Responding to the Needs of Early Career SETs through Educator Preparation Programs

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Abstract

Effective collaboration between special education teachers (SETs) and general educator teachers (GETs) is critical to better serve diverse students in the general education classroom. However, multiple areas of needs reported by early career SETs indicate that achieving the goal of effective collaboration is challenging. With a better understanding of the early experiences of SETs and their specific needs, GETs would be more suited to support early career SETs and increase effective partnerships across diverse educational settings. This article identified the needs of beginning SETs and discussed the directions of educator preparation programs in response of the reported needs.

Keywords: collaboration, early career special education teachers, general education teachers, educator preparation program

The Rationale of Effective Collaboration between GETs and SETs

Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) was enacted, much attention has been directed toward collaboration between special education teachers (SETs) and general education teachers (GETs) to ensure students with disabilities engage with their grade level peers without disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Additionally, a series of education laws (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015, No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001) and procedures

(Response to Intervention [RtI]) have emphasized students with disabilities meet grade level curriculum with higher-level academic expectation. These give us the rationale of why GETs and SETs should work together with better collaborative skills (Pugach, Blaton, Correa, McLeskey, Langley, 2009).

A body of literature have addressed the significance of collaboration between teaching professionals across general and special education. In particular, collaboration enhances the quality of instruction by maximizing instructional supports. Students are receiving more individualized attention for academic needs in addition to others (Snyder, Garriott, & Williams, 2001). Despite such positive aspects of collaboration, research shows early career special education teachers (SETs) perceive minimal support in working with GETs (e.g., Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2009; Kilgore, Griffin, Otis-Wilborn, & Winn, 2003). Given that feeling, this lack of supports contributes to the negative perceptions of early career SETs on work environment, teacher attrition, teacher quality (Billingsley, 2010), and instructional effectiveness (Bettini et al., 2016), there is an urgent need to listen to their voices to design supports. However, limited research has been conducted in this area.

The purpose of this article is to examine the needs of early career SETs. At the end of this article, ways teacher educators and districts will prepare GETs to better collaborate with SETs are highlighted.

What GETs Need to Know to Support SETs

Four major themes emerged from the literature review on early career SETs and included (a) emotional support, (b) guidance with system information, (c) assistance assessing resources and materials, and (d) support with curriculum and instruction.

Emotional support

Novice special educators felt a strong need for emotional support (White & Mason, 2006). They need colleagues with whom they can share their experiences. They also want to be supported by someone who will listen to their concerns and triumphs and encourage them to continue doing what works and to

try new things (White & Mason, 2006). They need colleagues who mentor on ways to do problem solve (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). According to Whitaker (2003), these teachers are receiving a certain amount of emotional support, but report feeling as though they would benefit from having greater emphasis placed on this area by their GET peers and mentors.

Guidance with system information

Beginning SETs reported their need for guidance with system information. To understand the function of school, their new workplace, those new teachers needed to be aware school policies and procedures, unwritten rules, and expectations (Kilgore, Griffin, Otis-Wilborn, & Winn, 2003; Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005). To do this, they need to network and find the right school personnel to obtain the valuable information, which made them to feel inadequate. It is more critical for them to get to know about such aspects because they play key roles in enhancing the work effectiveness of teachers as a whole (Pugach et al., 2009). With this need, career GETs can play as a resource to early career SETs, offering guidance for school system information.

Resources and materials

Beginning SETs reported difficulty in accessing resources and materials. New SETs also need assistance learning to navigate their new physical environments. Whitaker (2003) found that new SETs experience frustration in locating and collecting the resources and materials they needed to provide quality instruction for their students. With this need, GETs stand to provide much assistance, offering a spectrum of support from basic guidance to specific direction accessing and securing the materials SETs need to be successful educators of their students.

Curriculum and instruction

SETs in their early careers also reported having significant difficulties with curriculum and instruction. First, early career SETs shared the need for information about teaching diverse subject areas, methods

and strategies for instruction, student progress monitoring, and assessments (Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005; White & Mason, 2006). Lacking preparation in broad content-knowledge areas is referred as a substantial problem for many beginning SETs (Brownell et al., 2009). Compared to the amount of their needs, however, those teachers report they do not receive enough assistance in this area (Whitaker, 2003).

Second, early SETs felt difficulties in the area of curriculum and instruction, experiencing different expectations and standards to student achievement and supports. Gehrke and McCoy (2007) described four first-year SETs' experience related to misunderstandings of special education by general educators. From their experiences, general educators were not willing to assume responsibilities for students with disabilities, nor provide proper accommodations and modifications for their homework; in sum, beginning SETs indicated that GETs were fostering difficult environments by sticking to "unrealistic expectations" for students. In this sense, students were not being set up for successful outcomes. These novice teachers described extremely high levels of frustration, having difficulty getting involved in collaborative processes with GETs (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

Discussion and Implications

This literature review revealed beginning SETs' needs in multiple areas, including instruction and curriculum, resources, and systematic information. Furthermore, this review indicates the clear need for better communication and collaboration between SETs and GETs in order to maximize outcomes of students with disabilities (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Snyder et al., 2001).

Given that GETs are the ones who most closely works with SETs and who can influence SETs' perceptions to work environment (Billingsley, 2010), GETs should understand what novice special educators need and attempt to build supportive relationships with them (Griffin et al., 2008). In this

section, we suggest how to how to prepare to and support GETs in an effort to improve collaborative skills.

Directions for Educator Preparation Programs

Given that collaboration skills are learned from teacher preparation programs (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009), educator preparation programs (EPPs) need to provide more authentic collaborative experience for general education teacher candidates to work with SETs. Authentic learning experiences play a critical role in providing teacher candidates opportunities to identify and assess learning challenges in students and intervene (Richards, Huntley, Weaver, & Landers, 2003). Furthermore, practicing the skills in authentic field experiences enhances teacher candidates' comfort level with collaboration (Farnan, 2016). Therefore, it is important for teacher educators to identify the need for embedded collaborative and co-teaching experiences at the teacher candidate level within field experiences. Teacher candidates need multiple opportunities to practice collaboration skills.

In addition, EPPs need to provide opportunities for the general education teacher candidates to be more aware of the needs of beginning SETs in an attempt to build supportive relationships with them (Griffin et al., 2008). In the continuum of the field experience, the candidates have after field experience reflections on collaborations. Seminars and role plays will give ideas of what SETs need, therefore possibly increasing the desire and need for collaboration.

Continuous Support from School Districts

School districts should consider SETs having more than one mentor with one being a special educator and the other a regular education teacher. This focus on induction and mentoring practices with GETs serving as mentors, may increase the emotional and curriculum support and need for systems information by SETs. Although GET mentors reported difficulties providing feedback to early SETs who have students unfamiliar to them (Babione & Shea, 2005), sharing an early career SET as a mentee

enables GET and SET mentors to involve more collaborative practices, and to provide a model to the mentee. Furthermore, the GET mentor would provide more exposure to regular education curriculum and instructional practices, which is an area of need for SETs. This partnership and collaboration may lessen the frustration of SETs with collaborating with GETs in order to get assistance for the students in regular education, inclusive environments which is necessary to increase student achievement.

Conclusion

Given there are more students with disabilities in the general education classroom, understanding the needs of SETs is critical. In response, we identified early career SETs needed guidance for emotional support, system information, curriculum and instruction, and resources. With a better understanding of the early experiences of SETs and their specific needs, GETs would be more suited to support early career SETs and increase the possibility for effective partnerships across diverse educational settings. Based on SETs' needs, we provided suggestions of how to prepare GETs through EPPs as well as support at district level. To make these plans more tangible, further research needs to be conducted on how to design course curriculum to prepare these teacher candidates more strategically.

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