

Mentoring Pre-Service Special Education Teachers: What do they want to Know and what do they need to Know?

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Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive study was to survey pre-service teachers to determine the relevance of mentor teachers during field-based coursework. Likewise, the mentor teachers were surveyed. Teachers responded in writing to the following prompts: 1) What does a beginning special education teacher need to know to be successful in the classroom? 2) How can you help your assigned pre-service candidate be successful? Review of the responses were carefully analyzed and the results shared. The study suggests that pre-service teachers benefit from the support of mentor teachers. Suggestions to help first year teachers are also summarized.

Key words: mentoring, pre-service special education teachers' needs, collaboration

1. Introduction

Currently, there are 6.5 million children and youth with disabilities who receive special education services in the United States (US Department of Education, 2010) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004. As more students with exceptionalities are served within the context of the regular classroom setting, there is an increased need for well-trained special education teachers. In order to recruit and retain special education teachers, the establishment of informal and formal mentor programs may be desirable. Indeed, research suggests that mentoring has been shown to have a positive effect on the careers of beginning teachers (Heward, 2013).

2. Brief review of relevant literature

Bishop (1993) describes "collaboration as a way of thinking and relating, a philosophy, a paradigm shift, an attitude change. It requires a set of behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and values. The result is a sense of shared ownership, shared responsibility, shared success." Collaboration is key to addressing challenges that are present when promoting cohesiveness among organizations. In other words, collaboration doesn't just naturally occur (Tsai & Wu, 2011). It takes a great deal of time and effort to make connections with others in order to ensure that shared projects are a success. There has never been a time when the expectations have been greater that teachers work together in meaningful job-embedded ways. Indeed, collaborative working environments are widely considered to be critical to the creation and maintenance of schools as professional learning communities (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Effective partnerships involve trust and open communication. A trusting partnership is fostered by forming strong relationships and building on each others' expertise and resources, as appropriate, for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly benefit students and indirectly benefit other family members and professionals. Clearly, communicating within a team context is crucial. Establishing open and honest communication within the team is essential in creating effective partnerships (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer 2013).

According to Inzer and Crawford (2005), mentoring is a natural part of building a relationship that occurs in the workplace. In other words, where two people work together and one gains insight, knowledge, wisdom, friendship and support from the other, mentoring has occurred. Beginning teachers face many challenges. One of the keys to a successful first year of teaching is a solid mentor teacher who can provide the support needed to be successful in the classroom (Radford, 2013).

3. Description of participants

Twenty-five pre-service candidates enrolled in a special education field-based course, twenty-five special education teachers in a large metropolitan public school district in Southeast Texas

4. Purpose and objectives

Special education classroom teachers were prompted to indicate how they could best assist (mentor) assigned pre-service special education teachers to be successful in the classroom.

Special education classroom teachers were asked to identify what beginning special education teachers need to know to be successful in the classroom.

Pre-service candidates were asked to identify areas in which they would like to work on with their mentor teachers (the relevance of mentor teachers) to prepare them for their first teaching job in special education.

5. Data collection and analysis

Mentor special education teachers were surveyed. The survey questions were sent to the district coordinator of special education for distribution to the mentor teachers. Data were collected by the district personnel. Responses from the teachers were reviewed by the researcher. Patterns and themes emerged as a consequence. Analysis using a simple coding process was used to identify the patterns and recurring concepts. To help validate the analysis in the identification of themes and patterns, an expert in the field of special education served as a second reviewer. The first and second reviewers de-briefed with one another by writing memos and discussing findings to better assist in the comparison of concepts and clarification of the data. Likewise, the pre-service candidates were asked to identify areas of in which they would like to work on with their mentor teachers to prepare them for their first teaching jobs in special education. The data were collected in the form of participants' journal entries. Responses were categorized by using the process described above.

6. Findings

6.1 Mentorship

Mentor teachers recognized various blueprints in helping pre-service teacher achieve success in the classroom. When special education classroom teachers were prompted to indicate how they could best assist (mentor) assigned pre-service special education teachers to be successful in the classroom, the six commonly cited approaches include providing opportunities for the candidates to 1) actively participate, 2) engage in open and honest communication, 3) demonstrate commitment to the field, 4) build relationships and collaborate, 5) practice behavior management and teaching strategies, and 6) celebrate accomplishments.

Mentor teachers found that actively engaging the pre-service candidates in the classroom provided the most benefit. As one teacher describes it:

I truly believe the only way for the candidates to learn is do hands on activities and to begin working with the students as soon as possible. I put the candidates with the students to work them, not be just an observer.

The mentor teachers also support and value open and honest communication. Indeed, when a pre-service candidate shared her concerns with the mentor teacher and asked questions, positive effects were reported as evidenced by the following statement from the mentor teacher:

We are very open and honest about what education means to us and value what we do. Our goal is to accurately portray the successes and weaknesses of our programs.

Another common theme that emerged from the study is that the mentor teachers believe it is important to demonstrate commitment to the field. This theme involved professional growth opportunities as well as sharing resources:

The most important thing is for me to grow as a teacher and provide the best instruction possible to benefit student learning. Getting additional training and going to workshops is important. I tried to give her a copy of anything everything that might be of help.

Several mentors described the value in building relationships in order to secure collaboration. That is, a successful classroom builds on collaboration by developing positive relationships with others, such as other teachers, parents, students, and administrators:

Curriculum definitely has its place, yet, building relationships with your students, parents, and co-workers have long lasting effects. Take time to care, spend time getting to know one another.

A significant finding suggests that the mentor teacher provide opportunities for pre-service candidates to practice teaching and discipline management strategies without fear of making mistakes. One teacher aptly states:

Be sure to find a good mentor to turn to for help and do not be afraid to take chances. Know that everyone feels overwhelmed at times and that every day is a learning experience.

The mentor teachers were extremely positive and were quick to point out that the pre-service teachers were enthusiastic and eager to contribute to the classroom setting. The time together provided both the mentor teachers and the pre-service teachers and opportunity to share and celebrate student accomplishments:

Acknowledge success, give your students a pat on the back with an enthusiastic "Good Job", "Way to Go", or any other statement that you know will motivate them.

6.2 What beginning teachers need to know

Ten recommendations came from the mentor teachers in what first year special education teachers need to know in order to be successful in the classroom. Interestingly, the mentor teachers identified elements that were not linked to teacher knowledge and skills. The suggestions are summarized below:

- Always remain flexible
- Don't "sweat" the small stuff
- Expect the unexpected
- Organization is a key to success
- Attend to Annual Review Dismissal (ARD) paperwork
- Be inventive
- Document, document, document
- Keep a good sense of humor
- Stay positive
- Keep the joy in teaching

6.3 What pre-service teachers want to know

Several areas of development were listed by the pre-service teachers when asked to identify areas in which they would like to work on with their mentor teachers to prepare them for their first teaching job in special education. The three areas that emerged from the pre-service candidates include topics that address 1) the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 2) behavior challenges, and 3) instructional strategies,

The IEP was referred to in the majority of the journal writings done by the pre-service teacher. The teacher candidates wanted their mentor teachers to show them how to 1) create IEP goals and objectives, 2) develop appropriate activities to meet the goals and objectives, and 3) monitor and collect data for the IEP goals and objectives. Compellingly, the pre-service teachers found that the mentor teachers helped them make progress on their understanding of the IEP:

My teacher provided me with a data collection chart she created for one of her students. In order to monitor the student, she researched numerous websites pertaining to each objective outlined in the student's IEP. She created a chart with the websites listed, and had the student visit the sites and perform the activities, lessons, or readings.

A large number of pre-service teachers also wanted their mentor teachers to demonstrate how to deal with behavior management issues. Modeling appropriate techniques for classroom management provided pre-service teacher candidates a view of what actually goes on in the classroom and the knowledge to know how to successfully deal with the challenging behaviors:

I feel that being in this classroom I learned new strategies that will assist with classroom management. My mentor teacher was very proactive with making sure that each student displayed proper acceptable behavior. There were a few incidents throughout my time here that she showed me how to manage behavior issues. Some behaviors were unpredictable but the teacher dealt with the behavior appropriately. She was very encouraging and set a great example.

A third area that warranted attention was implementing appropriate instructional strategies. Effective practices were demonstrated by the mentor teachers. That is, the mentor teachers demonstrated the effectiveness of various strategies that benefitted a number of students with unique needs, including autism, learning disabilities, and behavior disorders. The teacher candidates had the opportunity to simulate the strategies.

I learned from the example of my mentor teacher how to use every opportunity for instruction. I learned a great deal strictly because of the modeling and strategies put forth by my mentor. She allowed me to have hands on practice. She also gave me the freedom to bring in some of my own ideas and strategies to practice.

7. Conclusions

In general, pre-service educators gained a greater appreciation of working together with mentor teachers. Overwhelmingly, pre-service candidates concluded that the mentor teacher helped them to become a more confident teacher. The pre-service teachers strongly agreed that their mentor teachers were instrumental in improving their teaching skills and appreciated their efforts. Mentor teachers were knowledgeable of techniques that encouraged all students to participate in the learning process. Clearly, the mentor teachers were dedicated in helping the pre-service teachers master areas in which they wanted to gain additional knowledge. It is likely from the extra effort, that a greater number of pre-service teachers became effective first year teachers. Indeed, one of the participants in the study was recently awarded the First Year Promising Teacher Award from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) – Texas at the annual conference.

8. Implications and Recommendations

Appropriate educational experiences for pre-service candidates with support from mentor teachers increase the likelihood that pre-service teachers will experience future success in the classroom. Developing opportunities for mentor teachers and pre-service teachers to work together is found to be mutually beneficial. Additional and appropriate training programs should be explored to further develop the pre-service teacher/ teacher mentor relationship.

9. References

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