

Opinions of In-Service and Pre-Service Special Education Teachers on the Competencies of the Undergraduate Special Education Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the opinions of in-service and pre-service special education teachers on the undergraduate special education programs, field competencies, and their own professional competence. Participants' suggestions for improving undergraduate special education programs and in-service training programs including topics they need for their own professional development were also obtained. The study designed as a survey model included 107 special education teachers and 160 seniors in the undergraduate special education programs of 4 different universities. The data were gathered using an information form and the Special Education Teacher Program Field Competencies Scale which were developed by the researchers. Results showed that the teachers who graduated from an undergraduate special education program perceived themselves and their teaching education more sufficient than both subject matter teachers and teachers with a special education teaching certificate. Teaching academic skills, classroom management, teaching speech, and language skills and autism were the topics on which the majority of participants found themselves inadequate and requested in-service training. Extending the duration of the practicum, spreading it over the whole duration of the program, and making the courses more field-oriented were the most frequently suggested changes by the participants to be made in the undergraduate special education programs. Based on the results of the study, implications for practice were discussed.

Key Words

Undergraduate Special Education Programs, Field Competencies, Special Education Teachers, Pre-Service Teachers, Special Education Teaching Certificate.

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The qualities of undergraduate programs which prepare pre-service teachers for their professions are very important. There is a positive relationship between student success and the quality of teacher education programs (Brownell, Ross, Colton, & McCallum, 2005). In order to improve the quality of these programs some standards need to be established (Özdemir Özden & Özden, 2010; Özer & Gelen 2008; Seferoğlu, 2004; Şişman, 2003; Zengin & Akgün, 2010). However, the research shows that several areas like collaboration with families (Brownell et al.), teaching social skills (Pavri, 2004), and collaboration among professionals (Greenwood, 2001) are not addressed enough.

Research studies that have been conducted in our country have revealed similar results. Inadequacy of practicum in teacher training programs (Dedeoğlu, Durali, & Tanrıverdi Kış, 2004) and inadequacy of special education teachers' communication and collaboration skills (Özen, Ergenekon, & Batu, 2008) are reported in these studies. Additionally, short-term certificate programs which are established to fill the gap in the need for special education teachers make difficult to increase the quality of teachers in the field (Nartgün, 2010; Özyürek, 2008). Therefore, it is important to identify or review competencies of special education undergraduate programs.

Competencies are described as the performance indicators describing a profession (Zengin & Akgün, 2010). In this context, teacher competencies can be described as the degree of knowledge, skills and attitudes which a teacher needs to have to successfully do his/her profession (Balci, 2005; Şahin, 2004). Based on these competencies, pre- and in-service teachers' professional competencies can be evaluated and improved (Zengin & Akgün). Therefore, identification of competencies for undergraduate programs of teacher training and effectively use of these competencies in professional development have received increasingly more attention in recent years (Gökçe, 2003; Özdemir Özden & Özden, 2010).

In this context, identification of competencies of special education undergraduate programs and evaluations of these competencies by pre-service and in-service teachers are important in increasing the quality of undergraduate programs. However, the review of the related literature shows that although there are several studies related to the competency levels of teachers from various areas (e.g. Güney, Aytan, & Gün, 2010; İzci, 2005; Özdemir Özden & Özden, 2010; Zengin & Akgün, 2010), studies examining special education teachers' professional competencies are very limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine opinions of pre- and in-service special education teachers about undergraduate programs of special education teacher training and their own professional competencies. Participants' suggestions on how to improve special education undergraduate programs and special education topics they need in-service training on are also investigated.

Method

Participants

The study in which survey model was used consisted of 160 pre-service teachers from special education departments of Ankara University (n=38), Anadolu University (n=36), Gazi University (n=28) and Abant İzzet Baysal University (n=58) and 107 special education teachers from various special education units (mainstreaming classrooms, special classrooms, and university application units) and special education schools that are located in the cities that these four universities reside. Among the special education teachers 52 were graduates of undergraduate special education programs (Teachers Graduated from the Undergraduate Special Education Programs-TGUSEP). Thirty-eight were teachers who completed a special education certificate program (Certified Teachers-CT). The remaining 17 teachers were subject matter teachers (SMT) who have not completed any training related to special education but who are lecturing in courses such as clothing, arts, music, and physical education.

Instruments

In order to collect data, an information form and the Special Education Teacher Program Field Competencies Scale were used.

Information Form: This form includes questions regarding participants' personal information, the areas they find themselves incompetent, the changes to be made in undergraduate special education programs, and the topics to be included in in-service trainings.

Special Education Teacher Program Field Competencies Scale (SETPFC): SETPFC was developed by the researchers. Its validity studies were completed. Its content validity and construct validity (exploratory factor analysis, item analysis and confirmatory factor analysis) (Büyüköztürk, 2006; Hair, Anderson, Tahtam, & Black, 1998; Kline, 1994, 2000; Marsh, Balla, & McDonald, 1998; Sümer, 2000; Şimşek, 2007) were tested and it was found that the scale included items under one factor with a high validity. SETPFC included 23 items related to the competencies of professional knowledge, skills, cooperation, and attitudes which were scored in a five point likert type scale. Participants were asked to evaluate to which extent they and their special education teaching programs meet each competency and they find each competency important.

Data Collection Process

In the study, the information form and the scale were administered to the pre-service teachers in their classrooms and to the in-service teachers in their institutions or online. Data gathered were analyzed using SPSS 17 software. Mean and standard deviations of the groups were calculated for each competency. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine whether there were significant differences between groups. Moreover, frequencies and percentiles were calculated for in-service and pre-service teachers for the last four open-ended questions of the information form.

Results

TGUSEP found their special education teacher training program and themselves more competent in each competency than certified, subject matter and pre-service teachers. There were significant differences among the groups. These differences were mostly between TGUSEP and subject matter teachers.

In the study, participants were asked to indicate in which areas they found themselves incompetent. The answers to this question were analyzed by content analysis. The results showed that TGUSEP found themselves incompetent in the areas of teaching reading and writing (28%), speech-language (20%) and autism (11%). For CT the sequence was as follows: teaching reading and writing (8%), autism (3%) and speech-language (0%). The percentage of SMT teachers who found themselves incompetent in these three areas were 6%. The teacher candidates indicated that they found themselves incompetent in teaching academic skills (25%), problem behaviors and classroom management (20%), and autism (15%). In the study, participants' suggestions were also asked to improve undergraduate special education programs to train well-equipped special education teachers. Extending the duration of the practicum, spreading it over the whole duration of the program, and making the courses more field-oriented were the most frequently suggested changes by the participants to be made in the undergraduate special education programs.

In addition, participants' opinions were asked about the courses and topics to be more emphasized in the undergraduate special education programs. Behavior and classroom management was reported by 52% and instruction of academic skills

was reported by 44% of TGUSEP. Instruction of academic skills was also reported by CT and pre-service teachers.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the topics to be held in in-service training programs. SMT and CT indicated that they needed training on the topics of communication and cooperation with families, behavior and classroom management whereas TGUSEP and pre-service teachers indicated that they needed in-service training on speech-language, communication, autism, classroom management, and instruction of academic skills.

Discussion

Results showed that subject matter teachers found their undergraduate trainings and themselves less competent than TGUSEP and CT. This finding emphasizes that in-service training offered to subject matter teachers are not sufficient, they cannot feel themselves as competent to give quality teaching, and therefore content of in-service trainings should be improved and duration of these trainings should be increased (Bettencourt & Howard, 2004; Nartgün, 2005, 2010; Özyürek, 2008). The finding showing that TGUSEP and CT find themselves as equally competent is not consistent with the previous research findings. Even though there are research studies showing teachers with certification show similar performances to TGUSEP (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Miller, McKenna, & McKenna, 1998), several studies demonstrate that certified teachers are quite incompetent in both teaching and behavior management than TGUSEP (Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez, & Bradley, 2005; Nougaret, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2005; Sindelar, Daunic, & Rennells, 2004). Moreover, it is frequently stated in the literature that certified teachers find themselves more incompetent in these areas (Bettencourt & Howard; Henderson et al.). However, different from studies conducted in other countries, 76% of certified teachers participated in this study were experienced or retired classroom teachers. Therefore, perceptions of certified teachers with a long time teaching experience toward competence of the special education certificate programs and themselves may be high.

It is also found that pre- and in-service teachers perceived themselves as less competent in assessment, classroom management, professional legislations, positive learning environment, and collaboration with families and members of other professions. This finding is inconsistent with the

results of some previous studies which stated that pre-service classroom teachers' professional competence perceptions were higher than in-service classroom teachers' (Çelikten, Şanal, & Yeni, 2005; Kahyaoglu & Yangın, 2007; Özer & Gelen, 2008; Sağlam, Anagün, & Dal, 2005; Seferoğlu, 2004; Yeşil, 2009; Zengin & Akgün, 2010). It is thought that this difference is reasonable in the scope of characteristics of the special education field requiring more knowledge and skills and special education teachers' experiences in the field.

In addition, the most frequently suggested changes to be made in the undergraduate special education programs were that courses should be more applied and the duration of the practicum should be longer or the practicum should be extended. Field practices provide settings in which teacher candidates interpret, give meaning and reconstruct the theoretical information they acquire in their courses (Karadüz, Eser, Şahin, & İlbaş, 2009). However, as frequently indicated in the literature, practices are not regarded as important in both education faculties and in practicum schools (Oral, 2003; Tüfekçi, 1998). Therefore, teachers confront difficulties in their first years of the profession and they cannot teach effectively.

Lastly, teachers indicated that they needed in-service training on the topics of behavior and classroom management and communication and collaboration with families. This finding is consisted with Bettencourt and Howard's (2004) finding showing that special education teachers do not take adequate courses on behavior management during their undergraduate training, and therefore they feel incompetent.

The results of the study suggest that special education teacher training programs must be improved by carefully evaluating the needs of the pre- and in-service teachers. Undergraduate programs of special education teacher training must contain more practice. Practicum can be more useful if its duration is longer and it is spread to whole undergraduate program period. The quality of special education certification programs should be improved. Subject matter teachers should participate in intensive in-service training programs before they begin working with children with special needs. In-service education programs should be planned based on teachers' needs. Because of the increasing numbers of children with autism in recent numbers (Girli & Atasoy, 2010), more courses on autism should be included in special education teacher trainings.

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