in two local districts. School selection was based on the quality of the school administrators, the capacity of the school faculty to mentor new teachers, and the presence of special education students. Following meetings with the district administrators, the program was explained in depth to school principals. Specifically:

- the role of the general education teacher and how a candidate no longer “belonged” just to a single teacher, rather the teacher was part of a mentoring and induction team;
- the fact that special education teachers played a critical role in the process and would have to mentor multiple candidates during the same semester; and
- the role that was needed for the remainder of the faculty to engage in the team approach to mentoring and induction.

The principals were then invited to participate with the opportunity to accept or decline the invitation.

In addition, the university supervisors’ roles changed. They had to embrace a model of tiered supervision, supervising all K–6 students within a school, regardless of where they were in the program, with the premise that the supervisor becomes well known and is a full partner in the school. Supervisors took on the role of mentors, coaches, and evaluators as they regularly conferenced with candidates, observed and evaluated candidates informally and formally, engaged in model teaching, and collaborated with the cooperating teachers. They also communicated with school administration to ensure that the candidates, cooperating teachers, and children’s learning needs were being met.

There was also a learning curve in terms of content knowledge for the supervisors. Previously, they had engaged in supervision in their primary area of expertise. Now, each had to engage in professional development in either special education or general education. Their colleagues within the college provided some of this professional development; the public school personnel provided some
professional development; and some individual supervisors engaged in professional research and readings.

Program Requirements

After achieving candidacy (full admission to the teacher preparation program), candidates complete 450 field experience hours in the two semesters they are enrolled in their methods courses prior to student teaching (Table 1: Tier 2 + Tier 3). Then, they complete 525 field experience hours in a third semester of student teaching (Table 1: Tier 4). The 450 hours prior to student teaching are partitioned: 150 hours in general education, 150 hours in special education, and 150 hours in the candidates’ area of greater interest or the school’s greatest need. Candidates complete the field requirement in a single school, with placement changes within the school. Candidates are assigned both special education and general education cooperating teachers every semester. Table 1 presents an overview of the course and field program requirements.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Level</th>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Field Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1 (18 hours)</td>
<td>Microcomputing Systems in Education, Education in a Diverse Society, Human Growth and Development, Evaluation of Teach and Learning, Health and Movement Education, Arts in the Elementary Classroom</td>
<td>20 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2 (17 hours)</td>
<td>K–6 Education, Foundations of Reading Instruction, Teaching Social Studies, Learning and Behavioral Disorders, Behavioral Management, Classroom Management 1 (1 hr.), Field Experience (1 cr. hr.)</td>
<td>200 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 3 (17 hours)</td>
<td>Teaching Mathematics, Teaching Science, Teaching Reading, Partnerships in Special Education, Intellectual and Physical Disabilities, Classroom Management 2 (1 hr.), Field Experience (1 hr.)</td>
<td>250 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 4 (12 hours)</td>
<td>Student Teaching EEC (6 hrs.), Student Teaching Collaborative K–6 (6 hrs.)</td>
<td>525 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Materials and Data Sources

To obtain a comprehensive picture of the initial implementation of the K–6 Teacher Education program, multiple sources of data were collected from candidates, cooperating teachers, principals, and university supervisors as detailed below.

Electronic Surveys

Candidates. An eleven-item electronic survey regarding the connection between theory taught at the university and expected classroom practice was administered to the candidates at the completion of the program. Three of the eleven items were open response items, and eight items had a Likert-like response scale. Two additional items relating to the preparation of teaching a diverse population of students exploring socioeconomic status and ethnicity were also included. Candidates had the opportunity to provide a narrative explanation of their answers. Sixty-one candidates responded to the survey.

Cooperating teachers. A nine-item electronic survey was administered to 27 general education (n = 27) and 4 special education (n = 4) cooperating teachers at the completion of the candidates’ program regarding the expectations of the assignments that were to be implemented in their classrooms. There were seven Likert-type items, with two allowing for further explanation and two open response items.

Focus Groups

Candidates. At the midpoint of the three semesters of field experience, candidates (n = 23) engaged in a focus group meeting facilitated by the field supervisors and the primary instructor of the field experience course.

Principals. At the end of each of the three field experience semesters, principals (n = 7) engaged in a focus group meeting facilitated by the Director of Field Services, the Associate Dean, and Dean of the College.

University supervisors. At the conclusion of the three-semester experience, a focus group meeting with the supervisors (n = 7) was conducted by the Director of Field Services to obtain feedback on what went well and what changes needed to be implemented.

Unstructured Interviews

University supervisors. Throughout the semester, the Director of Field Services conducted unstructured interviews with the university supervisors based on their observations and conversations with the cooperating teachers, principals, and candidates.

Results

Results are presented in relation to the research questions.

1. What is the relationship between university coursework and classroom practice in special education and general education as perceived by:
   a. teacher education candidates? In analyzing the data using descriptive statistics, the classroom management course was the most highly correlated course between university coursework and field experiences. The course encompassed both special education and general education strategies. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the respondents on the electronic survey reported the course to be highly correlated. The Foundations of Teaching Reading course, which also encompassed both special and general education standards, was highly
correlated to the field experience as reported by 48% (n = 10) of the respondents. However, 19% of the candidates reported the same course as poorly correlated with the field experience. The Methods of Teaching Social Studies course was reported to be the least correlated course to the field with 26% of candidates reporting it to be either fairly or poorly correlated.

b. cooperating teachers? Of the 27 cooperating teachers surveyed, 48% reported that the field requirements of the candidates matched what they were doing in the classroom. Approximately 38% reported the requirements to be somewhat correlated, 10% reported them to be fairly correlated, and 3% reported them to be poorly correlated.

2. What are the perceptions of K–6 teacher education candidates with respect to:
   a. the role of a teacher? At the completion of the program, the patterns in the qualitative data revealed that the candidates see the role of the teacher in multiple facets. The patterns clustered around:
      • meeting the academic needs of students,
      • serving as a role model for the students, and
      • providing support, guidance, and structure for the students.
   b. the challenges of teaching? At the completion of the program, the patterns in the qualitative data revealed that the candidates perceive that the challenges teachers face as:
      • classroom management,
      • attitudes of students in relation to motivation, and
      • differentiating instruction for a wide range of academic needs.
   c. meeting the needs of a diverse population of students? A qualitative data analysis of candidates’ perceptions of teaching a diverse population of students indicated:
      • there was a fear of the unknown, especially at the beginning of the program;
      • there was a recognition of the definite differences between themselves and some of the students they worked with in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status;
      • the field experiences and teachers they worked with helped make candidates more comfortable and learn more about the culture of the students they taught; and
      • the candidates expressed concerns about the vast number of types of disabilities and their personal teaching ability to meet all of the students’ needs, specifically in self-contained special education classrooms.

Participants were asked if their field placements were in a school with students from differing socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds than their own. Of the 61 responses, 53% reported they were placed in a school with students of different socioeconomic status than themselves, and 34% reported completing their field experience primarily with students of different ethnic backgrounds than themselves. Participants were also asked if they were prepared to meet the needs of these students. Of the 47 responses, six students reported that the coursework did not prepare them for teaching diverse students, qualifying their response by saying what they learned while in the field helped them learn how to meet the needs of the diverse population.

d. differentiating instruction? At the completion of the program, the patterns in the qualitative data revealed that the candidates’ perceptions of differentiating instruction:
      • is necessary for both general education and special education students;
must be determined on a case-by-case basis, individualized education plans dictate how this is done for special education students, and classroom assessments guide the instruction for general education students; and

is an overwhelming and daunting task because there is a wide range of abilities to consider. Further, candidates cited their field experiences as responsible for increased confidence in their ability to differentiate instruction for general education students and high incident special education students, but recognized their lack of ability, especially for the low-incident disabilities.

3. What are the challenges of implementing a comprehensive K–6 Teacher Education program as perceived by:

a. university supervisors? The challenges reported by the university supervisors fell into three categories. The first category was in relation to organizing the field hours. At a minimum, 75 hours for two semesters (150 total) had to be spent under the tutelage of a general education teacher, and 75 hours for two semesters (150 total) had to be spent with a special education teacher. Creating a schedule for the special education hours was a significant challenge, especially since a single special education teacher was mentoring multiple candidates. The candidates in grades K–1 often did not have identified special education students included in their general education class. As candidates progressed to the student teaching semester (Tier 4), the scheduling continued to be challenging as the participants were required to “solo teach” for 10 consecutive days in general education and 10 days in special education.

The second category related to the professional dispositions of the candidates. Though they were strong academically, they repeatedly complained about the workload and required hours: essentially 5 days a week, 7 hours a day for both coursework and field experience during the two consecutive semesters prior to student teaching. The negative attitude caused disruption in productivity and loss of focus for some students. The dispositions of the candidates, however, improved during the student teaching semester, as the participants felt well prepared to be in the schools full time.

The final category related to preparing candidates for the severe population of special needs students. Though the field experiences coupled with the coursework seemed to better prepare candidates for high incident special education students as well as for the inclusive classroom, there was less emphasis placed on preparing candidates to meet the needs of those students in self-contained special education classrooms.

b. cooperating teachers? The cooperating teacher data revealed that the greatest challenges for program implementation were logistical, such as the teachers’ lack of knowledge of field assignments, changes that were made to field hours, how to meet the standards in the field, and a lack of understanding of the overall program. Again, there were some patterns of concern related to scheduling the field hours as the movement of the candidates often became confusing. Cooperating teachers in both general and special education expressed concern of being able to provide adequate mentoring and induction into the disciplines as the time had to be split between both classrooms.

Much of the data revealed a very positive experience for the teachers. With the exception of one candidate, the teachers reported that the candidates were focused on learning and being involved with the general education and special education students.
c. teacher education candidates? The candidate data revealed that the greatest implementation challenges in the beginning of the program were learning how to manage course assignments, time in the field, and responsibilities outside of the program. As the program progressed, however, the candidates felt more prepared for what they faced in the subsequent semesters.

The candidates also revealed anxiety over being prepared to meet the demands of the classroom, both in an inclusive setting and in self-contained special education classes. Though they gained more confidence as the program progressed, they felt that there were constantly new obstacles faced in meeting the needs of all students and in their own self-concept of being able to successfully differentiate instruction. Many questioned their own ability as a teacher.

d. principals? The focus group data from principals revealed an extremely positive view of the beginning implementation of the program. The challenge some principals faced was internal; keeping teachers motivated and excited about working with university students as mentoring is often perceived as a lot of extra work. This was especially true of some of the special education teachers as they were assigned multiple university candidates simultaneously in a program that traditionally did not have many students.

Some of the principals reported the success of embracing the team approach to mentoring and inducting the preservice teachers. Specifically, engaging the building-based instructional coaches and media center specialists had a tremendous impact in the success of the program in their schools. In addition, the overall theme of the principal focus groups was that the preservice teachers were graduating better prepared to meet the challenges they would face as first year teachers. Many of the principals were excited to use the intense field experience as a “three semester job interview” and were hoping to be able to hire many of the candidates or recommend them to their principal colleagues for positions in other schools.

In addition, one principal expressed concern regarding whether the candidates were receiving the depth of experience needed in both the general education and special education areas. This principal reported that the demand on the teachers, especially in special education, proved to be a tremendous hardship on their ability to meet the needs of their own students.

Discussion

An examination of the data reveals that the program is challenging to implement, especially in terms of scheduling logistics, but beneficial to the preparation of new teachers. The intense field experiences allowed preservice teachers to face the challenges of working with a diverse population of students, especially as related to academics, culture, and socioeconomic status. Those who felt their coursework did not prepare them for the challenges reported that their time in the field was most beneficial.

Candidates also had a practical view of the realities of teaching in classrooms. There were highs and lows presented in the focus group data regarding overall teaching efficacy that can be attributed to the demanding schedule placed on the preservice teachers, the notion of being “scared” to teach special education, and being faced with the realities of the challenges that both general education and special education teachers face on a daily basis. Preparation in classroom management and differentiating
instruction emerged as two strong areas of the program, which are typically areas of weakness in many teacher preparation programs.

The intense program also resulted in a demanding schedule for the participants. Unlike many college students, the participants in this program were required to commit 35–40 hours a week for three semesters in university classes or in the field, in addition to time spent outside of class in planning, preparation, and completing assignments. Though this schedule provided a realistic view of the schedule of a “real teacher,” it was often difficult for the candidates to manage their responsibilities outside of teacher preparation.

As colleges of education attempt to design innovations, it is imperative that they consider the multifaceted challenges that will arise. Programs must not become so diluted that graduates are not well prepared in general education or in special education. State certification standards, program hours, and demands of students must also be considered as program revisions are made. Logistical issues regarding scheduling, the number of special education and general education teachers available to mentor, and the core philosophy of school-based administrators are all central to the success of innovations implemented by higher education. Ultimately, teacher education programs must rise to the challenge of preparing teachers to meet the needs of all students through developing positive attitudes, strong partnerships between home and school, use of appropriate interventions, and meaningful adaptations and modifications to the curriculum to effectively differentiate instruction.

Limitations

As in all studies, there are some limitations that should be acknowledged. Participants were a convenience sample of the first group of candidates who were part of this new program. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalizable to all teacher education programs.

The questionnaire used to collect data was a survey instrument completed through participants’ self-reporting. As such, participants could have misrepresented their actual perceptions. In addition, the researcher who developed the questionnaire and the questions themselves may not have encompassed the totality of the experience. Also, the focus group data may not reflect participants’ actual feelings as sharing in a group may have impeded the discussion of their actual perceptions.

Further Research

Though research supports that quality field experiences play a critical role in learning to teach (Maloch, Fine, & Flint, 2003), Anders, Hoffman, and Duffy (2000) caution that there is little research available that describes the actual components of effective field experiences. Likewise, this research did not identify specific field elements beneficial to the preservice teacher candidates. Therefore, further research should be conducted to determine the specific field elements that contribute to preparing candidates for teaching in inclusive settings.

This research revealed the impact of the field component on teacher preparation, specifically for inclusive classrooms. Follow-up research should be conducted, focusing more on the impact of the program on specific disabilities and differentiating between high-incidence and low-incidence special education students.

The present study examined the impact of the field component as perceived by preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, school administrators, and university supervisors. Additional research should be conducted on the programmatic impact of teacher candidates on student achievement.
Implications

Federal mandates such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002) have directed state education departments and local education agencies to address the pedagogical needs of special education students in least-restrictive environments (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). However, one of the most problematic and stressful challenges facing public school administrators today is to provide appropriate education by well-prepared educators in evidence-based instructional strategies for students with moderate and severe disabilities, alongside nondisabled students in general education inclusive classrooms (Goodman & Williams, 2007). In addition to the increasing number of students identified with special education needs, there simply are not enough new teachers graduating in the area of special education. The result is a compelling need to improve the preparation of special education and general education teachers required to teach all students in inclusive classrooms (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Downing & Pekham-Hardin, 2007).

The National Research Council (2001), as well as experienced and new general education teachers, have reported that they (the teachers) lack adequate preparation to teach children with moderate to severe disabilities in inclusive settings, and 61% of these teachers have advocated for proper training and tools to competently co-teach all students in the inclusive settings classroom (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004). As a result, many universities are beginning to carefully scrutinize their teacher preparation programs in attempt to improve the preparation of prospective teachers in inclusive classrooms (Van Laarhoven, Munk, Lynch, Bosma, & Rouse, 2007).

Teachers today face different challenges than they encountered only a few years ago. Traditionally, colleges of education have prepared teachers to teach in a general education classroom full of “regular students.” There has been a classroom evolution, however, where teachers must be able to meet the multidimensional needs of all of the students they teach. It is a simple fact that in our global classrooms, students do not fit in neat categories and cannot be taught using a one-size-fits-all approach. Though inclusion has been a part of many classrooms for nearly two decades, the number of students with diagnosed disabilities has increased, and research has continued to report the lack of preparation of teachers to meet the needs of all students. The future success of educating students identified with disabilities, as well as nondisabled students with varying ability levels, is contingent upon how well prepared educators are in the pedagogies of differentiating instruction. Teacher preparation programs must be willing to design and implement innovations to traditional programs to enable all educators to meet these challenges.

References


