

Essay

Career Changers in Special Education A Collaborative Direction in Teacher Preparation for School Systems and Institutions of Higher Education

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Schools across the United States are confronted with the critical demand for highly effective teachers to address the needs of the increasing numbers of diverse learners in their classrooms. In response, school systems are looking beyond the traditional four-year degree student to individuals who are entering the teaching field from other professions—career changers in education. These career changers are nontraditional teacher candidates who have a desire to help students and the motivation to teach (Chambers, 2002; Feistrizer, 2005; Salyer, 2003). Those who enter teaching from other professional careers want to contribute their life experiences to the classroom as a form of giving back, and this motivation is seen especially in career changers who choose to be special education teachers (Kurtts, Cooper, & Boyles, 2007).

Over the last five years, there have been changes in federal funding opportunities designed to prepare career changers in special education (Pugach & Blanton, 2009). These teachers, who have rich life experiences, yet are novice teachers, with novice teachers' needs, need mentoring

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and support to achieve their goals as teachers. Nevertheless, there is limited research on their needs and how to support them. Such research is warranted, as teacher preparation programs, at all levels, will need to implement best practices to ensure that these career changers become effective teachers in special education (Cooper, Kurtts, Vallecorsa, & Baber, 2008).

Characteristics of Career Changers in Education

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (WWNFF; 2010) has provided recruitment and training resources for institutions of higher education and prospective new teachers for over 65 years. The primary purpose of the foundation is to ensure that new teachers are prepared to implement a transformative curriculum to help students achieve. WWNFF defines *career changers in education* as individuals who enter teaching after working three or more years in a different field. These individuals choose to enter the teaching profession for altruistic and practical reasons and expect to receive satisfaction from their new career (WWNFF, 2010).

Chambers (2002) and Salyer (2003) stated that nontraditional adult learners believe that their life experiences and age give them an advantage as they enter the teaching profession. They can incorporate real-world knowledge gained from years spent in other professions, as well as maturity and good work habits, into their teaching (Chambers, 2002; Resta, Huling, & Rainwater, 2001). These attributes well serve a career-changer special education teacher.

The Evolving Role of Special Education Teachers

As we regard how career changers in special education come to their new profession, we also should consider how the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers have evolved. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as *No Child Left Behind*, requires that all children must have teachers who are *highly qualified*, with at least a bachelor's degree and content expertise in the academic area in which they will teach (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Special education teachers, in particular, must be highly qualified if they are to meet the diverse educational needs of children with disabilities (Cooper et al., 2008).

Inclusive practice has always been a critical component of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education (IDEA) legislation, and such practice begins with a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for all students with disabilities (Rozalski,

Stewart, & Miller, 2010). With *No Child Left Behind* legislation, there is increased emphasis on accountability and inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum (Hulgin & Drake, 2011; Terry, 2010).

With over 80% of students with disabilities receiving services in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), special education teachers must have the skills and strategies for implementing or adapting instruction for students with disabilities. They also should be able to demonstrate proficiency in an academic content area and exhibit collaborative skills when working with general education teachers, other educational professionals, community agencies, and families.

Areas of Needed Support

Institutions of Higher Education

There are inconsistencies in the level of preparedness that career changers in special education receive in institutions of higher education (IHE), which stem from inconsistencies of structure or program design, pedagogy, and methodology emphasis; level of scaffolded field experience; and focused mentoring (Quigney, 2010). These discrepancies affect a career changer's ability to provide effective instruction for students with disabilities (Pugach & Blanton, 2009; Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007).

When examining various teacher education or alternative certification programs that serve career changers who choose special education, the components needed to ensure successful induction and retention should be the focus (Quigney, 2010). In a study of 64 special education teacher preparation programs, Brownell, Ross, Colon, and McCallum (2005) found the following to be the most important: (a) extensive field experience, (b) cross-facility collaboration (e.g., faculty to school personnel, school personnel to inservice teachers, preservice teachers to faculty), and (c) program evaluation. Mentoring, which also is needed, should not only be the responsibility of the school district but of the IHE as well (WWNFF, 2010).

Teacher education programs must provide career changers with an engaging and challenging curriculum that allows for the incorporation of their work and real-world experience, while ensuring that they are proficient in content knowledge (Lee, 2011; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010). Typically, teacher preparation programs for special education prepare teacher candidates, which include career changers, to deliver specialized instruction for students with disabilities; however, little attention may be given to subject-matter pedagogy (Brownell, Leko, Kamman, & King, 2008).

Intensive instruction in both subject matter pedagogy and research-based interventions for students with disabilities in special education programs ensures that career changers will be able to develop and implement a students' IEP, especially because IEP objectives are focused on students' attainment of content knowledge according to a prescribed curriculum (Nougaret, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2005). deBettencourt and Howard (2004) and Quigney (2010) believe that there should be more of an emphasis on pedagogy and methodology when training career changers in special education as compared to typical teacher candidates. Quigney also believes that programs should not rely on on-the-job training or allow candidates to enter the classroom too soon. Most important to the training of career changers is the need for more field experiences than what non-career changers receive (Brownell et al., 2005; Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008; Quigney, 2010).

Well-planned and well-supervised field experiences are necessary for both general and special education programs. Mamlin (2012) stated that pre-service special education teachers would benefit from quality field experiences based in well-crafted coursework that "involves tutoring individual students, practicing administering assessments, or practicing teaching units" (p. 63). In a national study of 110 special education teacher preparation programs, pre-service special education teachers identified what they considered the strengths of programs:

- (a) multiple field settings that include a variety of age, grade level, and special education assignments (e.g., inclusive, self-contained, resource classes) across elementary, middle, and high school levels; (b) access to a wide range of communities with diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural populations; and (c) practical hands-on field-based experiences that are integrated with and distributed across numerous methods courses, allowing for the application of theory in practical settings. (Prater & Sileo, 2004, p. 259)

According to Kolb (1984), career changers enter teacher training programs with a more developed ability to approach new experiences and to transform their teaching behaviors to make connections across the curriculum. Further, career changers' prior experience leads to the better establishment of a teacher identity than is seen among traditionally-trained special education teachers (Allen, 2005; Novak & Knowles, 1992). NCATE (2010) recommends that teacher education programs focus on practices that provide a more direct link between field experience, content knowledge, and pedagogy that allows career changers to work in school during their preparation. The National Research Council (2010) identified field experience as "one of the three aspects of teacher preparation that are likely to have the highest potential for effects on

outcomes for students, along with content knowledge and the quality of teacher candidates” (p. 180).

Teacher education programs that offer instructional formats that take into account scheduling needs such as day care and offer stipends are more desirable to career changers (WWNFF, 2010). In addition, a sense of community helps career changers to make the transition into a new field. In this regard, allowing career changers to complete academic program requirements in cohorts provides opportunities for students to develop peer supports (Kurtts et al., 2007). These supports can be further cultivated through career changers’ forming face-to-face and online support groups. IHEs must provide rich opportunities for students to collaborate and share their unique experiences (Harrell & Harris, 2006).

The North Carolina State Board of Education developed a pathway for lateral entry to teachers by way of a law that encourages the state to identify and remove any obstacles to capable individuals’ entering the teaching field from the private sector (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2009). Teachers in North Carolina are able to obtain a teaching license without completing an approved teacher education program. In addition to lateral entry programs, the state utilizes other alternative entry licensure routes such as Troops to Teachers, NC TEACH, Regional Alternative Licensure Centers, and 2+2 programs that create collaborative partnerships between community colleges and four-year University of North Carolina campuses (NCDPI, 2006, 2009). These types of programs, combined with field experiences, ensure that career changers in special education are given ample opportunity to learn how to provide effective instruction and to improve the quality of their teaching once in the classroom (Casey, Dunlap, Brister, & Davidson, 2011).

On the Job. The establishment of a collaborative relationship between IHEs and local school districts is critical to the success of career changers in special education. As part of the induction process, higher education faculty should assist in the placement of career changers in special education classroom settings throughout their training (WWNFF, 2010). Most school districts have some form of mentoring for newly licensed teachers, but, often, this relationship is not designed to meet the needs of a special education teacher, let alone someone who also may be a career changer (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). Induction programs should focus not only on issues related to general education participants but to special education teachers as well. The development of IEPs, collaborating and leading the IEP team, and ensuring compliance with federal guidelines for service delivery to students with disabilities should be introduced, explained, and modeled for effective instruction. According to Billingsley

(2005), induction programs should include (a) district leaders and higher education faculty that provide support groups, (b) specific professional development activities, and (c) scheduled observations. Career changers who are special educators should be assigned highly qualified and experienced teachers who are recognized by the school districts and by IHEs (Billingsley, 2005; NCATE, 2010).

School Systems

In a school setting, the administrator sets the climate by playing a major role in providing the level of support that special education teachers, especially career changers, need to be successful. Although the provision of special education services in public schools is federally mandated, an administrator can decide not to make special education a priority. This decision could affect a career changer's choice to leave or remain in a special education position. In this regard, Haselkorn and Hammerness (2008) found that most career changers worry that working conditions, lack of on-the-job support, and shortened training in their preparation programs may present barriers to their success as teachers.

Working conditions. In any given school district, working conditions can become a major stressor for special education teachers, especially career changers. At the district level, there are strategies that can be implemented to improve the working conditions of schools to encourage special education teachers to develop a commitment to their jobs. Billingsley et al. (2004) found that working conditions for beginning special education teachers should be carefully designed to ensure that they have access to necessary teaching materials, particularly in resource or content area classes. Casey et al. (2011) conducted a study of 54 career-changer special education teachers, who had earned their teaching certification through alternative routes, to understand their first-year needs in regard to administrators and on-site staff. The participants reported that they frequently asked for support in regard to special education procedures, IEP paperwork, and materials and resources for their classrooms.

Administrators can improve working conditions by (a) asking teachers what they need, (b) supporting them in identifying solutions to their problems, and (c) avoiding becoming defensive about teachers' complaints (Billingsley, 2005). Farber (2000) found that administrators can encourage these teachers to focus on what is going well and can provide ways to work on problematic situations, instead of leaving teachers to handle issues alone. One of these ways is to encourage teachers to work as teams to problem solve and to provide emotional support for each other.

Mentoring. According to the National Center to Inform Policy and

Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP; 2010), standard induction support has its advantages for novice special education teachers, but the realities of their work conditions require additional attention, particularly the use of mentoring. WWNFF (2010) found that “two out of three career changers had little to no mentoring and the literature is clear that limited mentoring correlates with high turnover” (p. 25). Career changers need opportunities to participate in teacher induction and to have regular mentoring meetings (WWNFF, 2010). These teachers prefer mentors with similar teaching backgrounds and professional development related to their special education classroom assignments (NCIPP, 2010). Thus, mentoring programs need to include support that is geared to the various content areas and backgrounds of the teachers, including career changers in special education (Wasburn-Moses, 2010; WWNFF, 2010).

In a study of 156 novice special education teachers who participated in an induction program, Whitaker (2000) identified the components necessary for effective mentoring, particularly for special education teachers. Whitaker found that precise matching of the novice teacher and mentor is critical and that the mentor should spend a substantial amount of time with the novice special education teacher, including having informal and unscheduled meetings. Whitaker also found that teachers need emotional support and school system information related to special education. Notably, the novices' perception of the overall effectiveness of the mentoring and of their plans to remain in the special education field were directly related. Whitaker also found that, despite the importance of a match between the mentor and the special education teacher, 33% of the participants were not paired with a mentor in the special education field. Further, the mentors and mentees did not meet at least once a week.

An effective mentoring program is especially important to career changes because their backgrounds are different from those whose trained to be teachers as undergraduates. Assigning veteran special education teachers to be career changers' mentors can alleviate their anxieties about entering a new profession, particularly in regard to their application of the curriculum. A mentor can help these career changes to learn how teach based on students' needs, specifically to link the IEP to the curriculum when creating lesson plans (Casey et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The literature, although sparse, makes it clear that it is crucial to identify the best practices offered within education and alternative

route programs that support career changers in becoming well-prepared special education teachers (Brownell et al., 2005, 2008; Quigney, 2010; Rosenberg et al., 2007; WWNFF, 2010). School personnel and higher education faculty must revisit their policies and procedures in regard to mentoring in teacher education programs and in school systems, working conditions, and on-the-job supports for career changers in special education. The specific types of supports that may be available can be effective only if they are designed around the academic, financial, and personal needs of career changers (Kurtts et al., 2007). School system administrators and teacher education faculty must be prepared to support these 21st century teachers.

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