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Becoming Inclusive: A Collection and Analysis of the Perceptions of Newly Qualified General Elementary Education Teachers on their Preparedness for Teaching in Inclusive Settings

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in *Elementary and Special Education*.

By *Brooke Armesto*

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Catherine Howerter*

ABSTRACT

Pre-service teachers majoring in elementary education generally have few opportunities to teach students with disabilities. This research addressed the question “How do newly qualified general elementary education teachers perceive their preparedness to teach in inclusive settings?” The goal of this study was to discover what areas new teachers need to become more proficient in order to successfully teach within inclusive classrooms. The topics explored include perceived preparedness for teaching in inclusive settings, ways to measure preparedness, current approaches in teaching within the inclusive settings and strategies for preparing preservice teachers. Using a qualitative narrative design, five newly qualified elementary inclusion teachers were interviewed, the interviews were later transcribed and coded to create common themes between participants. The results of this study indicated that newly qualified teachers felt they would be better prepared to teach in inclusive settings if there was more special education coursework and hands-on experiences in placements. The results from this research can be used to reform curriculum or requirements for preservice teachers in the coming years.

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Introduction

Inclusive settings refer to classroom settings that serve students with disabilities (students with IEPs or 504 plans)¹ and those without, simultaneously. Inclusive settings are becoming more common in schools; in fact, most teachers will teach at least one child with an IEP or 504 plan regardless of whether or not their class is considered inclusive. One 2003 study stated, “In the last fifteen years, [due to] federal legislation and the Regular Education Initiative (REI)...many schools in the country are moving towards a fully inclusive model where students with disabilities² are educated with their non-disabled peers³” (Turner, 2003, p.491), and this is even more realistic today.

Because of the growing prevalence of this type of class setting, it is important that all teachers should be prepared to teach in inclusive settings. Typically, university students looking to teach in elementary schools can major in elementary education (ELEM) or special education (SPED); some universities additionally offer dual certification⁴ in ELEM and SPED. ELEM majors are trained to work in general education classrooms where all of the children are on relatively similar cognitive and behavioral levels. SPED majors are trained to work with students who have a wide variety of disabilities including, but not limited to, ADHD, Autism, Intellectual Disabilities, Specific Learning Disabilities, and Orthopedic Impairments. Dual certification students are typically trained in both areas but are more likely to teach in inclusive settings than self-contained special education classrooms. Graduates from Bachelor of Education

¹ See key terms section

² See key terms section

³ This is no longer an acceptable term in this field, current language is: “students without disabilities”

⁴ See key terms section

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programs, regardless of major, take some courses related to special education; however, because SPED majors and dual certification majors are focusing on learning to teach students with disabilities, students studying these majors are required to take more SPED classes than Elementary Education majors.

As class settings begin to integrate students with disabilities and students without disabilities more often, the question arises whether or not Elementary Education majors are being prepared enough to teach in these inclusive settings. After researching this topic, it has become clear that while research on inclusion exists, there is still a gap in the literature on teacher preparation. Many of the published peer-reviewed studies are related to inclusion in physical or secondary education (Coates, 2012; Turner, 2003), inclusive settings in other countries (Coates, 2012; Marin, 2014), or were published prior to 2010 (Cooper, Kurtt, Baber, & Vallecorsa, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Stanovich & Jordan, 2002; Turner, 2003; Singh, 2007; Fuchs, 2010; Hinders, 1995; Villa, Thousand, & Chappie, 1996; Snyder, 1999).

Research Questions

The main research question this study will focus on is “How do newly qualified general elementary education teachers perceive their preparedness to teach in inclusive settings?” Sub-questions will include: “Upon graduation, how prepared to teach in an inclusive setting did these newly qualified teachers feel?” “After teaching in inclusive settings for at least one year, did teachers feel that their programs adequately prepared them for teaching inclusion?” and “How do teachers feel that they could have been better

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prepared to teach in inclusive settings?” The goal of this study is to discover what areas inservice teachers felt they needed to build more proficiency to successfully teach inclusion.

Definitions of Key Terms

Students with disabilities: Students with some physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. (Federal Statute 34 CFR 668.142)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)- A piece of legislation detailing the right all students have to a free and appropriate public education (IDEA, n.d.).

Inclusive Setting: A classroom setting where students with and without disabilities are served together

Self-Efficacy: An individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997).

Newly qualified teachers: Teachers who have graduated from a teacher education program within the past five years

Preservice teachers: Students in a teacher education program

Dual Certification: Certification in both general education and special education

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): A written document developed for each public school child eligible for special education. The information in the IEP includes the students' background, goals, necessary accommodations, related services, and other prevalent information to the students' individual education. (IDEA, n.d.).

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504 Plan: A plan developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives accommodations that will ensure their academic success and access to the learning environment. (Washington.edu, 2019)

Review of Literature

This review of literature includes reviews of 12 sources related to preparing preservice⁵ and in-service teachers for teaching in inclusive settings. The topics which will be explored include perceived preparedness for teaching in inclusive settings, ways to measure preparedness for teaching in inclusive settings, current ways teachers are being prepared to teach in inclusive settings and effective strategies for preparing teachers to teach in inclusive settings. By exploring this literature, areas in which further research is needed will become evident.

Teachers' attitudes toward and perceived preparedness to teach inclusion

One way to measure Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) preparedness to teach in inclusive settings is by taking a look at their perceived preparedness and thoughts and attitudes toward teaching in inclusive settings. Coats (2012) investigated whether or not secondary physical education student teachers in the United Kingdom were prepared to teach inclusion. The results yielded that student teachers desired more hands-on experience teaching inclusively and those who did feel confident teaching did not attribute this to their program. On the other hand, the general education teachers in Fuchs

⁵ See key terms section

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(2010) had much less confidence in their abilities to teach in inclusive settings. This was attributed to the teachers' agreement that "responsibilities and expectations of regular education teachers were unreasonable. The teachers had little formal education or training with regard to mainstreaming practices," (Fuchs, 2010, pg. 30). The participants also responded that college did not prepare them well for teaching inclusion and that they were required to take only one course in special education. One complaint about their preparation in college is the lack of hands-on experience, similar to the findings of Coates (2012). The teachers in Fuchs (2010) reported that in their college classes they learned only terminology and did not have experience working with children with disabilities. Another barrier they reported was a lack of administrative support and support from SPED staff, "The teachers felt there was a lack of support from school administrators in the areas of in-service education and training, class size, collaboration and planning time, and shared duties with the special education staff," (Fuchs, 2010).

These findings are important because according to a study done by Tschannen-Morgan et.al. (1998), the combination of self-efficacy⁶ and collective efficacy have a great impact on teacher preparedness, especially for NQTs. The study reported, "Although few studies have looked at the efficacy beliefs among novices, it seems that the efficacy beliefs of first-year teachers are related to stress and commitment to teaching," (Tschannen-Morgan et.al., 1998). This means that teacher efficacy can affect their stress levels, dedication to their job, and other factors as well. For this reason, it is important to measure teacher efficacy with regards to their ability to teach in inclusive

⁶ See key terms section

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settings and determine how teacher efficacy can be raised to promote successful teaching in an inclusive environment.

Measuring teacher preparedness for inclusion

Rather than measuring whether or not teachers feel prepared to teach in inclusive settings, some studies have examined whether or not teachers are prepared to teach in inclusive settings. Singh (2007) had the purpose of determining whether or not teacher candidates were prepared to become teachers of students with disabilities in inclusive settings, after taking only one introductory class in special education. This is similar to the one introductory special education course elementary education majors at Georgia Southern are required to take. The researchers in Singh (2007) found this information by giving a pre-test and post-test where teachers self-assessed using a likert scale to answer a variety of questions about their confidence to teach inclusion before and after going through a special education class combined with clinical experience. Surprisingly, this study determined that the one course with clinical experience was likely to prepare students to teach inclusion, and noted that they will learn more about disabilities after they interact with students throughout their career. However, similar studies have not reported the same findings. Marin (2014) which “explore[d] teachers level of preparation to deal with kids with special needs in the mainstream school” reported that many teachers “feel the need for more training when it comes to meeting the requirements of an inclusive school system,” (Marin, 2014). They also noted that many teachers believed that in order to give quality education to a group of students in an inclusive setting, teachers should hold “a specific set of skills, teaching methods and tools” and that

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explicit training is necessary for developing these skills (Marin, 2014). Gehrke and Cocchiarella (2013) measured teacher preparedness in another way. They evaluated whether or not teachers could successfully “define, identify, and implement inclusion,” (Gehrke & Cocchiarella 2013), and aimed to identify where their ability to do those things came from (whether that be coursework, field experiences, or something else). After surveying 125 participants, certified in either special education, elementary education, or dual certification, they found that across the board, student teachers were “not consistently provided with sufficient instruction in recognizing those aspects of inclusion that reach beyond the mere placement of students in general education settings,” (Gehrke & Cocchiarella 2013). Some interesting results that this study yielded were that dual certification majors were the most prepared but also that elementary education majors were more prepared than special education majors. They also concluded that field placement had a big impact on results, meaning that those given opportunities to have a field placement in an inclusive setting were later more prepared to teach in an inclusive setting.

Effective strategies for preparing teachers for teaching in inclusive settings

In order to fully understand whether or not teachers are being prepared to teach in inclusive settings, it is important to realize what preparation strategies are successful and determine whether or not they are being implemented. Stanovich and Jordan’s article (2002) provides expert opinions on preparation strategies for future inclusion teachers. The two factors which they concluded had a great impact on teacher preparedness are commitment and teacher’s perceptions. Essentially, they believe mindset is important to

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success in teaching in inclusive settings. They also argued that in inclusive classrooms, lessons should be based on pedagogy, not just in creativity. The implication of this is that student teachers should be taught pedagogy and its importance should be stressed in their preparation programs.

Additionally, it has been found that it is important for teachers to have first-hand experience being in an inclusion classroom before having to teach one on their own. Turner's article (2003) found that, in the case of secondary education teachers, "teacher candidates' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities change through interaction and direct experience with individuals with disabilities in addition to professor-directed instruction" (Turner, 2003) supporting the point that teacher candidates need firsthand experience working with students with disabilities.

Another strategy for preparing preservice teachers for teaching in inclusive settings is shown in Villa, et.al. (1996). This report is a collection of case studies on teacher preparation programs at various major universities throughout the U.S. It gives strategy recommendations, followed by commentary on how individual universities are putting these recommendations into practice. One common practice between the universities is offering or requiring education majors to become dually certified in general education and special education. Some universities also, rather than focusing on certifying teachers in both general and special education, focused on building interdisciplinary connections and providing opportunities for general education majors and special education majors to work together or even practice team teaching.

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Cooper, et. al. (2008) built upon previous studies; the research looked into how one teacher education program was preparing their graduates and whether or not they were equipped with all the tools necessary to be successful in teaching inclusion classes. To research this, a group of experts called The Task Force, collected literature on preparing teachers to meet the needs of exceptional students in regular classrooms and examined the information. This resulted in their creation of the 12 competency areas necessary for teaching inclusion. The 12 competency areas are skills which special education teachers and general education teachers should possess. Some examples for general education teachers include knowledge of state standards, classroom management, and “instructional methods” for the core areas, and some examples for special education teachers include “identification and placement procedures,” “assessment strategies,” knowledge of IEPs, 504s, and the accommodations and modifications to go along with these (Cooper, et. al., 2008). If teachers are able to master all of the competency areas for both special educators and general educators it is believed that they should then be successful in teaching in inclusive settings.

Current ways newly qualified general education teachers are being prepared to teach students with disabilities.

A common theme throughout many studies has been that general education preservice teachers are being required by their program to take one to two special education courses throughout their college career. These typically include an introductory special education course and in some cases a course regarding classroom management, which is likely to still be centered around managing the general education classroom.

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Fuchs (2010) and Singh (2007) both attribute the under-preparedness of teachers to the lack of special education courses. In order to receive a B.S.Ed in Elementary Education, teacher candidates are required to take two special education courses: *Introduction to Special Education for Elementary Education* and *Classroom Management*. This reflects similarities between Georgia Southern's methods of elementary education teacher preparation and those studied by Fuchs and Singh.

After reviewing the literature, it has become clear that there is a need for more research regarding the preparedness of newly qualified general elementary education teachers to teach in inclusive settings. The results from this research can be used to reform curriculum or requirements for bachelors of elementary education candidates in the coming years.

Methodology

Participants

For this qualitative study, I interviewed four newly qualified teachers⁷ who graduated from a large rural university in the southeastern United States (pseudonym Smalltown University) in the last five years and are currently teaching in an inclusive setting⁸ at an elementary school within the same county as the university. The participants were identified through a list of the university's graduates of Bachelor of Science (B.S.)Elementary Education program from 2015-2019. Within the B.S. Elementary Education program, undergraduate teacher candidates have the option to complete the traditional single-certification track in Elementary Education or the dual certification

⁷ See key terms section

⁸ See key terms section

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track in both Elementary Education and Special Education (P-5 general curriculum).

Three participants in the study completed the single-certification track while one completed the dual-certification track.

As shown in Table 1, the teachers I interviewed were Amanda Alexander, Bailey Beach, Carly Cabello, and Danielle Diaz (pseudonyms for participants and schools). Ms. Alexander, Ms. Beach, and Ms. Cabello are all teachers at Appalachia Elementary School. Ms. Alexander and Ms. Cabello have been teaching 3rd grade for four years and Ms. Beach taught preschool for two years and first grade for one year. Ms. Diaz is a teacher at Bayside Elementary School and has been teaching first grade for three years. All four teachers have taught students with disabilities in a general education setting with paraprofessional support; however, Ms. Alexander has also had experience co-teaching with a special education teacher in an inclusive general education setting.

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Table 1***Participant Information***

Teacher	BSEd. Elementary Education Certification Track	School	Years of Experience	Placements Taught
Amanda Alexander	Single Certification Track	Appalachia Elementary School	4 years	3rd grade inclusion 3rd grade co-teaching
Bailey Beach	Single Certification Track	Appalachia Elementary School	3 years	Pre-K inclusion 1st grade inclusion
Carly Cabello	Dual Certification Track	Appalachia Elementary School	4 years	3rd grade inclusion
Danielle Diaz	Single Certification Track	Bayside Elementary School	3 years	1st grade inclusion

Interviews and Analysis

The aim of this study was to capture teachers' unique experiences and feelings; the best way to do this was through conducting open-ended interviews with the teachers, through a qualitative-narrative design using thematic analysis. All of the interviews were conducted via video-conferencing platform Zoom and were, on average, less than thirty minutes long. Through this process, I conducted and transcribed interviews with teachers and coded and analyzed the transcriptions.

During the interviews, teachers answered interviews questions to share their experiences teaching in inclusive settings and how experiences prepared by their degree

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program informed their skills to teach in inclusive settings. They shared their perceived levels of preparedness at the very beginning of their career and how they compare to their comfort levels teaching inclusion now, and what factors they feel influenced those feelings. They additionally shared any suggestions they have for ways they could have been better prepared by their degree program for the reality of teaching inclusion. See Appendix A for interview questions.

All interviews were transcribed and when necessary, fillers (um, uh, like, etc.) were removed. As seen in Table 2, I analyzed and coded the collected data for common experiences, opinions, and beliefs and synthesized the commonalities into themes used to answer my research questions.

Table 2

Interview themes and corresponding codes

Initial Perceptions	Positively Impactful Program Experiences	Contributions to Feelings of Unpreparedness
Surprised (S)	SPED Coursework (SC)	SPED Coursework (SC)
Not Surprised (NS)	Classroom Management Coursework (CMC)	Applications of Course Content (ACC)
Prepared (P)	Diverse Placement (DP)	Diverse Placement (DP)
Unprepared (UP)	-----	Practical Experiences (PE)

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As displayed in figure 2, there are three themes that emerged from the teacher interviews. Along with these themes, are specific codes which were used to indicate statements throughout the transcripts which corresponded with each theme.

Initial Perceptions: This theme describes the teachers' thoughts, feelings, and perceived preparedness to teach in an inclusive setting upon receiving their first teaching job.

Impactful Program Experiences: This theme describes experiences in the participants' undergraduate programs that they felt had a positive impact on their preparedness to teach in inclusive settings.

Impactful Professional Experiences: This theme describes experiences in the participants' career as an educator that had a positive impact on their preparedness to teach in inclusive settings.

Contributions to Feelings of Unpreparedness: This theme describes areas in which the participants felt they needed more preparation by their degree programs in order to feel successfully prepared to teach in inclusive settings.

Findings

The purpose of conducting these interviews was to gain an understanding of newly qualified teachers' perceived perception to teach in inclusive settings, and to discover what areas, if any, teachers felt like they needed to build more proficiency in to successfully teach an inclusion class. In order to do so, I aimed to answer the following questions: "When they first began teaching, how prepared to teach in an inclusive setting did these newly qualified teachers feel?" "After teaching in inclusive settings for at least

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one year, did teachers feel that their programs adequately prepared them for teaching inclusion?” and “How do teachers feel that they could have been better prepared to teach in inclusive settings?”

Overall, I found that most of the teachers initially felt uneasy about teaching students with disabilities, and all four felt they could have been more prepared. Some of the common concerns contributing to their feelings of unpreparedness included a lack of practical experience, limited course work in special education, and inexperience in applying what they learned in their coursework to their classrooms. Some of the experiences that the teachers felt prepared them more included coursework in behavior management, collaborating with more experienced teachers, practical experiences, and professional development experiences.

Initial Perceptions

The codes used most commonly to indicate similarities within this theme include *surprised* (S), *not surprised* (NS), *prepared* (P), and *unprepared* (UP).

Surprised (S) vs Not Surprised (NS)

(S) and (NS) indicated whether the teachers had expected to teach an inclusion class or whether they were surprised to find out they would be teaching inclusion. I found that the results were relatively split in regards to this theme, with an equal number of (S) and (NS) responses.

Ms. Alexander and Ms. Beach indicated that they thought they would never teach students with disabilities, while Ms. Cabello and Ms. Diaz indicated that they knew it

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was a possibility. Ms. Cabello additionally noted being dually certified played a role in this expectation: “It was not explicitly stated that it would happen however with me having that extra certification and there being such a high [population of students with disabilities] at Appalachia, I already kind of knew that the chances of it happening were very high.”

In contrast, Ms. Alexander and Ms. Beach did not have as strong of an expectation that they would one day teach students with disabilities. Ms. Alexander noted that she felt certain she would never teach students with disabilities: “...looking back, I was so wrong. I went into teaching thinking: ‘I’m going to be a gifted teacher. I’m going to teach the highest kids. My mom taught SPED and I’ve watched it, I’ve heard about it, I heard her stories, and I will never do it. Can’t do it.’ And when I started teaching, in that first year, I got that inclusion class.”

Prepared (P) vs Unprepared (UP)

(P) and (UP) indicated whether the teachers had felt more confident and prepared in their ability to teach in inclusive settings or more uneasy and unprepared when they first began teaching. I found with these results, that all four teachers felt a level of unpreparedness; however, some relayed more negative emotions than others did.

The main feeling described by the teachers was “nervous.” Ms. Beach and Ms. Diaz both indicated that they were nervous about teaching in an inclusive setting. Ms. Diaz’s nervousness stemmed from surprise that she was being trusted to teach students with disabilities: “It definitely made me nervous when I got my first roster and I got to see all the students’ IEPs and 504 plans, because it was a little nerve wracking to think

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that they were trusting me with those students. Ms. Beach was similarly intimidated when presented with her incoming students' IEPs⁹: "I definitely felt nervous and challenged especially with the paperwork and reading the IEP; I wasn't too familiar with [IEPs] and sometimes they're hard to dissect."

While Ms. Cabello also noted that while she was nervous, she did not attribute those feelings to learning she would be teaching students with disabilities, and felt she was prepared to do so to some extent: "I was nervous because I mean it was my first year teaching in general, but I wasn't nervous about the SPED aspect. I wouldn't say I was overly-prepared by any means, but I felt like I was at least a little bit prepared and kind of had an idea of what it was going to be like."

Ms. Alexander did not note feelings of nervousness, but rather feelings of uncertainty and lack of confidence, attributed to being a new teacher and being inexperienced in teaching students with disabilities: "My first reaction was, I'm brand new, I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know how to do this. All of a sudden, I was upset. I didn't think I could do it and I didn't know what I was going to do, how I was going to handle it because I'd only worked with kids on the higher level before. Coming out of Smalltown University (pseudonym), I had just kept missing those opportunities because I wasn't having a placement that was working with students with disabilities, and I wasn't, you know, taking the classes because they weren't required. So I didn't really know much to begin with."

⁹ See key terms section

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Impactful Program Experiences

The codes most commonly used to indicate similarities within this theme include *Special Education (SPED) Coursework (SC)*, *Classroom Management Coursework (CMC)*, and *Diverse Field Placements (DP)*.

SPED Coursework (SC)

Three of the four teachers indicated that (SC) helped to prepare them to teach in inclusive settings, and this code appeared in the interviews a total of six times.

Ms. Alexander and Ms. Diaz, both indicated that they took one online Special Education course during their time in the BSEd. program (single-certification track). Ms. Alexander noted specific concepts covered in the class that helped her as she navigated teaching students with disabilities for the first time, specifically stating: “During that time, I don't remember much, but I do remember learning a lot about the laws and the rules like IDEA¹⁰. We talked about all that kind of stuff at the beginning and then talked about how to follow all of these rules.” While Ms. Diaz, did not remember specific content covered in the course, she did note that she took one special education course which may have benefited her in teaching in inclusive settings: “We might have had one class on that, I think we did, and it was an online class... I can't even really remember it.”

Ms. Cabello however, being dually certified in Elementary and Special education, remembered more extensive special education coursework, and noted additional topics she learned in these courses: “Because I was in [the dual certification track], we had specific SPED classes [where we learned] how to read IEPs and best practices to help

¹⁰ See key terms section

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[students with disabilities] in the classroom. I would say the greatest benefit I've had would be learning to read an IEP... and how to incorporate those accommodations.”

In addition to the SPED coursework being impactful, the participants also discussed the value of their classroom management coursework.

Classroom Management Coursework (CMC)

Another experience the participants identified as beneficial was taking a classroom management course (CMC). The code (CMC) appeared in all four teacher interviews, and was commonly described as an evening class in which the participants learned how to write FBAs and BIPs.

Ms. Alexander noted: “There was a class I took, it was an evening class, but it was a really great class. I think the professor came from Dogwood Elementary (pseudonym) that was the [leading] behavior school here in the county and we learned about behavior intervention plans [BIPs] and how to intervene. I remember that class more than any of the others. That class was very beneficial.”

Ms. Beach had a similar experience, and expressed that she would have liked to have additional instruction in this area: “There was this one class, Dr. Samantha Cook (pseudonym) taught it, it was an evening class, and we talked about behavioral management strategies and I remember going over an FBA and a BIP, or a behavior intervention plan; I remember learning about those and a few other things, but not nearly as much as I would've liked.”

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Diverse Placements (DP)

While coursework seemed to play an important role in preparing the teachers to teach in inclusive settings, the code which appeared most often, by far, was Diverse Placements (DP). All four teachers mentioned being assigned to a placement with a diverse group of students, whether that be students with disabilities, students in the tiers, gifted students, or English language learning (ELL/ESOL) students, was a beneficial experience in preparing them to teach in inclusive settings, and this code appeared a total of six times.

Ms. Alexander and Ms. Diaz both had practicum placements in a gifted class, Ms. Beach had a placement in which she observed one student with an IEP and one ESOL student, and Ms. Cabello, being dually certified, had two placements in a SPED classroom.

Ms. Beach noted that experiencing a placement in which she got to observe some students with disabilities helped her become more familiar with what to expect in an inclusive classroom “When I was in [a placement] at Bayside Elementary School, I did have a student with an IEP and I saw him getting pulled out for services and how that all worked, and I also had some ESOL students that were getting pulled out. So I kind of got familiar with the revolving door of teachers coming in and coming out and getting students to work with them and things like that.”

Ms. Diaz also noted a similar experience, “I don't really think you can be prepared to teach a child with disabilities by sitting in a classroom. I got to teach in a variety of different classrooms during our field experiences and different grade level. I

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got to see a lot of different dynamics going on. I was in a gifted class where everybody was gifted. I was in a class where it was remedial. I was in a classroom where there was a child with autism, which I had never experienced before myself. So I think that was the best way that I was prepared to go into my classroom, was just seeing how other teachers handled it and how different classrooms were made up with so many diverse students”

Experiencing a diverse placement positively contributed to the feelings of preparedness of all four teachers.

Contributions to Feelings of Unpreparedness

The four most commonly mentioned shortcomings of the participants’ educational experience included *SPED Coursework (SC)*, *Applications of Course Content (ACC)*, *Diverse Placement (DP)*, and *Practical Experiences (PE)*.

SPED Coursework (SC)

While the participants noted that *SPED coursework* had a positive impact on their ability to teach in inclusive settings, all four teachers noted that they wished they had the opportunity to take more SPED courses throughout their time in their BSEd. programs. Ms. Alexander, Ms. Beach, and Ms. Diaz all took one special education course during their time in the program, with Ms. Alexander and Ms. Diaz both taking this course as a condensed, 5-week, online summer course.

The two teachers noted that the online format of the course significantly impacted their educational experience and their preparedness to teach in inclusive settings. When asked if she felt like taking the course online negatively impacted her experience in the

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course, Ms. Diaz stated: “I do, I do think so. I think it would have been nice to have had a face-to-face professor who was experienced in teaching SPED and could answer our questions. If I had a question about something that was going on in my field experience, I didn't feel like I could just email her and ask about that, but I feel like if it was face to face, it would have been easier to have those conversations. So I don't think that class should be strictly online. I think that needs to be an in person class where you get to really discuss those topics with somebody who knows.”

Ms. Alexander noted similar feelings: “So this is more so my fault, rather than [the university’s], I took the special education class offered for [single-certification track students] online. So I was learning online, but I'm not an online learner. I knew how to read in the textbook and answer my questions, and at the time I was just plowing through that class, and I made an A on it, but I can't tell you more than bits and pieces [from the course] and it's mainly from what I've gathered from teaching for the last couple of years. So when I think about it, I had that one main class, and then you really didn't do a whole lot more with inclusion. But it was a five week summer online class, so [you learn] as much as you can learn. So I don't think that they should be offered in those condensed versions because I gave it my best go but I still can't tell you much from it.” While content was not the focus of the issue with this response the delivery method can also have implications on the preparation of future teachers.

In addition to requesting in-person SPED courses, Ms. Alexander, Ms. Beach, and Ms. Diaz, all graduates of the single-certification track, mentioned that they would have

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liked to have had a curriculum which included more SPED courses, like the curriculum of the dual-certification track students, such as Ms. Cabello.

Ms. Alexander recalled feelings she had as an undergraduate, while spending time with her roommate, an Elementary Education major on the dual-certification track: “I had a roommate that was dual cert while I was just regular elementary education, and I would look at her classes all the time and be like, ‘I really just need to be doing that.’ It's almost like they all [every elementary education major] just needs to do dual cert, because that's the only way that you can know the ins and outs of it.

While Ms. Beach did not specifically mention the dual certification track like Ms. Alexander did, she expressed a need to learn the course content that a dual-certification track student would learn: “As far as preparing me, Smalltown University did a great job but I would have liked to have a little bit more like knowledge about how to do the paperwork for and teach students with disabilities, but also knowledge of [RTI,] like the tiers, and documenting like how to get a student from tier one, tier two and things like that.”

However, the teachers did not only feel they needed to experience more SPED courses, they also mentioned the need for experiences which allowed them to draw important connections between the course content and the classroom.

Applications of Course Content (ACC)

Ms. Beach was not the only teacher who expressed a desire to learn more about the RTI process. Ms. Cabello was surprised by the challenge of completing RTI

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paperwork at the beginning of her career, and remarked that while she learned about RTI, she did not feel as though she understood the full responsibility and was able to apply her knowledge to a real-life setting. This begins a section in which teachers express how, while they learned about aspects of special education in their programs, they did not necessarily learn how to take what they learned and apply it into the classroom. In regards to applying her knowledge of RTI, Ms. Cabello noted: “I think one thing I was shocked by was that we talk about the RTI process, but don’t actually see the paperwork that goes in to the RTI process, the burden of the general education teacher that falls on, and how we can take what we know about it and apply that. Only your tier three kids are really getting pulled by an intervention specialist, so for your tier two kids, you’re coming up with the goals, you’re keeping up with progress monitoring, you’re doing the extra stuff like any good teacher would, but the paperwork behind that was just shocking.”

RTI paperwork was not the only type of paperwork that overwhelmed the teachers. Writing and reading IEPs was also a concern of Ms. Alexander, Ms. Beach, and Ms. Diaz, with Ms. Alexander noting that she had never even seen an IEP before her first IEP meeting as an inclusion teacher: “We occasionally would touch on IEPs [throughout the program] and learned how to use them and how to like add information into them, but I never had to sit down, look at an IEP, write an IEP, etc. My true first time looking at an IEP was at an IEP meeting in front of parents and I was like, ‘Oh, this is great. I really need to look like I know what I’m doing right now.’ It was kind of a disservice.” Unlike Ms. Alexander, Ms. Beach and Ms. Diaz had experiences learning about and seeing IEPs during their program; however, they both expressed a disconnect in transferring what

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they learned about IEPs in school, and apply that to their classrooms. Ms. Beach stated “I don't recall if we ever really dug into what an IEP looks like, how to read it, how to apply it and how to carry it through in the classroom and things like that,” and Ms. Diaz stated “I think the biggest thing that it might have fallen short of is just the paperwork involved with IEPs and 504 plans and how to document things correctly. I believe we looked at one, maybe two, but I just, I mean, that's such an important legal document so there could be better preparation on how to read one, how to decipher what they're even talking about, and even just making one. I did not realize going into it that we would be directly involved in the writing process. When I had to sit in on [my first] IEP meeting, I thought that I was just a spectator with the SPED team, but I had to have an active part in that. I did not feel prepared for that. It's completely different to be like reading about, you know, the characteristics of disabilities in a textbook or actually being in the classroom and being actively involved.”

Similarly to wanting more experiences which challenge them to apply the course material to their classroom experience, these teachers also desired to experience the other “practical duties” of teachers.

Practical Experiences (PE)

While incorporating more SPED coursework and teaching the undergraduates how to apply what they learned to real-life situations were recognized as important suggestions by most of the teachers, the teachers also expressed that there are numerous experiences that simply cannot be taught by a textbook. In this study, these are referred to as practical experiences (PE), and every teacher noted that their undergraduate education

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was lacking in practical experience in some fashion. Some of the practical experiences teachers desired to have included working with paraprofessionals, attending IEP meetings, shadowing RTI specialists, teaching students with extreme behaviors, and participating in parent teacher conferences.

Diverse Placements (DP)

Finally, the way that teachers expect to gain practical experience is through having diverse field placements. All four teachers talked about either being in diverse field placements positively impacting, or a lack of diverse field placement experiences impeding their preparedness to teach in inclusive settings. The teachers felt, in general, that in order to be adequately prepared for the variety of settings they may one day be faced with, preservice teachers should be placed in settings with students with various disabilities, students in the tiers, ESOL students, different grade levels, and with different clinical supervisors.

Ms. Alexander remarked that she never had an opportunity to be placed in a class with students with disabilities: “I was never placed in a SPED class for a field placement. I think if we integrated more opportunities into those classes, like, if it was required that you're in a placement with a special ed class or something like that at some point, that would be beneficial. I mean, we need those forced interactions, because you're going to have your people, who, I will admit to being in my undergrad, who would be like: ‘I don't want to teach SPED. I don't want to do it.’ And then one day, you have to. I have never had a year in the last four years that I have not had to teach students with disabilities. So I

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think that if we integrate more opportunities for them to get that experience earlier on, it's going to help them out." Ms. Alexander shares the practical value of having more experience with working with students with disabilities could better prepare preservice teachers for what they would likely experience in their classroom.

In addition, Ms. Diaz also mentioned that she believes having more hands-on experience working with students with disabilities would be beneficial: "I think generally, it is great just being in so many different classes and seeing how different teachers handle different situations. Everybody has their own teaching style and there were things that I saw in my field experience that I did and didn't want to bring into my classroom. So that was it was just a great learning experience, seeing things that I wanted to incorporate and things that I didn't want to incorporate. There were several times where I saw a teacher not handle a student with a disability in the correct way and made the situation escalate so that was very helpful to see. For me, the student actually had autism and I currently am now teaching a student with autism, so I think back to those experiences quite frequently because when I get frustrated or I'm just done I do think back to that a lot and remind myself like this is, you know, the student needs extra love and extra patience and you've seen what happened in the past when you don't see that extra love and expectations and things just get worse. So it's just been a great reminder for me, and I wish that I had more opportunities for experiencing things like this." Here, Ms. Diaz describes the usefulness of being in a variety of placements and having diverse experiences, and how those were valuable learning experiences for her on her journey to becoming a teacher of students with disabilities.

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Discussion

My goal in this study was to better understand the perspectives of newly qualified elementary educators and pinpoint specific experiences that contributed to their feelings of preparedness and unpreparedness to teach in inclusive settings. After reviewing the literature, I predicted that the teachers would have a general feeling of unpreparedness, and would attribute that to little coursework in special education and a lack of hands-on experience working with students with disabilities.

I was not surprised to find that the preservice teachers at Smalltown University responded similarly to the participants in Fuchs (2010) and Coates (2012); the participants in responded that generally, college did not prepare them well for teaching inclusion and that they attributed this to only being required to take only one course in special education, and a lack of hands-on experience, respectively. The participants in my study, particularly those who chose the single-certification track, responded similarly.

However, my participants' responses differed from Fuchs (2010) in their opinions on their support once beginning their careers. A barrier participants in Fuchs (2010) reported was a lack of support from administrators and lack of collaboration and planning time. In fact, three out of four participants in my study explicitly stated that they felt very supported by the administration at their schools, with Ms. Alexander recalling being given explicit covered planning time with her SPED Co-teacher in her first year, Ms, Cabello discussing receiving and relying on a mentor during a first-year induction program, and Ms. Diaz expressing gratitude for the SPED staff who supported her and answered her questions throughout her first year.

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Some other trends I noticed throughout the findings, which were not as prevalent in the literature reviewed were confusion about practical applications of course content and difficulties with behavior management. Across multiple themes and questions in my interviews, various teachers reported feelings of uncertainty and unpreparedness when it came to taking on other roles of a teacher than planning lessons and teaching, such as reading, writing, and implementing IEPs, attending to students with challenging behaviors, building parent-teacher relationships, and in general applying what they learned in their coursework to the classroom. I was surprised to not see a similar theme in the literature review, as this is something I, as a preservice teacher, expected the participants to say. It is clear that having diverse placements and opportunities for hands-on experiences applying what they learn in their courses is essential to preparing preservice teachers for their future careers, and this becomes even more important when inclusive settings are considered.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the small sample of teachers interviewed. With approximately 50 students graduating from the BSEd. Elementary Education program each fall semester, and double that graduating each spring, the opinions and experiences of four teachers cannot comprehensively represent the opinions and experiences of all of the graduates.

Additionally, those who participated shared many similarities. All four of the participants currently teach in the same local county (with three teaching at the same school), have taught for either 3 or 4 years, and teach either first or third grade students .

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Teachers working in other school districts or states, teaching other grade levels, or with more or less teaching experience than 3-4 years may not share the same opinions and experiences as those who participated in the study.

Recommendations for Future Study

Students with disabilities do not only exist in elementary schools. In fact, students with disabilities in middle and high school are likely at an even greater disadvantage because the emphasis on preparing teachers for inclusive settings is placed much more strongly on elementary settings. My hope for future study is this research can be continued with more elementary teachers, and extended to middle and high school settings as well; where providing differentiated inclusive instruction is just as important.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore other perspectives than just that of the teachers. School faculty and administration see the newly qualified teachers' strengths and areas for growth from a different point-of-view than the teachers themselves do, and could provide further insight into areas in which pre-service teachers may need more instruction and experience.

Conclusion

More than likely, every elementary school teacher will, at some point in their professional career, teach students with disabilities in an inclusive setting. With this in mind, it is imperative that the next generation of elementary school teachers receive the necessary training to provide their future students with an appropriate education that meets their diverse needs. There are many aspects which go into preparing teachers to

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teach in inclusive settings, such as meaningful coursework, hands-on experiences, and covering a variety of essential topics, and it is clear that change must be made in order to provide preservice teachers with the necessary experiences to continue to advance our education systems.

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Appendix A

Instrument (Sample Interview Questions)

1. How many years have you been teaching and what grade levels have you taught?
 - a. How many of those years have you taught at least one student with an IEP/504 plan? To clarify, IEPs, or individualized education plans, and 504 plans are types of plans developed for students with disabilities which provide them with specific accommodations or modifications and services to support them in the educational setting.
 - b. In which settings have you taught students with IEPs/504 plans (independently in a general education class, with a paraprofessional, with a partial-day co-teacher, with a full-day co-teacher?)
 - a. What is the (approximate) average number of students with IEP/504 plans in your class? Have you had gifted students in those same classes as well?
2. For the purposes of this study, inclusive settings are those in which students with and without disabilities are served together in one classroom. How were you/are you being prepared to teach in inclusive settings?
 - a. What kind of support have you received from your school or district to prepare you for teaching in an inclusive setting?
 - b. In what ways have you prepared on your own?
 - c. In what ways were you prepared by your degree program?
3. Think back to when you were first hired as a teacher. Were you aware that you would be teaching in an inclusive setting? In college, did you ever think you would be teaching inclusive settings?
 - a. When you first found out, how did you feel? Was this something you felt prepared to do?
 - b. What experiences did you have in your degree program that you feel prepared you best for this? What aspects do you feel like your degree program fell short on?

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4. Tell me about a time you felt unprepared in working with a student who was challenging.
5. After teaching inclusion for some time now, have your perceptions changed? If so, what are some experiences that affected your confidence in your ability to teach inclusive settings?
6. Do you have any suggestions for improving the B.S. Elementary Education program so that future teachers are better prepared to teach in inclusive settings?