Teaching students with learning disabilities: Perceptions of a First-Year Teacher

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the perceptions of one first-year teacher of students with LD, focusing on the factors that contributed to her successes and failures and on the tactics that enabled her to survive her first year. Why is it important to identify the perceptions of first-year teachers? First, understanding their perceptions may be important in the retention of those teachers. The attrition rates of teachers in special education are alarmingly high. One factor that has been shown to reduce attrition rates for beginning teachers is a positive initial teaching experience. If we can identify the factors that affect the perceptions of first-year teachers, perhaps we can design strategies to ensure positive initial teaching experiences and thereby improve the health, efficacy, and employment longevity of our most valuable beginning teachers.

Key words: special education, perceptions, support system, paperwork requirements, teacher preparation.

Introduction

First-year teachers of students with learning disabilities (LD) are faced with multiple challenges. Although their primary responsibility is the education of students with academic delays, other elements frequently play a role in determining whether they view their vocational efforts as successful or unsuccessful. Service-delivery issues, student characteristics, school climate, support systems, teacher preparation, paperwork requirements, administrative support, role ambiguity, and student behavioral difficulties may all affect the perceptions and consequent efficacy of teachers during their first years of employment. A second reason for identifying the perceptions of first-year teachers is to communicate to other beginners that they are not alone. Lack of collegiality and feelings of isolation negatively affect the perceptions and increase the stress levels of first-year teachers, potentially contributing to decreased motivation, emotional exhaustion, higher rates of absenteeism, and increased attrition rates. By relating the stories of first-year teachers we can convey to other beginners that they are not alone in their experiences, that is, that others have faced similar challenges and have overcome them to become successful teachers.

A third reason for identifying the perceptions of first-year teachers is to gather information that can be used by university trainers, administrators, and other educators as they prepare teachers for careers in education. Trained teachers with better test scores and multiple certifications have been found to leave teaching sooner than those with lower test scores and fewer certifications. Teacher preparation programs and school districts are in a unique position to provide beginning teachers with needed support and mentoring during their early years, and to assist beginning teachers in developing realistic expectations, effective coping strategies, and an increased understanding of the role and demands of their profession. Learning more about the perceptions of first-year teachers may help university preparation programs and school districts to retain the "brightest and the best."
In summary, there are multiple reasons to collect information from those who are "out in the trenches"—those first-year front-line workers engaged in the practice of teaching students with learning disabilities. In this paper, we investigate what a beginning teacher of students with learning disabilities thinks about her first year in special education. Our goals are to communicate to other beginning teachers that they are not alone in their fears and frustrations and to identify information that university personnel, administrators, and teachers can use to ensure the success of the first-year novices in our profession. We begin with a description of the teacher's school and the special education program in which the teacher worked. We next describe the challenges the teacher faced, the solutions she employed to deal with those challenges, and the successes she experienced. We query the teacher as to her views on assessment and accountability in general and special education, and on inclusion of students in general education. Finally, we ask the teacher to reflect on how well-prepared she felt for her first year of teaching, and to make recommendations for other beginning teachers.

Perceptions of our first-year teacher

School and Staff. Our first-year teacher was hired as a specific learning disabilities teacher at a K through 6 elementary school in a large metropolitan area. There were 550 students in the school: approximately 65% White, 30% African American, and 5% other minority groups. The school's attendance area encompassed many low-income housing areas. The school faculty was composed of 25 teachers (21 general educators, 3 special educators, and one teacher of English as a Second Language [ESL]), one principal, and one half-time administrative assistant. The school also employed a part-time school psychologist, a full-time speech therapist, and a parent/school liaison whose job it was to facilitate communication between the parents and the school.

Students. Our teacher worked with students in the second and sixth grades (4 and 11 students, respectively). The mean age for the second-grade students was approximately 8 and for the sixth-grade students approximately 12. Seven students on our teacher's caseload were African American, seven were White, and one had recently immigrated to the United States from another country. Students in the sixth grade had diagnoses of developmental delays, LD, and emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD). Students in the second grade had diagnoses of LD, EBD, dyslexia, and oppositional defiant disorder. One of the second-grade students was not officially labeled but had been placed in our teacher's classroom because of combined learning and language difficulties. All students were functioning 2 to 3 years behind same-aged peers.

Program. The primary service delivery model for special education services at our teacher's school was a pullout model. Our first-year teacher taught five pullout groups per day, each consisting of two to six students. A sample daily schedule for the teacher is presented in Table 1. Groups were formed on the basis of students' academic needs and grade levels and focused on language arts or mathematics. The meeting time of each group was dictated by the general education classroom schedule. In many cases, the content of instruction in the pullout groups differed from that in the general education classroom. No co-teaching took place at our interviewee's school, although our teacher reported that she would have liked to have had the opportunity to co-teach.

School climate

Our first-year teacher considered the school climate to be supportive for both students and staff. The general education teachers, special education teachers, and educational assistants communicated on a daily basis. In addition, special and general education teachers tried to be flexible and accommodating for one another. For example, if the special education assistant was
providing support for students in a general education classroom, he or she also might help non-special education students in that classroom who were having difficulties. Similarly, children who were not in special education but who had significant difficulties in reading or mathematics might be included in special education pullout groups. Our teacher reported that the supportiveness and collegiality between the general and special education departments allowed for joint problem solving. Consequently, resolving students' academic and behavioral problems was viewed as the shared responsibility of both general and special educators. Our first-year teacher felt well supported by the school administration and by the other teachers in the school. Because the school did not have a formal mentoring program, our interviewee sought out her own mentor. Our teacher states that she chose her mentor because she and her mentor "had similar personalities and teaching styles." Our beginning teacher found her mentor to be a great source of support, not only in teaching but also in adjusting socially to the school. The other experienced teachers in the school were also supportive, providing consistent help in locating resources and materials and giving sound advice on managing students' behaviors. In addition, they introduced new teaching techniques and interventions to our teacher.

Finally, our teacher would have liked to have learned multiple formative assessment techniques. Although she felt comfortable with the use of formative assessment techniques such as CBM, she would have liked to have learned additional techniques such as the use of informal reading inventories.

**Managing the Multi-level Classroom**

Planning for the multilevel class must also include strategies for managing the group, pair, and individual activities. The teacher may work with one small group at a time while the other learners or groups of learners are engaged in independent work. Some teachers manage the various groupings by enlisting a volunteer to work with one group while the teacher works with others. Learners can also act as peer tutors or peer group leaders. Again as was true with grouping and pairing strategies in choosing peer group tutors and leaders, teacher sensitivity to learner expectations, to learning styles, and to personal and cultural issues is paramount.

**CONCLUSION**

To conclude, although many factors contributed to the success and satisfaction of our first-year teacher, probably the most important was the teacher herself. Our first-year teacher was an energetic, enthusiastic, talented, positive person who worked hard and was dedicated to educating her students. Our interview illustrates the importance of recruiting such energetic and talented students into our teacher-training programs. We have described the factors that led to the successes and failures of one beginning teacher and the factors that enabled her to "stick it out" during her first year. We hope we have communicated to other beginning teachers that they are not alone in their first-year fears and frustrations. In addition, we hope that this story of one first-year teacher can help university personnel, administrators, and other teachers reflect upon the influence of their decisions and to identify information that can be used to ensure the success of the beginning teachers with whom they work.

**References:**