

# Induction Insights



## Supporting Special Education Teachers–Teacher Educators [TEII-1]

### First Year Challenges

#### Using the Concerns of Novice Special Education Teachers to Inform Preservice Practices

##### *Briefly...*

*Understanding the challenges that novice special education teachers encounter provides important information for teacher educators as they consider preservice preparation, continuing professional development activities, and leadership training for principals. Find out about these new teachers' top areas of concern.*

The learning curve is high for novice special education teachers. They must assume full teaching responsibilities while at the same time becoming familiar with district and school policies, curriculum, and assessment policies and procedures. They are expected to build relationships with administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, families, and other service providers. For the most part, novice special education teachers have the same responsibilities as their more experienced counterparts, even though they may lack the knowledge and skills of their more experienced peers.

Novice special education teachers face many challenges. An understanding of these new teachers' unique concerns can help teacher educators plan preservice and ongoing professional development activities for them. This Brief looks at novice special education teachers' concerns in the following areas:

- Inclusion, collaboration, and interactions with adults.
- Instructional support.
- Managing roles.

#### **Inclusion, Collaboration, and Interactions with Adults**

Learning to interact with other adults in a positive and productive manner is an important dimension of learn-

ing to teach. Novice special education teachers rely on others for support as they navigate the school culture, learn policies and procedures, and work to solve problems.

Although interactions with adults can be helpful, they also can be challenging. Novice special education teachers are more likely to stay in teaching when they feel supported and part of the school community. Problematic interactions and communication may lead to perceptions of poor school climate, a factor associated with special education teacher turnover.

Novice special education teachers typically find significant challenges in the following areas:

- Inclusion and collaboration with general education teachers.
- Interactions with adults, including administrators, paraprofessionals, and family members.

#### **Concerns: Inclusion and Collaboration with General Education Teachers**

Novice special education teachers generally work with general education teachers to ensure that students with disabilities have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum. Becoming a part of the school community and negotiating inclusion of students with disabilities in general

education classes is one of the most daunting challenges that new special education teachers face.

Collaboration can be particularly challenging when the school lacks strategies and structures necessary to support the inclusion of students with disabilities. Novice special education teachers may feel unwelcome when general education teachers resist their efforts to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms. They may experience stress when they perceive that students with disabilities are not faring well in general education classrooms.

Novice special education teachers need adequate preparation in building collaborative relationships. They also require knowledge and skills related to including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. A strong emphasis on preparing teachers for inclusion and collaboration in preservice programs can help reduce obstacles to building positive relationships.

**Concern: Interactions with Adults**

In addition to collaborating with general education teachers, novice special education teachers are expected to build relationships with administrators, paraprofessionals, and family members. In some cases, establishing working relationships can pose challenges. In each of the following examples, novice special education teachers have indicated a need for more preparation—knowledge and skills—in addressing concerns.

- **Interactions with administrators.** Administrative support is one of the most significant factors in reducing stress for novice special education teachers. Special education teachers with strong administrative support report greater job satisfaction, higher levels of commitment, more professional development opportunities, greater colleague support, fewer role problems, and lower levels of stress and burnout than do their less supported peers. Typically, novice special education teachers are reluctant to seek

help from administrators; yet, they should be encouraged to do so.

- **Interactions with paraprofessionals.** Paraprofessionals are an important source of support for novice special education teachers. However, many new teachers find it challenging to work with paraprofessionals. Novice special education teachers often report inadequate preparation for supervising, managing, and coordinating paraprofessionals. Specific challenges include learning how to set expectations, determining a structure and schedule for paraprofessionals, dealing with paraprofessionals who interact inappropriately with students, and finding time to work with paraprofessionals. In some cases, tensions may arise when novice special education teachers must supervise paraprofessionals who are older and more familiar with the school and students than they are.
- **Interactions with parents.** Interacting with parents can be challenging for novice special education teachers. New teachers may encounter additional problems such as addressing low parent involvement, being uncomfortable conducting different types of meetings (e.g., Individualized Education Program meetings, referral meetings), and determining an appropriate amount of interaction. Novice teachers may benefit from help with planning and conducting parent-family conferences.

**Instructional Support**

Novice special education teachers struggle with many of the same pedagogical challenges as their general education counterparts. They often need help learning the curriculum, acquiring and adapting necessary materials, and addressing challenging student behavior.

A complicating factor is that novice special education teachers typically have curricular responsibilities that span multiple content areas and grade levels. Some novice special education teachers report minimal preparation in the content areas, leaving them to spend much of their time learning content rather than thinking about how to design appropri-

○○ *Sightings*

Other factors also may make it difficult for novice special education teachers to collaborate and monitor their students' progress in general education. Examples include:

- **Physical location of teachers.** Classrooms that are separate from general education teachers reduce special education teachers' opportunities to interact with them.
- **Heavy caseloads.** Collaboration can be hampered when special education teachers have many different students who are assigned to many different general education teachers.
- **Ineffective communication channels.** Collaboration is limited when teachers have inadequate time and few shared professional development opportunities.

Preservice teachers may benefit from talking with veteran teachers about how to manage these and other issues.



ate teaching strategies and routines to meet individual student needs.

Novice special education teachers typically find the following instructional areas to pose significant challenges:

- Curriculum, teaching, and assessment.
- Availability of adequate materials.
- Student behavior.

**Concerns: Curriculum, Teaching, and Assessment**

Novice special education teachers struggle to carry out their major responsibilities. They must learn content, prepare lessons, and create materials across multiple grade levels while monitoring student performance and coordinating

their efforts with general education teachers. They often feel inadequately prepared to meet the complex needs of students across a range of curriculum areas, including academics, social skills, assessment, learning strategies, transition, and technology. In addition, novice special education teachers may have difficulty using alternative instructional delivery formats such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning.

The lack of knowledge about specific content areas is particularly challenging when novice special education teachers have responsibility for multiple subjects. In these situations, new teachers are essentially learning the content as they teach it. This can interfere with their ability to deliver a standards-based curriculum in which curriculum, Individualized Education Program goals, and instruction are matched with grade expectations and student abilities.

Novice special education teachers find teaching reading to be particularly challenging, especially for students with complex reading problems. They also may have difficulty diagnosing reading problems, assessing student reading level, and learning the reading content taught in specific grades.

### ◎◎ Sightings

Novice special education teachers perceive observation and feedback as important. Formal classroom observations tend to be perceived more positively by these teachers when they are not generic, but rather are specific enough to help them address instructional and behavioral issues related to students with disabilities.



### Concerns: Availability of Adequate Materials

Novice special education teachers often report having insufficient and/or inadequate teaching materials. Variations of this problem include:

- Outdated materials and technology.
- Inadequate numbers of books.
- No teacher manuals.
- Few consumables.
- Insufficient alternative materials to address the range of their students' instructional levels.

Novice special education teachers also may need training in how to use assistive technology and other devices that are available.

Novice special education teachers without background knowledge in content areas and who are lacking materials often have additional challenges. These new teachers may be left on their own to develop instructional materials based on what is available to them. This can result in stress and can cut into time that is needed for other responsibilities. It also can be time consuming when novice teachers secure materials on their own (e.g., searching for materials on the Internet, asking university faculty for suggestions, requesting materials from publishers).

### Concerns: Student Behavior

Novice special education and general education teachers all typically struggle with addressing challenging student behavior. They have difficulty controlling student behavior that interferes with teaching.

However, novice special education teachers often are faced with more severe problems that may require individualized behavioral plans. For example, they describe difficulty trying to teach while dealing with student behaviors such as refusing to work, challenging their authority, and becoming verbally and/or physically aggressive. Novice special education teachers need preparation for dealing with these kinds of complex and

troubling behaviors. They can benefit from mastering strategies for dealing with challenging behavior (e.g., how to avoid power struggles, responding to behavioral triggers) as well as classroom management strategies that provide positive behavioral support (e.g., promoting a supportive learning community, giving students ownership and choice in the learning process).

*Novice special education teachers expect to spend the majority of their time teaching and express frustration when their instructional pursuits are reduced because of bureaucratic tasks such as meetings and paperwork.*

### Managing Roles

The range and volume of responsibilities can seem insurmountable to novice special education teachers. In fact, many do not see their workloads as manageable. Challenging work conditions—such as an uncertainty about their roles and responsibilities, time pressures, scheduling difficulties, paperwork and routine requirements—can contribute to their decision to leave teaching.

Novice special education teachers typically find the following areas to pose significant challenges:

- Time and scheduling.
- Caseloads.
- Legal requirements, paperwork, and meetings.
- Role confusion and ambiguity.

Although these concerns are typically characteristic of how schools are organized, novice special education teachers can benefit from an understanding of these realities. They also can be encouraged to seek help from administrators and colleagues once on the job.

## Concerns: Time and Scheduling

Not having adequate time to teach and address the varied needs of students is a pressing concern for novice special education teachers. The task of scheduling, organizing, and managing an environment of adults, along with students with disabilities, across multiple grades and subjects can be overwhelming. The situation can become even more challenging when students change classrooms many times throughout the day or when teachers are assigned to two or more schools.

Having insufficient time during the day to complete paperwork—such as writing Individualized Education Programs, referrals, evaluations, etc.—along with planning for instruction also can be a major concern. They find that they must complete substantial amounts of work

outside of school, during nonschool hours.

Novice special education teachers can benefit from time management skills. This includes learning how to develop schedules and organize responsibilities.

## Concerns: Caseloads

Heavy caseloads can make it hard for novice special education teachers to attend to the individual needs of their students. This can be particularly challenging if teachers are expected to provide services to students across many classrooms. Caseloads in which students have multiple academic and behavioral needs and require different levels of support also can create challenges for effective instruction, curriculum planning, and behavior management.

## Concerns: Legal Requirements, Paperwork, and Meetings

Novice special education teachers can find it difficult to function effectively in the face of excessive and competing responsibilities. Legal requirements and paperwork—such as writing Individualized Education Programs and completing referral, placement, and evaluation documents—can be challenging. The volume of work and the logistics of completing it also can present challenges, particularly when tasks involve notifying parents, scheduling meetings, inviting appropriate people to meetings, creating meeting agendas, and completing forms.

## Concerns: Role Confusion and Ambiguity

Novice special education teachers often express confusion about their roles and what is expected of them. For example, they may be unclear about their roles and responsibilities relating to students, especially when working collaboratively with general education teachers. General education teachers also may be unsure about their role with students with disabilities, which can exacerbate role confusion as teachers collaborate. Role overload, ambiguity, and conflict are associated with job dissatisfaction, turnover, and weakened commitment to the teaching profession.

**Learn More.** This Brief summarizes select findings from a comprehensive review of the literature:

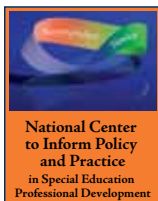
Billingsley, B. S., Griffin, C. C., Smith, S. J., Kamman, M., & Israel, M. (2009). *A review of teacher induction in special education: Research, practice, and technology solutions* (NCIPP Doc. No. RS-1). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP).

It is available on the NCIPP website at [www.ncipp.org](http://www.ncipp.org).

## ◎◎ Consider This...

Teacher educators can better support novice special education teachers by understanding the principal's role in induction. There are many things that principals can do to help novice special education teachers overcome challenges. NCIPP has prepared briefs for administrators that include practical strategies. These are available on the NCIPP website ([www.ncipp.org](http://www.ncipp.org)):

- *The Challenges of Inclusion and Collaboration: Understanding the Needs of Novice Special Education Teachers.*
- *The Challenge of Managing Roles: Understanding the Needs of Novice Special Education Teachers.*
- *Instructional Challenges: Understanding the Needs of Novice Special Education Teachers.*



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