

Introduction: Preparing Special Education Teachers and Learning to Teach

Special education teachers are often prepared to work with special needs children in programs that are separate from the teacher education programs that regular education student experience. This fact raises a lot of questions about the kinds of knowledge and practices students who are preparing to teach in mainstream classes learn about how to best serve the learning needs of special education students who are likely to be in their classrooms. Moreover, most special education coursework is geared to elementary level classrooms. While secondary education students often take the same coursework as elementary education students, there are clearly differences in ways to work with older and younger children who have mild to moderate learning and/or behavioral needs.

We are fortunate in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* to have four articles that directly address these concerns in the context of teacher education credential programs. Working mostly with manuscripts accepted during the editorship of Tom Nelson, and consulting about these materials with Tom, I have assembled this Spring 2011 issue to bring to light some of the issues and new work that special education educators are doing and proposing to ensure that all teachers are better equipped to understand and meet the needs of special education students.

I think that, at times, those of us who work in teacher education do not pay enough attention to special education. There are some reasons for this. Special education is a specialized field that typically relies on research methods and a knowledge base that is informed in fields that fall outside of the general teacher education curriculum. For example, special education students take coursework in reading

Introduction

disabilities, where the focus is on phonics, decoding, and cognitive approaches to language processing. They may study behavior modification strategies, with pre- and post-test assessments. Regular education students study reading and writing across the curriculum, first and second language acquisition, inquiry approaches to improving their teaching, and subject matter content teaching methods.

In this issue, the first three articles examine combined special education and teacher education programs, one elementary and one secondary. At both levels of preparation, the focus is on professional socialization in combined programs, with an eye toward the better understanding of the norms and values that emerge within these differing types of programs. In the opening article, Kathryn S. Young points out that one of most difficult issues to overcome within dual certification programs is finding ways to socialize teachers toward the needs of all students, when the educational bureaucracy requires teachers to distinguish among different types of learning needs and students with disabilities.

Ann Fullerton, Barbara J. Ruben, Stephanie McBride, and Susan Bert at Portland State University set out to find ways of doing just that, combining special education coursework and experiences with secondary teacher education requirements. As students progress in the credential program, they learn how to plan for and teach in ways that stress collaboration and inclusion. A special feature of the Portland State combined program for secondary teachers is that students also continue for a Master's degree in which they conduct inquiry into their classroom practices. The entire merged program is presented in the second article in this issue. In the third article, Fullerton and her colleagues present an evaluation of the merged special education and secondary program. One finding that stood out for me was that candidates in the merged program "first learn to assess and consider the learning needs of every student in the actual classroom; to view learning diversity as a given that must first be assessed and understood before one can plan instruction." Being in a combined credential program also meant that candidates identified with both fields of study, relying on practices and experiences from both interdependently.

The next article, by Yeunjoo Lee, Philip P. Patterson, and Luis A. Vega, focused on understanding why special education teachers often leave teaching within three years. Organizing their work around Bandura's cognitive theory of social learning and self-efficacy, particularly a teacher's perceived ability to influence learning as a result of action taken, Lee and colleagues set out to study the factors that may have contributed to low self-efficacy among special education teachers. The findings were grim and do not auger well in the current climate of cutbacks within education: "Teaching context in the form of lack of support from school districts, lack of resources (e.g., curriculum supplies, and technology), and heavy workload present grave perils to teachers' self-efficacy and can weaken the ultimate success of special education teachers..."

The other four articles in this issue present portraits of pre-service teachers from a range of perspectives. The article by Michael B. Ripski, Jennifer LoCasale-

Crouch, and Lauren Decker examines connections between dispositional traits and emotional states of pre-service teachers and interactions with students. An interesting finding from this study is that there was a relationship between higher reported levels of extroversion and lower quality interactions with students. That is, being high sociable does not always translate in to being able to teach well. Moreover, they found that depressive states were also negatively related to quality interactions.

Ye He and Jewell Cooper studied five first-year secondary teachers' concerns and struggles as they entered the teacher profession. Using ethnographic interviews, the authors learned that the teachers were most concerned about classroom management, keeping students interested, and parental involvement, and especially making connections with diverse student populations. All five teachers were White, and all five had experienced opportunities to interact with culturally and ethnically diverse student populations during their secondary teacher credential program, which provided them with a range of strategies and resources for interacting with diverse student populations, their families, and their communities.

In the "Role of Legitimacy in Student Teacher," Alexander Cuenca employed Lave and Wenger's idea of legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice as the lens through which he studied two candidates' experiences during student teaching as they apprenticed with experienced teachers in the profession. Cuenca introduced the concept of "tethered learning" to capture situated learning with a safety net, where mistakes are expected and serve as learning potentials while students hone their craft. The two experienced teachers in this study played a key role in assisting the development of a professional identity for the student teachers who learned with and from them.

The article by Jennifer Mahon and Jill Packman shares information about teaching as a career choice and provides a menu of options for how to engage students in reflection about the pros and cons of choosing teaching as a career. There are examples of activities and experiences for lower- as well as upper-division college courses, including student teaching and internships, with the goal of helping students make informed choices about entering teaching. The authors argue for presenting realistic scenarios for teaching assignments, and the lives of teachers in today's culturally and linguistically diverse school settings, a theme that cuts across all of the articles in this issue.

—Christian Faltis, Editor