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ABSTRACT

A study assessed perceptions of 90 preservice teachers about the quality of their participation in practica experiences in a consultation and curriculum adaptation course collaboratively developed and supervised by a small midwestern university and rural school personnel. Data were collected over three semesters in the form of written responses followed by a large-group discussion. Findings indicate that preservice teachers considered the curriculum and materials adaptation practica to be valuable experiences in which they performed and were treated professionally. Preservice teachers reported making numerous and varied adaptations to accommodate real students in authentic and difficult learning situations. However, many consulting teachers did not indicate or apply previous knowledge of consultation or collaboration. Even at the end of the semester, student teachers remained weak in their understanding of the consultation model. Although it became evident that adaptations apply to all subject areas, many preservice teachers expressed a need for increased presentation of ideas for adaptations. There was an apparent lack of connection between the student teacher evaluation responses and outlined course units and topics, as several areas of course content were not addressed in their responses. In addition, student teachers found it disjointed and disconcerting to have one course instructor and another faculty member supervise the practica, or even two section instructors and one practica supervisor. (Contains 17 references.) (TD)

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PRE-TEACHERS EVALUATE UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FOR CURRICULUM ADAPTATION AND ACCESS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN RURAL CLASSROOMS

Due to availability of fewer supports and resources (Martin and Williams, 2000), expansive travel distances, and limited time to develop individualized materials, rural educators find consultation, collaboration and networking essential both to the preparation of future teachers and to successful instruction of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and settings (Ludlow and Wienke, 1998). University-School partnerships can provide classroom teachers with the support they need to individualize curriculum access and make necessary adaptations (Deschenes, Ebeling, & Sprague, 1996). This qualitative, action research study (Creswell, 1998) assessed preteachers' perceptions about the quality of their participation in practica experiences collaboratively developed and supervised by university and school personnel in rural service areas. With input from area teachers, university supervisors designed a qualitative, action research inquiry into the reflections and perceptions of preteachers. The protocol comprised four primary questions designed to elicit critical student feedback, which was then analyzed, integrated into course evaluation, and considered for changes in course structure and delivery. Preteachers' written narrative responses were collected over three semesters, Fall 1999, Spring 2000, through Fall 2000. Their oral responses during large group discussions were manually recorded and analyzed for Fall, 1999 and Fall, 2000.

Background

The percentage of children with disabilities attending regular education classes has increased every year since the passage of The Education for All Handicapped Children (PL 94-142) in 1975, and by all indicators, this trend will continue. Approximately 80% of children with disabilities are attending regular education classes all or part of their programming day (USDE, 1997). Students with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities in particular bring to the educational setting a number of general and specific learning needs such as difficulties in processing information, conceptualizing, and remembering that can lead to significant academic deficits (Deschler et Al., 1982). Schumm and Vaughn (1992) confirmed that teachers were expressing discomfort and lack of confidence to meet these types of educational needs in regular classroom settings. For these reasons, providing consultative support to classroom teachers in the process of assessing multiple learning needs and adapting curriculum and materials is of benefit at all levels, to the school students, practicing teachers, and preteachers.

Teacher Preparation Course Structure: Consultation and Curriculum Adaptation for Individuals with Special Needs

Participants in this study were enrolled in a Consultation and Curriculum Adaptation Course. The course provides practica experiences and lecture sessions designed to develop preteachers' consultative, planning, and creative skills necessary for implementing modified curricula for students with special needs. This course includes 30 hours of practica. The 30 hours for practica can be divided between shadowing a practicing, consulting teacher (maximum of 10 hours), and consulting directly with teachers to discuss learning needs of specific students and creating materials that modify curriculum or assist students to access curriculum. Their consulting teachers and university supervisors evaluate performance of participants at the end of each semester using an evaluative checklist. These performance outcomes aligned with NCATE performance standards.

Preteachers also meet weekly for lecture sessions and in-class activities. The lecture portion of the course is comprised of five units: 1) Educator as Creator of Effective Education Environments, (2) Knowledge of Diversity Among Students, (3) Knowledge of Diverse Societies and Communities, (4) Knowledge of Diverse Subject Areas and Levels, and (5) Knowledge of Diverse Strategies. Course topics include Preparing to Consult; Teaming for Problem Identification; Observation and Informal Assessment; Consultation Principles, Strategies, and Techniques; Consultation and Curriculum Adaptation. Course textbooks used in the course are by Friend & Cook, (1996) and Hover & Patton (1997).

Methods

Participants

Participants were 90 pre-service teachers enrolled full-time in a special education teacher preparation program at a small, mid-western university. During Fall 1999, 24 preteachers participated, one of whom was male and 23 were female. During Spring 2000, 33 preteachers participated, three of whom were male and 30 female. During Fall 2000, 33 preteachers participated, two of whom were male and 31 were female. For each semester there were several students enrolled in the course who did not participate in the evaluation because of absence from that particular class session.

Setting

University supervisors collaborated to set up a debriefing session for preteachers at the culmination of their practica. During this session, they were afforded time to provide written narrative responses before participation in a round table discussion to share their ideas orally. These sessions occurred in the lecture classrooms, which were familiar to preteachers from lecture class meetings. The sessions took place in the late afternoon. Participating preteachers were informed of the importance and usefulness of their feedback to course design. In addition, they were told all information gathered would remain anonymous, but that the ideas generated may be reported at local, state, and national levels.

Data Collection

Data were collected in the form of written responses to four questions followed by a large group discussion. These activities were facilitated by one university supervisor at the end of each semester, (Fall, 1999, Spring 2000, and Fall, 2000) after practica and course requirements were completed. Students were given the opportunity to write their personal responses then enter into large group discussion of the same four questions. Questions that were asked of participants are as follows:

1. How do you feel your work of adapting curriculum and materials benefited the students for whom they were intended?
2. What do you feel you did well?
3. What would you have done differently?
4. What could we (university supervisors) do differently in the future?

Analysis

Qualitative Constant Comparative Analysis (Markku Lonkila, 1995) was used to identify emergent common constructs, themes, patterns, and relational linkages in narrative and oral data collected. Response data sheets were tagged with control numbers to establish an audit trail to original data source for later verification when revisiting original context. Each semester group of response sheets was read once by an instructor. All written responses were read a second time and repeated responses were totaled. In the transcription process, only first mentions were recorded, but repeat mentions were tallied. For example nine participants used the phrase "increased understanding," in response to questions 1, "How do you feel your work of adapting curriculum and materials benefited the students for whom they were intended?" However, only one participant reported "condensing information for the student." These similarities and differences were listed and totaled. We called these similarities and differences categories.

Ideas presented in the data were chunked and sorted into emergent themes. To discover relationships among categories and identify themes, links between data chunks were sought out and analyzed. For example in response to questions two, "What do you feel you did well?" ideas about "effective communication," "worked well with professional," and "was well organized" were grouped under the theme of "Professionalism."

This same process was repeated for each semester and across Fall semesters with the discussion group data. The large group discussion results were recorded manually during the evaluation session. There is only one record for Fall 1999 and Fall 2000 semester. Next, the data were reviewed by semester themes to determine patterns of change over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, data sets were reviewed by university supervisors in relation to the course outline and performance requirements.

Findings

The findings are reported within questions, across questions, and as they relate to course requirements. For each questions, the identified themes and primary categories are reported. Infrequent responses are acknowledged. These findings are cross-verified with large group discussion results. The unique contributions from large group discussions are listed.

Emergent Themes Within Question

At the conclusion of the Consultation and Curriculum Adaptation course and practica experiences, the participants were asked to respond to the four research questions. The participants were informed that results would both influence course design and be reported at local, state, and national levels. Anonymity was assured.

Participants responded to the questions in writing. Following the given time for individual personal reflection, a large group discussion was facilitated. The personal responses were collected and analyzed, and the manually recorded group responses were analyzed to provide verification of the personal responses.

Emergent themes and identified categories are summarized below by question. Emergent themes are discussed in reference to most frequently occurring categories. Ideas recorded in the large group discussions that did not appear in the individual written responses are separately mentioned for each question.

Question 1. How do you feel your work adapting curriculum and materials benefited the students for whom they were intended?

Analysis of the data for question one resulted in identification of five themes. These themes were, Overall Sense of Improvement, Increased Conceptualization, Provided Specific Tools or Strategies, Subject-specific Adaptations, and Evaluation. The most frequently occurring responses were in overall sense of improvement and included categories such as increased student motivation and success, reduced difficulty, and decreased frustration. Increased conceptualization was most frequently recognized by the categories of, increased understanding, increased learning, and clarification of vague content. Numerous types of tools and strategies were identified, such as study guides, outlines, audiotapes, manipulative devices, games, memory techniques. Several subject areas were identified such as Math, Social Studies, and Reading. The only category for evaluation was simplification of tests. Infrequent responses mostly occurred for the themes, provided specific tools and strategies, and subject-specific adaptations.

Lack of response was mostly observed by the categories of no benefit, no opportunity to observe the effect on school students. Ideas from the large group discussion that were not found in written responses included the following:

- I worked to incorporate lower to higher thinking skills,
- Summarized the assignments,
- Also beneficial to teacher;
- Saved the teacher's time,
- Promoted and provided motivation;
- Provided a word bank,
- Pre-service teachers apply knowledge from other classes,
- Provided new ideas for old teacher,

Read assignments aloud to students,
Provided varied instructional methods,
Provides pre-service teacher practica experience.

Question 2: What do you feel you did well?

Four themes evolved in response to question two, these are; Materials, Professionalism, Tools and Strategies, Subject-specific Adaptations. Preteachers reported making lots of adaptations, which was the highest category for the theme, materials. This was cross-verified in large group discussion. Primary categories for the theme of professionalism are, worked well with professionals, used creativity, was well organized, and communication. The only category for tools and strategies mentioned was, gave clear directions. Areas for subject-specific adaptations included Social Studies, Spelling, Art. Infrequent responses occurred only for materials and professionalism.

Only one occurrence of no response was noted for question two. Ideas presented in large group discussion not found in individual written responses are:

Through observations came up with adaptation for one student without assistance,
Resourceful;
Returned materials in a timely fashion,
Interacted well with students,
Dedicated large amounts of time to create adaptations,
Participated in conferences with high school students.

Question 3: What would you have done differently?

Only two themes emerged in response to question three, Changes in Process and Changes in Product. Several of the categories for change in process were also mentioned in group discussion, such as, use more creativity, have more input, have more communication with consulting teachers. Other frequently occurring categories for changes in process were, focus on one child, identify the learning problem, and deal with more subject areas. The most frequently occurring category for changes in product was that of, create more adaptations. Infrequent responses included, collaborate with general educators (as well as special educators), set boundaries, consider learning styles for changes in process. Adjust vocabulary down and visual aides were infrequent responses for changes in product.

Four pre-teachers did not respond to question three. Ideas presented in large group discussion not found in individual written responses are:

Set up team approach to generate ideas,
Getting to know the students first,
Structure is important, but does not have to be rigid,
Be flexible with students,
Utilize classroom aides (paraprofessionals) more, that is why they are there.

Question 4: What could we (university supervisors) do differently in the future?

All responses to question four can be summarized in three themes; Course Structure, Course Content, and Instructor. The most frequently occurring response was related to course structure, and was categorized as specific requirements. Other categories related to course structure are: consulting teachers should know how to collaborate; hour requirement in schools was difficult; and begin practica earlier. The primary category for course content was, provide more ideas for adaptation. Responses for the theme of instructor were in the categories, be more organized, instructors collaborate, and increase communication (both with pre-teachers and consulting teachers). Infrequent responses were mostly under the theme of course structure, and included the following categories: consulting teachers should know paper work; ask what teachers want; select own adaptations; revise the practica evaluation form; and adapt materials for existing units. Under course content, one infrequent response was noted, sharing of adaptation in class. One set of one-time only responses appeared to be in juxtaposition, more shadowing – less shadowing experiences.

Five occurrences of no response to question four were recorded. Ideas presented in large group discussion not found in individual written responses are:

- Provide better explanation,
- Provide follow-up opportunities,
- More weight for the practica grade,
- Eliminate great quantities of work,
- Did not allow for creativity or demand outside research,
- One instructor (not 2) for practica and class, the difference is too great,

Include practica class sessions in lecture class, not during separate times.

Common Constructs and Linkages Across Questions

There are four constructs that emerged across the research questions. A construct was identified when similar themes evolved in response to more than one question (linkages) or when the number of occurrences of one theme within one question was high. The four constructs from this study relate to 1) the products of the practica experience, (2) the effect of the practica, (3) the experience in the practica, and (4) desired improvements of the practica. The first two constructs relate to the public school students who were the target of the consulting experience while the last two constructs relate to the experience of the pre-teacher.

The strongest response from the preteachers was that they created, designed or made many materials and adaptations that are used in classrooms for children who have learning needs. The materials and strategies were varied and covered several subject areas. Preteachers reported a need for the adaptations that were created; the ideas would be used in the classroom. Although some pre-teachers expressed a desire to improve the amount of input or control over the process for selecting the intervention ideas, such as clearly identifying the problem, focusing on one specific student, using more creativity, it is clear that materials and strategies were produced. Secondly the pre-teachers perceived that the adaptations resulted in increased understanding, success and learning for the public school students. As well as noting the increases, the pre-teachers reported a reduction in frustration for the students. In addition, pre-teachers reported that the consulting teacher benefited by having support to create materials and adaptations to meet multiple learning needs in the classroom, "additional hands and eyes." One response indicated that the adaptation work saved the teacher time.

The practica experience provided preteachers a professional experience. Preteachers reported having professional models and interactions that allowed them to gain and demonstrate skills in communication and collaborative consultation. Most reported that the consulting teachers received them as a professional. Many reported their own organization, use of creativity, and effective communication contributed to the experience. Preteachers made several suggestions to enhance the consultation and adaptation experience. Their suggestions were: 1) that the consulting teachers should be knowledgeable and experienced in consultation and collaboration, (2) that university instructors clearly communicate the course requirements and expectations, and (3) that university instructors' and consulting teachers' communication enhance teaming between themselves and with the preteachers. Preteachers expressed a perception that the initial presentation of the course requirements lacked organization. Pre-teachers also wanted more specific curriculum adaptations to be presented in the class lectures.

Relationship to Required Performance Criteria and Course Outline

The consulting teacher at the conclusion of the 30 hour practica experiences evaluates preteachers. Results of this study compared to practica evaluation criteria are as follows. Preteachers reported meeting the following performance criteria, 1) develop an appropriate educational program for learners with special needs, (2) demonstrate effective and appropriate professional qualities in the school settings, (3) adaptation of curriculum for diverse populations, (4) demonstrate skills in consulting and communicating with school personnel and (5) demonstrated professional performance. Performance criteria not addressed were, 1) demonstrate knowledge of contemporary issues, (2) organize, summarize, and interpret assessment data, (3) develop criterion-referenced measures, (4) develop and administer informal inventories, (5) Analyzing curriculum materials and approaches according to subject area content. Preteachers reported wanting more experience with 1) organize, summarize and interpret prior and present assessment data, and (2) analyze curriculum materials and approaches. Preteachers did not address other characteristics or skills evaluated in the performance checklist for the practica.

Weekly class lectures and activities accompany the practica experience. Results of this study are compared to unit themes and course topics as follows. Pre-teachers reported demonstrating knowledge of 1) diversity among students, (2) diverse subject areas and levels, and (3) diverse strategies. Pre-teachers reported strength in consultation and curriculum adaptations during their practica experience; this strength was reported both in the individual written responses and the large group discussion. All other course units and topics were not represented by the pre-teacher evaluation. The most frequent suggestion for course lecture and activities was to increase examples of curriculum and material adaptations.

Discussion

Interpretation

Preteachers considered this curriculum and materials adaptation practica to be a valuable professional experience, in which they performed and were treated professionally. Preteachers reported making numerous and varied adaptations to accommodate real students in authentic and difficult learning situations. However, they reported that many consulting teachers were not indicating or applying previous knowledge of consultation or collaboration. Even at the end of the semester, preteachers remained weak in their understanding of the consultation model. Although it became evident that adaptations apply to all subject areas, many preteachers expressed a need for increased presentation of ideas for adaptations. There was an apparent lack of connection between the responses in the preteacher evaluation and outlined course units and topics, as several areas of course content were not addressed in their responses. In addition, preteachers found it disjointed and disconcerting to have one course instructor and another faculty member supervise the practica, or even two section instructors and one practica supervisor.

Limitations

This study was limited in the following four ways: 1) The study was conducted in one location; (2) It relied on self-report data; (3) There was a need for further validity checking (4) There was a lack of triangulation of methods. We were a faculty team from one university looking within program at preteacher perceptions of course structure, content, and delivery. We had no outside review process whereby our sorting and coding of themes and categories could be cross-checked. An improvement strategy for increasing validity might be to address these issues with faculty from other universities and compare evaluation data. We were dealing with self-report responses of preteachers at the end of the semester. Perhaps probing their responses over time could provide a better measure of how reliably responses occurred in identified categories. Finally, to further ensure validity, perhaps a member-checking procedure could be implemented for the data emanating from the large group discussions.

Implications

The findings from this study have implications for the field, teacher preparation, and further research. Providing supports for rural teachers through curriculum and materials adaptation allows teachers to concentrate on meeting the needs of diverse learners in the classroom (Tomlinson, 1995). Teachers require further inservice support to enhance their application of consultation and collaboration models. Preteachers benefit from explicit modeling and examples of ideas for adaptations. Preteachers can gain skills in consultation and curriculum adaptation through practica experience. For this course, university instructors and practica supervisors need to increase teaming to reduce confusion and vagueness. In addition, this course may benefit from one instructor replacing the two-instructor delivery model, or by creating regular teaming approaches to course content presentation. Lastly related to the course, highlighting the various types and methods for creating curriculum adaptations may be advisable. Further research in this area might include a comparative study of preteachers' logs of consulting activities with evaluation of their performance, and a more descriptive look at the specific adaptations created by preteachers as related to "best practice" research. Participatory research is situated in authentic problems within real classroom settings, thus it gains wider acceptance from practicing teachers as an introspective rather than didactic activity (Boudah & Knight, 1999). This study is educationally useful because allowing students to provide critical input has provided both a basis for reflexive learning on the part of preservice teachers (Dewey, 1933; Posner, 1991) and has allowed university faculty to reconsider structure, content, and delivery.

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