Spring 2015

Effectively Preparing Special Education Teachers: Success in Urban Environments

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Effectively Preparing Special Education Teachers: Success in Urban Environments

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Honors Research Project

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Effectively Preparing Special Education Teachers: Success in Urban Environments

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Honors Project

April 17th, 2015

The University of Akron
Abstract

This literature review examines the level of preparedness of pre-service and novice special education teachers, specifically teachers pursuing education careers within urban school districts. Research studies were reviewed to indicate what teaching methods are regarded as effective in relation to behavior management. It was found that using culturally responsive teaching has been proven to be effective within urban settings. Studies were also examined to determine if first-year teachers were well prepared and what teacher preparation programs could possibly implement to ensure that future educators are well equipped to effectively teach and manage the growing special education population of students in urban environments. It was found that the majority of pre-service and novice teachers are not adequately prepared to take on the demands of special education in urban classrooms. This is based off of self-efficacy as reported by teachers and perceived preparedness as reported by others including professors and administrators. Implications for how teacher preparation programs should respond to this research to better prepare future educators are outlined within the review of studies.
**Introduction**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that states implement policies and procedures in order to prevent disproportionate representation of students by race and ethnicity in special education or early intervention (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, Roberts, 2014). Even so, in 2010 the number of racial and ethnic minority children between the ages of 3 and 5 that received special education services was 321,958. This is compared to 413,287 White children that qualified for special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Likewise, within the ages of 6 and 21, 2,730,345 minority students and 3,092,463 White students received special education services under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

A study in Arizona found that throughout the state, 11.5% of students had been identified with a disability and qualified for specialized instruction (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). The study identified African American students and Native American students as having the greatest risk of being identified. At this time, 13.95% of African American students and 14.43% of Native American students were identified as disabled indicating a gross overrepresentation as compared to their White American peers (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011).

At both the state and local levels of education, there are significant discrepancies in the representation of racial minority students in special education (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). However, the focus of this review is not on how minority students are
overrepresented within the special education population. Nevertheless, due to this fact, there is a natural increase in special education services and needs within urban school settings. In correlation with this pattern, there has been an increase in the trend that students with a wide range of disabilities are being served in inclusive settings (Hart & Malian, 2013). Therefore, there is a high demand for highly qualified special educators in urban districts and these teachers need to be ready for the challenges that the position brings.

In 2001, the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) created an emphasis on preparing highly qualified teachers that have full certification and are well versed in content knowledge (Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007). Shealey and Mchatton (2009) developed a survey to research the perceptions of special educators in regards to how NCLB impacts teachers, teaching methods, and their students. Two hundred twenty three special educators from urban school districts participated in the survey (Shealey & Mchatton, 2009). Many of the participants responded with the overall sentiment that NCLB has unrealistic expectations, especially for those in urban districts. They expressed that NCLB has taken away teachers’ power to make instructional and curriculum decisions based on their students’ IEP goals and specific student characteristics such as culture, academic skill levels, and socioeconomic status (Shealey & Mchatton, 2009). Instead, these decisions are being made at the discretion of district administrators that seem to fail to take these key factors into consideration, especially for students receiving special
education services (Shealey & Mchatton, 2009). The implications of NCLB has also caused many urban school districts to struggle in enlisting and employing high quality teachers for long term employment due to challenging circumstances and ever-increasing demands within the field of special education (Shealey & Mchatton, 2009).

Going along with this, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) is currently focusing more on teachers being well prepared in content knowledge and is focusing less on pedagogy and teaching strategies for both general and special educators. This creates confusion in regards to how teacher preparation programs should be constructed to adequately prepare highly qualified teachers (Boe et al., 2007). Many researchers have looked into this topic in regards to how well teacher preparation programs are doing in sending out general and special educators that are ready to effectively take on the responsibilities of a professional educator that meets the needs of all students. This literature review will examine a number of various studies in hopes to outline what the expectations of special education teachers, specifically in urban settings, are, whether novice teachers are adequately prepared, and what can be done to ensure that teacher preparation programs are constructed to be as effective as possible.

Behavior Management and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Many research studies and surveys have been conducted to determine the greatest area of need for novice teachers in regards to effectively managing a classroom. It has been reported that a great challenge for teachers in regards to providing students
with a high quality education is effectively managing aversive student behavior, as described in greater detail within this literature review. Likewise, the number of students displaying these disruptive behaviors is consistently increasing (Hemmeter, Santos, & Ostrosky, 2008). In order to more fully understand this area of need, several studies were considered within this review in order to gain a detailed idea of what methods of behavior management effective teachers implemented within their classrooms.

A study completed by Shin and Koh (2007) asked 116 teachers from seven high schools in an urban school district in the southern United States questions regarding behavior management using the Attitudes and Beliefs on Classroom Control Inventory survey. The teachers surveyed ranged from teachers with one year of teaching experience to over sixteen years of teaching experience. The survey used is divided into three parts designed to measure teachers’ instructional management styles, the teachers’ student management styles, and demographic information (Shin & Koh, 2007).

The results of the surveys showed that the teachers surveyed were control oriented and proactive in student and instruction management to prevent misbehavior or lack of engagement in the classroom. They portrayed the usage of teacher centered methods of instructional management by intervening and controlling transitions between activities, monitoring student seatwork, assigning seats to students, selecting learning topics and activities, distribution of supplies and materials, and directing class
and student routines. It was also found that the participating teachers felt that giving students feedback on their work and performance was a very valuable method of student management. Another method that scored highly on the survey was that teachers would state the classroom rules within the first days of school and also outline the consequences for failing to follow the rules (Shin & Koh, 2007).

Milner and Tenore (2010) conducted a study focusing on two teachers’ classroom management strategies implemented in Bridge Middle School, an urban school located in southeastern United States. The purpose of the study was to analyze the school, students, and teachers’ positive experiences and areas in which there is struggle in order to understand and portray how teachers were able to succeed in an urban setting and ultimately provide a high quality education for the students. Milner and Tenore (2010) conducted periodical observations in various contexts of the school including the teachers’ classrooms, school activities and events, the library, and the cafeteria. To gain more data, they also analyzed lesson plans, student work samples, and other instruction materials. The main avenue of data collection was through interviewing the participating teachers both formally and informally throughout (Milner & Tenore, 2010).

From this study, six major principles were identified as relating to classroom management and diversity in an urban setting. The first theme is that teachers understand the difference between equity and equality and therefore discern whether
or not to adapt management strategies as a response to students based on varying circumstances or if these management strategies are to be the same for all students all of the time, no matter what the situation brings (Milner & Tenore, 2010). A second theme realized is that teachers need to understand power structures among students. A strategy that worked well for the teachers that participated in this study was that they, in a sense, “recruited” high status students to really engage in learning and be active participants in the classroom. The engagement of these high status students successfully influenced the other students to also want to play an active role in their education and thus positively influenced the overall classroom environment (Milner & Tenore, 2010).

A third theme realized by this study is that teachers should attempt to be aware of the culture shared by the generation of the students. This means knowing things that are popular such as music, sports, movies, and celebrities. If a teacher knows of these things and incorporates them into classroom management practices the students will be more apt to readily receive the instruction given (Milner & Tenore, 2010).

A fourth principal identified is that teachers understand their place in regards to their similarities and differences as compared to their students. These comparisons are in relation to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. This knowledge and understanding should be used by teachers to build meaningful relationships with students as an effective classroom management strategy (Milner & Tenore, 2010). A similar principal found by the study is that teachers should reciprocate this
understanding by letting students learn things about them to discover things they have in common. This aids in building relationships and therefore builds a stronger classroom community (Milner & Tenore, 2010).

The final identified theme is that teachers should treat the school as a community that reflects the structure of a family. Teachers should ensure that each member has the opportunity to play an active role and that their voice and opinions are respected and valued in constructing the school and classroom community (Milner & Tenore, 2010). Through implementing these six themes and adopting the culturally responsive perspectives outlined, it was found by the participating teachers and by Milner and Tenore (2010) that student participation in the classroom increased. Students were more engaged in learning opportunities and activities and were more likely to engage learning opportunities rather than simply respond to them (Milner & Tenore, 2010).

A study conducted by Joan L. Whipp (2013) investigated the teaching goals, influences, and practices of 12 first year teachers in an urban school. The study was conducted to identify factors that influence how a teacher defines and implements socially just or culturally responsive teaching. Whipp (2013) interviews the participants at the end of their semester long student teaching placement in an urban setting and at the completion of their first year of teaching in an urban school.

Based on the study results, Whipp (2013) identified three categories describing how the surveyed teachers’ teaching practices are shaped and influenced by their
perception and understanding of culturally responsive teaching. The categories are Structural/Individual, Individual/Structural, and Individual. Those categorized as Structural/Individual or Individual/Structure portrayed in their responses in the interviews that they have sociocultural consciousness in regards to teaching in culturally responsive ways (Whipp, 2013). These teachers showed that they were aware of their students’ cultures and adapted their teaching accordingly by pulling from their students’ cultural experiences and background knowledge. These teachers showed culturally responsive teaching by incorporating aspects of their students’ culture into lesson content including using popular culture, historical topics, literature, and their languages to deepen engagement and concept comprehension (Whipp, 2013). The Structural/Individual teachers also were active advocates for their students both in the classroom and beyond (Whipp, 2013).

The teachers classified as individually oriented did not indicate or describe any sociocultural consciousness in their description of their teaching practices and did not describe any culturally responsive teaching strategies in their responses (Whipp, 2013). Their teaching strategies reported mainly included building caring relationships with students and did not include specific methods of incorporating or acknowledging their students’ cultures. Whipp (2013) argued that having this mindset would limit teaching practices and would also lead to inadequate perceptions of students. Likewise, teachers with a more individual and structural orientation are more likely to have a strong
recognition of students’ cultures and will naturally increase their teaching practices to respond to their students’ needs and strengths (Whipp, 2013).

The factors that Whipp (2013) identified as having a positive influence on developing a more structural orientation, and therefore more effective teaching methods, include having cross-cultural experiences prior to and during participation in a teacher preparation program, participating in course content and field experiences with assignments meant to challenge predispositions, and having access to collegial support within the first year of teaching. While a limitation of this study includes the fact that data was not collected to show how these practices directly influenced the students’ learning outcomes, the findings and the themes highlighted align to the findings of other research studies outlined within this review.

Teachers from a large urban school district participated in a study to examine the connections between student achievement and effective teacher qualities and strategies (Muñoz, Scoskie, & French, 2013). The first part of this study used value-added modeling to use standardized test scores of fourth grade students within the district to determine the measureable impact teachers have on student achievement. These results were used to divide teachers into two categories: more effective teachers and less effective teachers (Muñoz et al., 2013).

The second portion of the study surveyed these teachers on their perceptions of what aspects of teaching/education matter the most and are characteristic of an effective
EFFECTIVELY PREPARING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

Both the teachers deemed more effective and less effective completed the same survey for the purpose of finding any discrepancies or correlations that may indicate what causes a teacher to be less or more effective than another. The fourth grade teachers of an urban school district participating in the survey were asked to rank five teacher qualities in order of those having the most impact on student achievement to having the lowest perceived impact (Muñoz et al., 2013). The participants answered questions within the categories of classroom management and organization, instructional planning, implementing instruction, student progress monitoring, and the overall quality of the teacher as a person. Then, the participants ranked these categories in order of importance for effective teaching. They were then given the opportunity to list any additional qualities not included in the survey that they feel are important factors of effective teaching (Muñoz et al., 2013).

The survey result that stood out the most was in the category of classroom management and organization (Muñoz et al., 2013). Teachers ranked as more effective ordered the item of “maintaining a physically and emotionally safe environment for students” as having greater importance in positively influencing student achievement than the teachers that were ranked as less effective. It was also found that over half of the teachers categorized as more effective ranked this item as being the most important aspect out of all of the categories (Muñoz et al., 2013). This finding indicates that more effective teachers place a higher value and focus on meeting the basic needs, both
physical and emotional, of their students and realizing that if these needs are not met
the students are less likely to engage in learning (Muñoz et al., 2013). Muñoz et al.
(2013) also used this study to indicate teaching methods that were used by the
participants deemed as effective teachers. These methods and strategies are outlined
within the third section of this review as themes that should be taken into consideration
by teacher preparation programs.

Are First-Year Teachers Well Prepared?

The expectations on a federal, state, and local level put on teachers can be
overwhelming. Using the methods and strategies outlined above is not always easy and
may not come as first instinct. The responsibility of ensuring that first-year educators
are equipped in knowledge and in skill to implement effective and culturally
responsive teaching falls on the teacher preparation programs. Much research has been
done to determine if teacher preparation programs are doing their part in mentoring
future educators to become effective in reaching all learners and enlisting student
achievement. The information within this section highlights research studies that
examined the self-efficacy and perceived preparedness of pre-service and novice
teachers entering the education field.

A study conducted by Bleicher (2011) enforced a weeklong field placement in an
urban school for 95 teacher candidates pursuing a career as an educator in rural and
suburban settings. The study focused on the perceptions of the participants in regards
to urban schools and students and also the teacher candidates’ perception of self-efficacy in relation to teaching in a culturally diverse setting. The teacher candidates were given a survey before their field experience and a survey when their experience was completed (Bleicher, 2011).

The pre-survey prompted the participants to indicate what they thought of when they pictured an urban school in a major city. Many of the responses were very negative and focused more on the expected quality of the facilities and atmosphere and far less on the characteristics of the students and teachers (Bleicher, 2011). Half of the participants expressed that they envisioned an urban school to be underfunded resulting in limited or outdated resources. Thirty-two percent envisioned the school having apparent signs of poverty and an enrollment rate that surpassed the comfortable capacity of the physical building (Bleicher, 2011). Responses also included preconceptions of large student/teacher rations, violence, high security measures, lack of structure, run-down facilities, crime, drugs, gangs, and racial cliques (Bleicher, 2011).

It was noted that four of the five expectations of characteristics of an urban school that were mentioned the most were more directly related to the implications of poverty as opposed to the actual subject of race or ethnicity (Bleicher, 2011). Before participating in the field experience in the urban school, the teacher candidates were asked about any concerns they may have had. Many responded in having apprehension in regards to having limited teaching experience, feeling ill prepared, and not knowing
enough about the culture of the school.

After completion of the field experience the participants were asked to reflect on their original concerns (Bleicher, 2011). It was found by most participants that their reservation and anxiety associated with teaching in an urban school were unsupported by their experiences within the school. Contrasting greatly with their preconceptions, participants reported in the post-experience survey that urban schools can be structured and orderly, resources are available, they found less diversity within the school than expected, and the facilities are well kept and inviting (Bleicher, 2011).

Siwatu (2011) conducted a similar study to research the preparedness and self-efficacy beliefs of pre-service elementary, middle level, and high school teachers from a teacher preparation program in the Southwest. The main focus of this study was to determine whether pre-service teachers had a varying sense of preparedness based on the context of teaching being urban or suburban (Siwatu, 2011).

Each participant was given an essay on teaching in an urban school or teaching in a suburban school. After reading the essay the participants were asked to explain if what they read complied with their preconceptions. Then, each participant was given a self-efficacy scale with 31 items. When they had completed the scale, the participants were to indicate their perceived level of preparedness to teach in an urban or suburban school based on the essay they had read by answering five questions. When they had completed this they were to wait five days and then repeat the procedure using the
Results of this study show that the majority of the pre-service teachers that participated in the study felt significantly more prepared to teach in a suburban setting than in an urban setting (Siwatu, 2011). Also, surveyed pre-service teachers expressed that they felt more prepared to teach White American, African American, and Hispanic students and English Language Learners if they were enrolled in a suburban school rather than if they were to teach these students in an urban school (Siwatu, 2011).

It was also found that these pre-service teachers felt less prepared to teach minority students and English Language Learners (ELL) no matter what the school setting may be (Siwatu, 2011). In contrast, they felt more prepared in teaching White American students regardless of the setting. In correlation with these findings, the pre-service teachers had a higher sense of self-efficacy when they completed the survey in a suburban setting or after reading the suburban essay. They had a lower sense of self-efficacy when in an urban environment or after reading the urban focused essays (Siwatu, 2011).

Szü-Yin Chu conducted a pilot study to test the reliability and validity of a survey research instrument while also examining the self-perceptions of 31 special educators teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students in an urban setting (2011). The study used an online survey to investigate special educators’ self-perceptions on their abilities to use culturally responsive teaching in relation to working
with culturally and linguistically diverse students and any connections between using this approach and correlating student-learning outcomes (Chu, 2011).

The teachers surveyed stated that their participation in a teacher preparation program was only slightly effective in training them to successfully teach culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities (Chu, 2011). Likewise, 58% of surveyed teachers expressed that the professional development opportunities they have participated in within the past 5 years have also been just slightly effective in preparing them to work with these students (Chu, 2011). In response to teaching specifically culturally linguistically and culturally diverse students, the survey results indicated that the surveyed special education teachers had the highest levels of self-efficacy in the area of creating a supportive and caring learning environment and in motivating student learning by using background knowledge and incorporating culturally relevant topics into their lessons (Chu, 2011).

Utely, Delquadri, Obiakor, and Mims (2000) conducted a study to examine how well prepared, both in knowledge and application, the surveyed educators were in implementing effective instructional strategies in all classroom settings. As an educator, understanding how a student’s background affects their learning and knowing what that cultural background entails is crucial to effectively teaching multicultural students of all levels of abilities. This was a motivating factor in exploring the topic more deeply (Utley et al., 2000).
This study surveyed 403 teachers that work with multicultural students with and without disabilities in public schools in Kansas. School districts included in the survey had to have at least 10 percent or more of the students enrolled identify as multicultural. These teachers were surveyed using the Multicultural Special Education Survey (MSES), which was developed with the purpose of identifying training needs to be addressed in professional development for general and special educators working with multicultural students with and without disabilities (Utley et al., 2000). The survey items were created based on literature findings in multicultural, bilingual, and special education pieces. For the purpose of this study the primary focus was on areas including demographics, professional development, cultural knowledge, linguistics, and teaching strategies of the teachers surveyed (Utley et al., 2000).

In the survey responses under the topic of professional development, the response cited most often was that there was a significant lack in official training in multicultural education course work for educators. Survey respondents reported that having cultural knowledge of their student population would be very beneficial in understanding their students’ learning and behavior styles, both verbal and nonverbal, and how it influences their learning (Utley et al., 2000). Specifically speaking to training needs, the respondents reported that knowing more about the languages of their students and the development of language were the most pressing areas. In alignment with these needs, the educators surveyed expressed that teacher-student discussion and
dialogue, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring were strategies that have been found to be successful when working with multicultural students with and without disabilities (Utley et al., 2000).

A study conducted by Stoughton (2007) looked into perceived disconnections between preconceptions about teaching, university coursework, and observations in public school classrooms through pre-service teachers’ experiences. Participants included teacher education students from an urban Midwestern university. Driving this study was the analysis of reflective journal entries kept by the participants during field experiences within various classroom settings. The purpose of the analysis was for teacher educators to examine and consider the thinking of pre-service teachers in regards to providing relevant context and discussions within coursework to provide authentic instruction, which, by extension, increases their abilities to effectively work with children in their classrooms (Stoughton, 2007).

Many of the participants exhibited that they comprehended that behavior management and the culture of the classroom are directly correlated. The reflective writings also portrayed that this correlation is also linked to the personal values and commitments that teachers bring into their classrooms and use as a framework for their teaching philosophy (Stoughton, 2007). The reflective writings by the participants showed that teacher educators should be supporting future teachers in critical thinking skills and carefully creating their personalized identities as professional educators.
(Stoughton, 2007). To achieve this, teacher preparation programs should be proactive in ensuring that there are explicit correlations between current school practices and the coursework and requirements implemented within university programs.

Boe et al. (2007) conducted research using data collected by the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), which was completed by beginning teachers being within their first five years of teaching in general and special education. Within the survey, the areas of focus included two research questions, which were as follows: “To what extent is the amount of teacher preparation associated with the two key dimensions of an HQT as defined by NCLB: full certification and earning a degree major in a teacher’s main teaching assignment?” and, “To what extent is the amount of teacher preparation associated with other dimensions of teacher qualifications: field of degree major in relation to teaching field, degree level, and each of six aspects of being well prepared to teach?” (Boe et al., 2007)

In this study, it was found that beginning special educators have less content area knowledge than general education teachers. This implies that based on the definition of a highly qualified teacher, special educators should have more preparation regarding knowledge of subject matter. It was also found in this survey that extensive teacher preparation programs were effective in preparing general education teachers in the area of classroom management whereas special education teachers were not as well prepared (Boe et al., 2007).
A study conducted by Recchia and Puig (2011) asked five pre-service teachers working toward dual-certification in Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education to share reflective journal entries on their field experiences. They were asked to write about their questions, assumptions, beliefs, and other thoughts in an open manner. The focus questions that were considered when reviewing the journal entries were: (a) how do pre-service students describe their experiences in segregated early childhood special education classrooms? And (b) what are the implications of these experiences for teacher education in early childhood special education?” (Recchia & Puig, 2011)

When reviewing the written reflections it was found that most of the participants had initial discomfort in the classroom setting. One participant expressed that, “Stepping into the classroom was like giving up all my prior experiences with children and starting all over; I didn’t know what to do or say, not to mention how to react or participate.” This indicates that while these students may have been underprepared for their experiences, it is undoubtedly crucial that they were there gaining the authentic experiences needed to success as a professional educator (Recchia & Puig, 2011).

Speaking specifically to special educators, it was found in a study by Hart and Malian (2013) that there is a great need for training in regards to meeting the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This is a relevant and pressing issue because of the steady increase of students being identified with ASD. Special education directors
in the southwest United States were surveyed to determine what requirements would be necessary to adequately prepare teachers to work with students with ASD. These needs included specific competencies and licensure requirements. Overall, it was found that of the directors surveyed, most believed that their teachers were not ready to take on this increase of students with ASD and educate and manage them well (Hart & Malian, 2013).

It was found that the majority of respondents preferred that their special education teachers have an autism endorsement. Respondents also described essential competencies required for teachers working with students with ASD as behavior management skills, knowledge of ASD characteristics, and communication skills (Hart & Malian, 2013). This research shows that most general education pre-service teachers have very minimal if any preparation specifically speaking to educating students with autism outside of an introductory course created to briefly address a variety of disability categories. Special education pre-service teachers have more exposure, but arguably still not enough to be adequately qualified to fully address all of the needs of students with ASD (Hart & Malian, 2013). This lack of knowledge and experience indicates that more time should be spent to better prepare all educators to effectively teach students with ASD due to the rise in their presence in general and special education classes (Hart & Malian, 2013).

Ergül, Baydik, and Demir, (2013) conducted a survey of 160 pre-service special
education teachers from four universities and 107 special education teachers from various special education settings including special classrooms, university units, special education schools, and mainstreamed classrooms. As part of the study, the participants were to specify which areas of special education they felt that they were incompetent. Pre-service teachers generally responded that they felt incompetent in teaching academic skills (25%), classroom management and addressing problem behaviors (20%), and meeting the needs of students with autism (15%) (Ergül et al., 2013).

In a study by Griffin et al. (2009) two research questions were presented to 596 first year full time special educators from Florida and Wisconsin. The first question presented was “What are 1st-year special educators’ accomplishments and problems?” The second research question presented was “What school and classroom context factors are associated with 1st-year special educators’ most significant accomplishments and pressing problems?” (Griffin et al., 2009). The accomplishment most reported by survey respondents was student learning during their first year of teaching (61%). Behavior management (54%), classroom environment (43%), curriculum (42%), communication/collaboration (32%), advocacy for students (21%), program management (17%), and assessment (14%) were other first year accomplishments reported (Griffin et al., 2009).

Behavior management was the second highest reported accomplishment by first year teachers, however, it was also the most significant problem reported by 45% of
respondents. Other areas of weakness reported include curriculum (36%), specific student centered concerns (33%), communication and collaboration (24%), school climate (23%), assessment (17%), and advocacy for students (13%) (Griffin et al., 2009).

Lava, Recchia, and Giovacco-Johnson (2004) initiated interviews with twenty-five graduates of a Master’s Program in Early Childhood Special Education. These educators had been teaching for one to five years at the time of the interviews. These interviews were constructed with the focus of expressing their experiences and perceptions of their first years of teaching in urban schools. The participants’ responses showed that there were many challenges during the first years of teaching including collaboration, finding support, working with families, and overall handling the demands of the profession (Lava et al., 2004).

**What can be done to better prepare first-year teachers?**

It was expressed by participants of the interview-based study conducted by Lava et al. (2004) that teacher preparation programs do not give pre-service teachers a realistic view of teaching. Several studies have been conducted in attempt to determine how to form teacher preparation programs and other resources to give pre-service teachers the supports needed to be successful in the many facets of the education profession.

In regards to teacher preparation programs, there are many factors that influence the preparedness of a pre-service or first-year educator. Faculty members from two and
four year institutions of higher education with preparation programs for early childhood or early childhood special educators returned 158 completed surveys for the study conducted by Hemmeter, Santos, and Ostrosky (2008). The institutions included were selected from Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, New Mexico, Oregon, and Rhode Island. The faculty members were given a 5-page survey, the Survey of Early Educators, designed by the authors that questioned how well pre-service educators from two and four year teacher preparation programs were prepared to effectively promote the social, emotional, and behavioral development of children. This analysis also allowed faculty members to examine how the teacher preparation programs addressed these areas and identify strengths in the programs and areas of weakness (Hemmeter et al., 2008).

The survey also addressed the content of the preparation program courses aligned with research based best practices relating specifically to promoting the social-emotional development and preventing and responding to aversive behavior. This survey had 17 questions that were categorized as demographics, preparation coursework content, and program areas of need in terms of preparing pre-service teachers to adequately address challenging behaviors presented by children (Hemmeter et al., 2008).

A major focus of the survey was to determine how well prepared graduates were in regards to implementing specific practices listed in the survey that directly related to
social emotional development and addressing inappropriate behaviors in young children. This was designed to determine if the graduates not only had a strong knowledge base of the practices but that they were also able to effectively implement them in classroom settings. The faculty members surveyed were to rank the preparedness of their graduates using a 4-point Likert-type scale with the rankings as follows: 0 = not a priority in our program at this time, 1 = some understanding, 2 = emerging ability to apply, 3 = mastery, ability to apply in early childhood settings (Hemmeter et al., 2008).

Faculty members surveyed responded that graduates of their programs, including both 2- and 4-year programs, were well prepared to design and implement preventative practices in the classroom. The survey respondents also agreed that graduates of the teacher preparation programs were the least prepared to address challenging behaviors by means of designing and implementing appropriate interventions (Hemmeter et al., 2008). Also, graduates of the 4-year programs were rated higher than those who participated in the 2-year programs in levels of overall preparedness to succeed as professional educators. It was also concluded that the graduates from a 4-year program that had a special education component were even more prepared than those without a special education degree (Hemmeter et al., 2008).

The two main challenges seen in preparation programs addressed up by respondents from 2- and 4-year programs were the lack of authentic involvement in
field placements in regards to implementing learned practices and that there was not enough coursework set aside specific to the topics of promoting social and emotional development and addressing challenging behaviors in students. It was also indicated that field experience settings rarely included environments that comprised of children with significant behavioral difficulties, thus creating a severe lack of authentic experiences in this area (Hemmeter et al., 2008). Overall, it was reported that graduates included in the survey were more prepared in collaborating with family members, preventative practices, and promoting social emotional development. They reportedly were less prepared to address challenging behaviors in students (Hemmeter et al., 2008).

The faculty surveyed in the research study conducted by Hemmeter et al. (2008) responded that many of their graduates have emerging skills in the areas of promoting social-emotional development and addressing challenging behaviors (2008). This perceived emergent level of skill indicates that pre-service teachers have not mastered the skills necessary to be effective in addressing these areas. Respectively, this also indicates that beginning teachers should be offered additional assistance in the form of mentoring and constructive feedback in regards to working well with students with challenging behaviors (Hemmeter et al., 2008).

According to the study conducted by Sayeski and Higgins (2014), the curriculum areas of highest priority for teacher preparation programs include modifying and
EFFECTIVELY PREPARING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

adapting student curriculum, knowledge of IEPs and lesson planning, and evidence-based practices. In response to these needs, teacher preparation programs also should be flexible and able to be modified to mirror current expectations of educators and teaching standards. This implies that these programs should reflect relevant legislations and research and the curriculum should be formed with the students of the graduate educators in mind (Sayeski & Higgins, 2014). All of this, in turn, should help novice teachers better understand aversive student behaviors and should aid in responding to such situations based on current research and best practices being used in schools.

Section 300.18 of IDEA contains the requirement that special educators are HQT meaning that they are not only responsible for having expertise in working with students with disabilities but that they also must be well versed in the contents and concepts of the general curriculum. It is imperative that this is thoroughly addressed throughout teacher preparation programs and that current curriculums are modified to align with the IDEA standards (Sayeski & Higgins, 2014).

In the research conducted by Utley et al. (2000) the results of the MSES in the category of cultural knowledge indicated that having an understanding of their students’ cultures would be beneficial in creating and implementing student assessments, setting expectations, and selecting appropriate resources to be used in the classroom. In this study, the teachers surveyed were asked to rank what teaching strategies have been most successful when teaching multicultural students with and
without mild disabilities (Utley et al., 2000).

The survey respondents ranked strategies including teacher-directed and peer-mediated approaches. The most common strategy used was teacher-student discussion. Cooperative learning and peer tutoring were also deemed as effective strategies in multicultural classrooms and were ranked as second and third in the survey. Fourth and fifth were whole language instruction and diagnostic/prescriptive teaching, respectively. The teaching strategy reported as being used the least in their classrooms was traditional lecturing (Utley et al., 2000).

Additional survey items were used to identify the most useful teaching strategies with practical implications for multicultural classrooms with and without students with disabilities. The use of prompts and cues to stimulate engaged responses was the most useful strategy reported by 48% of respondents (Utley et al., 2000). The second most useful strategy reported by 47% of responding teachers was having a conversation about future learning to prepare students for upcoming instructional activities.

Other high-ranking instructional strategies proved to be effective in respondents’ classrooms include aligning classroom activities with academic objectives, providing opportunities to practice new skills, using student performance to make instructional decisions, maximizing engaged learning time, and using students’ experiences and background knowledge to drive comprehension (Utley et al., 2000). Instructional strategies that ranked with less that 40% of responses were giving numerous examples
of new concepts and ways to generalize, giving praise and feedback on assignments, using modeling in instruction, making transitions short and efficient, and using literature that relates students’ experiences (Utley et al., 2000).

The results of the survey by Utley et al. (2000) showed that in their teacher preparation programs course work regarding teaching multicultural learners with and without disabilities had not been offered to approximately 40% of the general and special education teachers that responded to the survey. In response to this area of need, these teachers reported seeking other ways of increasing their multicultural education by attending conferences and workshops and using professional journals as resources.

Results of the survey conducted by Boe et al. (2007) showed that having adequate preparation in pedagogy and opportunities to practice teaching skills was more effective in producing competent beginning teachers that were certified and well prepared in the areas of content knowledge and pedagogical skills (Boe et al., 2007).

This study compared the preparedness of special and general educators that studied in traditional teacher programs and alternative teacher programs. It was found that for all areas surveyed that teachers that had a more extensive preparation program experience were more prepared in pedagogical skills including effective lesson planning, using effective instructional methods, student assessment, and selecting appropriate curricular materials (Boe et al., 2007).
Recchia and Puig (2011) also contend that field experiences are extremely valuable because it gives pre-service teachers opportunities to have authentic learning experiences in team collaboration, curriculum decision-making, and the every-day happenings of a professional educator. Having various field experiences for pre-service teachers also prepares them for the reality of teaching throughout diverse environments and classroom cultures.

Regarding the research by Hart and Malian (2013), it was found that because of the lack of specific training regarding educating students with ASD, teachers were not able to give the appropriate supports and instruction to their students with autism. A consideration made by the authors for future implications to prevent this predicament that aligns with other research presented includes teacher preparation programs providing additional coursework and internships specific to ASD (Hart & Malian, 2013).

Another part of the study by Ergül et al. (2013) asked participants to outline suggestions to improve teacher preparation programs for special education. The most prevalent suggestions given included extending the length of field experiences, spreading field experience throughout the entire duration of the preparation program, and making coursework more focused on field experiences and applications. Participants were also asked to indicate which topics should have more emphasis in undergraduate teacher preparation programs. The top two topics given were classroom management and behavior management (52%) and instruction of academic skills (44%)
Survey participants were also asked to give the topics they would most like to have as part of in-service trainings. Pre-service teachers indicated that areas of highest need included classroom management, autism, academic instruction, speech language, and communication. Undergraduate special education programs should implement more teaching practice by means of field experience, student teaching, and internships. Also, these experiences within the field should last longer and be implemented throughout the entire duration of the undergraduate program (Ergül et al., 2013).

The study conducted by Muñoz et al. (2013) showed that effective teachers are greatly concerned with the physical and emotional well being of their students. This indicates that taking the time to solidify pedagogical skills in the area of building positive relationships with students would be of great benefit for first year teachers in building rapport with students and thus increasing student achievement (Muñoz et al., 2013).

To increase teachers’ preparedness to succeed in an urban school setting, Whipp indicated that pre-service teachers should be given the opportunities to engage in cross-cultural experiences in an urban community (2013). Whipp indicated that these experiences should be in conjunction with coursework that incorporates guidance from teacher educators and coursework that allows pre-service teachers to critically consider the implications of these cultural experiences (2013). Likewise, pre-service teachers
should be exposed to examples of culturally responsive teaching and strategies. Whipp advises that this can be done in a classroom during field experience or within coursework using videos or similar presentations (2013). Also, Whipp’s study shows that first year teachers that had access to support from past professors and mentors had a more developed sense of culturally responsive teaching (2013). This indicates that teacher preparation programs should consider implementing a program that follows graduates through the beginning of their teaching career for additional support and as a means to gain relevant resources (Whipp, 2013).

In the study by Lava et al. (2004) participants expressed that their time spent student teaching was one of the most valuable experiences within the teacher preparation program. Many participants suggested that programs create more opportunities for hands-on experience for pre-service teachers.

Another area of focus stated by Stoughton (2007) would be to consider how teacher education programs can adequately support pre-service teachers in developing the means to effectively teach a classroom of diverse students and form instruction that aligns with resources available to that population of learners. An additional improvement to be made is to explore new and effective ways to connect university teachings and dispositions with current school practices and expectations.

Many aspects of Stoughton’s (2007) research say that pre-service teachers are being told to do one thing while being showed another. In other words, they are
learning how to be effective teachers though ineffective teaching models during their university coursework. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to say that pre-service teachers may, after becoming so overwhelmed and compacted with the challenges of learning how to be an effective teacher may “revert to teaching how they were taught which sometimes means that they teach in ways quite different from what they learn in their teacher preparation programs” (Fajet et al., 2005). This is an unsettling notion that should be used as a call to action for teacher education programs. This statement indicates that many of the time spent learning how to teach is essentially wasted. It also shows that perhaps in reality, teachers are not as effective as one would think by simply looking at their college credentials and resume of teaching experiences. In turn, it would be the students that ultimately suffer from this overturning of knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and general correlations of these studies, it can be determined that pre-service teachers and first-year teachers are not as well prepared to succeed in urban special education classrooms as perhaps they could be. Most participants in the reviewed studies indicated that classroom and behavior management was the greatest struggle and the area they felt could be greatly improved upon.
Research studies indicated that culturally responsive classroom management is effective in instilling active participation in class, improved academic achievement, and maintaining engagement. The main method of implementing culturally responsive teaching mainly calls for including aspects of the students’ culture within instruction. This includes using cultural history, popular culture, and language in lessons and classroom activities.

An additional theme related to classroom management is that teachers should strive to build strong relationships with all students. When the students feel that their teacher is approachable, that teacher is more likely to be approached and thus classroom engagement automatically can be seen as increasing. The classroom should be made into a safe learning environment where the students can feel a sense of community and they feel that they are well respected. Educators should serve as advocates for their students and should be encouragers in their lives.

Pre-service teachers were surveyed in a number of studies and the general consensus is that they do not feel prepared to effectively teach and reach students in urban settings. However, with these studies it was also found that after authentic experiences within urban settings their perceptions tended to change. After learning more about diverse learners and completing field experience in urban classrooms, most participants began to feel more comfortable and more confident in their teaching.
Throughout the review it became apparent that the characteristics of teacher preparation programs play a key role pre-service teachers’ perceived preparedness to teach and actual preparedness to teach effectively. Many teachers seem to have an unrealistic idea of what their role will be and how they will complete their responsibilities. Several suggestions were made on how to improve teacher preparation programs to give future educators a more realistic view on the duties and expectations of in the field of special education.

A main point is that educators that complete a 4-year program and obtain a special education endorsement are far more prepared than those that complete a 2-year program and/or do not complete special education coursework. This is especially imperative due to the rising number of students with special needs being included in general education classrooms.

It can also be noticed that it appears that there is a great lack of opportunities within teacher preparation programs for pre-service teacher to have authentic experiences within diverse urban school settings. A clear way for preparation programs to improve would be to require more learning experiences for longer durations within urban school settings. It was found that exposure led to confidence and corrected many misconceptions and stereotypes regarding urban schools and culturally diverse students.
Another broad theme found is that teacher preparation coursework should include topics that relate to student diversity and should emphasize culturally responsive teaching. Likewise, coursework should be malleable to change with the transforming expectations and standards for special educators. Courses should be continually adapted to reflect current research, legal regulations, and best practices. This will better prepare first-year teachers for the realities of the classroom in applicable ways that reflect current practices and will potentially increase their successfulness early in their career.

It is commonly known that many educators turn away from the teaching profession due to high stress and overwhelming demands. By teacher preparation programs implementing the outlined suggestions within this review, special educators would, in theory, be better prepared for the demands of the position and attrition rates would potentially decline dramatically. An area for further study and research would be to determine if perceived levels of preparedness, both on the high and low ends of the spectrum, correlate with attrition rates of special educators.
References


programs with a focus on outcomes. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 37*(2), 91-105. DOI:10.1177/0888406413513274


