The Role of Collaboration in Supporting The Induction and Retention of New Special Education Teachers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by
Marleen C. Pugach
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Linda P. Blanton
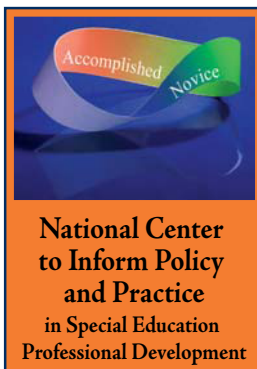Florida International University
Vivian I. Correa
Clemson University
James McLeskey & Lisa K. Langley
University of Florida

September 2009

National Center to Inform Policy and Practice
in Special Education Professional Development

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

National Center to Inform Policy and Practice
in Special Education Professional Development
1403 Norman Hall
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
PO Box 117050
Gainesville, FL 32611
Phone: 352-273-4259   http://www.ncipp.org

INTRODUCTION

Given the high attrition rates and difficult working conditions of special education teachers [SETs], how to retain them in the teaching force poses a great challenge. Retaining a stable special education teaching force is critical to the quality of student learning, especially in light of the unyielding achievement gap between students who have disabilities and their peers. Furthermore, a large proportion of SETs work directly with general education teachers [GETs] to create inclusive learning environments, so the retention of SETs is a concern for both general and special education. The purpose of this literature review is to explore the role of professional collaboration within the school context as a means of improving the quality and retention of beginning SETs. The assumption underlying the review is that the local school context in which new SETs work should also function as the primary source of induction support for GETs and SETs alike. The audience for this review—both general and special educators, school building administrators, and central services staff —will be interested in the findings from general education with direct applicability to building capacity for the induction of SETs at the school site through collaboration as well as literature that addresses SETs more directly. The paper includes charts of empirical studies and recommendations for practice and research.

Collaboration among teaching professionals across general and special education appears to have potential for playing a positive role in inducting and retaining beginning SETs within a supportive, vibrant professional school culture. In the face of a growing literature that is starting to reflect the importance of the local school community for the retention of new teachers generally, what is less well understood is how such collaborative communities function and what kinds of intersections between special and general education might best serve to promote the retention of new SETs. This leads to the first question that guides our analysis:

Guiding Question 1: If the school is viewed as the major context within which induction takes place, what aspects of the school as a community need to be taken into consideration when building strong induction policies and practices for SETs?

Induction for novice special educators can be viewed as a process of dual socialization in which SETs are learning to be professionals both within their individual schools and also as members of the larger special education community, often defined by district practices. This dynamic makes induction a more complex undertaking in relation to meeting the needs of SETs and raises several important questions about how SETs view their primary professional identities and how they navigate belonging to both a school and special education professional culture. This situation can pose a challenge for district- and school-level administrators alike, who will need to respond to this duality by creating induction programs for SETs that acknowledge the dual nature of their professional lives as well as minimize their separation and segregation from other teachers. Thus, this is the second question guiding our analysis:

Guiding Question 2: What is the relationship between capacity building for induction at the school level through a variety of collaborative practices that treat SETs as fully participating members of the school's learning community and any discipline-specific support related to the unique role and needs of special educators, and how might general and special educators' efforts in this regard intersect to create effective connections and an appropriate balance between the two?

Major issues: Related to the guiding questions, the paper draws on the literature from both general and special education to address four major issues:

- How are novice SETs situated within the concept and practice of schools as professional learning communities [PLCs]?
- What roles do building principals play in creating school communities that support the induction of SETs?

- What professional development practices might best serve as vehicles for improving the quality of new SETs' practice?
- What is the role of co-teaching or teacher teaming as a collaborative enterprise for the induction of SETs?

METHODS

We searched databases for journals as well as some book chapters and empirical reports in both general and special education. Papers, reports, and chapters were not included (a) if the source did not clarify the methodology used or (b) if the resource was practitioner-oriented, providing details of promising practices rather than empirical research. Roughly 75 sources were identified, including primarily empirical studies and literature reviews from 1988-2009 across the four major topics of the review.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

This review examines the existing research to uncover the extent to which SETs, especially novices, have participated in PLCs, broadly defined as professionals in a school, typically groups of teachers who work collaboratively to improve practice and enhance student learning. Common characteristics of successful PLCs include supportive leadership, collective learning and applications, shared vision, supportive environment, focus on improvement, and shared practice.

Research on PLCs in General and Special Education

Research has largely been qualitative except for some studies using quantitative teacher surveys. All school levels (elementary, middle, and secondary) and schools in urban and suburban settings have been investigated. Three topics predominate: (a) how PLCs emerge and sustain; (b) the impact of PLCs on teaching practice and student learning; and (c) the variables that influence PLCs, such as bounded communities, conflict, and contrived congeniality. Research directly connecting PLCs and special education is practically nonexistent with no reference to novice SETs. The research on PLCs focused on general education and included only one study explicitly including SETs. Research identified four dimensions that distinguish a *community of teachers* from a *group of teachers* and offered several theoretical models showing PLC development from early stages to maturity. PLC studies discussed improvements in teachers' classroom practices and the professional culture of the school when teachers participated in PLCs. Many provided evidence that student achievement was improved as a result of teachers' involvement in PLCs. With various levels of empirical support, among changes found were more (a) collaboration, (b) focus on student learning, (c) teacher authority, (d) continuous teacher learning, (e) collegial conversations and discussions of student work, and (f) improvements in student achievement.

Several issues surfaced as critical to understanding the complexities of teacher communities, for example, how school organization and how inevitable workplace conflicts impact PLCs. The influences of workplace structures, e.g., departments, were linked to teacher collegiality, exclusivity within the larger school community, and support for teacher learning. Bounded communities isolated from the school by in-group language and exclusivity may create challenges for other teachers. Conflict, viewed by most teachers as something to avoid, often centered on different philosophical orientations (e.g., fairness to students, classroom practices, or attitudes toward students with disabilities in general classrooms). Whether teachers' working arrangements were administratively mandated or emerged from the teachers themselves created different types of congeniality.

Research on PLCs for Special Education

Successful PLCs may;

- serve as vehicles to integrate isolated SETs into the community of GETs in a school, e.g., provide a safe environment for debating and issues

- improve student outcomes for students with disabilities through greater focus on the performance of all students
- enhance the classroom practices of SETs and GETs
- recognize the inevitability of conflict and develop strategies for conflict management and problem solving.

Limiting the application of current studies to special education are these missing elements: (a) data on whether SETs are members of PLCs; (b) concepts of community that address individual components (e.g., resources, parents, students); and (c) discussions of how the PLC interacts with other communities (e.g., school district, school board, local community, state department). Further research should focus specifically on beginning SETs related to their involvement in school PLCs, including the impact of PLCs on: teaching practices, student achievement outcomes, novices vs. veterans, conflict management, as well as relationships and comparisons with GETs,

ROLE OF PRINCIPALS

In support of new SETs and GETs, principals can create school cultures that are collaborative and provide positive working conditions; serve as instructional leaders by promoting ongoing evaluation and professional development; ensure that mentor-mentee relationships are of high quality and supported with time for planning and collaboration; monitor and support the ongoing appraisal of new teachers; and recruit and hire new teachers. Principals exert a powerful influence on a beginning teacher's decision to remain at a school site. The paper reviews key empirical studies that address the administrator's role in the induction of novice teachers. The findings from studies of both GETs and SETS are similar in confirming the principal's critical role in providing supports for beginning teachers by promoting a positive school culture, serving as an instructional leader, and supporting induction and mentoring activities.

The Role of Principals in General Education Induction

This section of the paper highlights several common features found across research studies on the role of principals in the induction of beginning GETs on this topic. The profound effect of **school culture** on the experiences of beginning teachers has been the subject of several studies that consistently find that school culture and principal leadership are related to their intent to remain at the school site. Supportive principals can make a PLC successful. The more positively teachers felt about the principal and the school culture, the more likely they were to stay in their current teaching jobs. The principal's leadership style is the dominant way in which school culture is promoted and provides important insights into the culture of a school and its impact on beginning teachers' experiences. Several leadership roles have been highlighted in the literature, including that of **instructional leader**. Principals can support beginning teachers by arranging for appropriate mentors, enabling further professional development, and providing reasonable schedules for novice SETs. The paper presents teacher surveys in which numerous supportive roles of principals are established. Of the various supports provided to teachers by principals, two were especially valued: assignment of a mentor and provision of an orientation program. The specific roles principals play in **induction** has also been a focus of several studies. Effective induction includes multiple components, such as well-matched mentoring, released time to work together, financial incentives for mentors, opportunities for collaboration and planning, teacher networking, administrative support, and professional development Principals can affect the quality of induction across all of these components, starting with their own initial interactions with potential teachers at the time of recruitment.

The Role of Principals in Special Education Induction

Like GETs, one of the main reasons SETs state they are leaving the profession is lack of support and cooperation from administrative personnel. The principal who understands the stresses faced by beginning SETs and fosters a school culture that supports all teachers can help prevent the negative cycle new SETs often experience. The influence

school leaders exert on **school culture**, well established in the GET research, is also a factor with SETs. Orientation to the school and assistance with the mechanics of the job were rated the most effective areas of their mentoring programs. Sometimes principals had to hire beginning SETs to teach students with disabilities that they were not certified or prepared to teach, putting them at risk for stress, job dissatisfaction, and possible withdrawal from teaching. The principal's role as **instructional leader** for beginning SETs can be especially challenging. In one study over 50% of building principals held sole responsibility for supervising and evaluating SETs generally, while 40% of principals shared this responsibility with assistant principals, special education directors, or a combination of district-level supervisors. The principal's role in facilitating and assisting with **induction** and mentoring for beginning teachers can differ substantially when working with a new SET. Mentoring of new special educators may be provided by an off-site, district-level supervisor, an arrangement that may not provide SETs with necessary information on how to access day-to-day support for instruction and classroom management within their school setting. New SETs might have participated in mentoring programs for all the new teachers in their school but did not receive programs that were tailored to their specific needs as special educators. Not surprisingly, SETs did not find formal mentoring programs helpful; and they did find informal support from colleagues helpful. They reported turning to other teachers more than to principals to help them with instructional feedback.

Research on Principals and the Induction of SETs

Induction and mentoring programs offer opportunities for school leaders to reevaluate their school culture and organizational structures to accommodate the important work of supporting new teachers. Situating induction and mentoring programs within collaborative school cultures appears to be critical. Specific strategies for building those cultures are beginning to be identified. The paper reviews many studies, but except for three, most were based on small to moderate samples and may not be generalizable to larger populations. Generally, the research involved surveys and case studies, did not reflect rigorous designs (e.g., no random sampling, low response rates, self-report, and some untested survey instruments). Topics for future research could include: (a) how beginning SETs are supervised and directed across school contexts; (b) specific leadership roles and practices of principals who most effectively promote beginning teacher retention; (c) how principals foster PLCs and establish school climate and culture that is conducive to building learning communities of new SETs and GETs; (d) ways to intervene and assist district leaders, special education coordinators, principals, and mentors in the induction process; (e) evaluation of the implementation of induction and mentoring programs; and (f) the impact of school-university partnerships on induction of beginning teachers.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COLLABORATION

This section of the paper focuses on professional development to provide teachers with new skills and strategies for classroom practice. Improving teacher practice has been shown to increase the retention of beginning SETs and improve student outcomes.

Overview of Professional Development Research

Most research on professional development has been conducted with GETs. Only in recent years have a few studies of professional development begun to appear in the special education literature, primarily on increasing the use of certain evidence-based practices in classrooms. While more limited than the research in general education, our findings for special education were similar. **Expert-centered professional development [ECPD]**, requiring teachers to "sit and get" information from an expert and apply this information in their classrooms with little or no support, is largely ineffective in changing teacher practice for both GETs and SETs. **Learner-centered professional development [LCPD]** has shown great promise for improving teacher practice. This research, which until recently had targeted almost entirely GETs, has resulted in a consensus on a general

approach to professional development that fosters instructional innovations. This paper explores LCPD research in detail.

Research on LCPD in Special Education

The use of innovative practices in the classroom has become a topic of interest because of the dearth of documented, research-based practices in special education. The majority of professional development activities in special education involve passive ECPD formats with little follow-up as teachers implement these new practices. Several **comparison studies** in special education have evaluated the traditional ECPD with new forms of professional development that include knowledge, demonstration, practice, and coaching, with results generally favoring the new techniques. In LCPDs **case studies** have been used extensively as a SET learns a new strategy and then teaches it in the classroom. LCPDs for SETS, as for GETs, are associated with substantially greater subsequent use of innovative practices. Follow-ups years later have shown widely different results, often with significant percentages of LCPD teachers (50-100%) compared to ECPD teachers (5%-10%) still using the new strategy. Peer coaching during training increases the likelihood that teachers will continue the innovative practice.

Several key directions for future research on LCPD and how this intensive approach to professional development is delivered are suggested in the questions below:

- How can LCPD be delivered to large numbers of teachers in a cost-effective manner?
- Why do expert-centered methods of professional development continue to be widely used to change and improve classroom practice?
- What issues influence the extent to which LCPD results in the increased use of innovative practices in the classroom?
- What factors influence the frequency, sustainability, and appropriateness of practices used in the classroom?
- Can teacher-led professional inquiry be used as a form of LCPD to improve outcomes for students with disabilities?
- Are there unique issues faced by beginning teachers when providing LCPD that is intended to facilitate the use of innovative practices in the classroom?

ROLE OF CO-TEACHING AND TEAMING IN INDUCTION

The relationship of induction to co-teaching and teaming—which have the potential to influence how new teachers experience their initial work in schools—merits exploration. Co-teaching emerged two decades ago in relation to building the capacity for inclusive education. Team teaching (primarily in middle schools) predates both co-teaching and induction. Recently team teaching has re-emerged related to the inclusion of students with disabilities. For our purposes, *co-teaching* is defined as shared responsibility for teaching within the same classroom by a GET and a SET, and *team teaching* is defined as a group of teachers sharing responsibility for a group of students, usually but not limited to an interdisciplinary team. Co-teaching, which brings together SETs and GETs regularly, contributes to the professional development of novice GETs as well. This paper describes the research on what co-teaching and teaming can contribute to support for new SETs. The review found a research base in special education on co-teaching and on teaming to support inclusion. Most research on teaming at the middle school level comes from general education. No studies, either within special or general education, address induction except peripherally.

Research on Co-Teaching and Team Teaching

Since its initial appearance in the late 1980s as a strategy for supporting inclusion, co-teaching has been a dependable, yet not ubiquitous, feature of special education practice, coexisting with more traditional approaches to special education, including resource rooms and self-contained classrooms. Efforts to include students who have disabilities in

general education have increased and become institutionalized under IDEA; and under NCLB, co-teaching has grown steadily. It has continued to provide a means for SETs and GETs to work collaboratively and support one another in their common goal: providing a high-quality education to all of their students in the common setting of a general education classroom, primarily but not exclusively, in relationship to students in categories of high-incidence disabilities. Four major reviews of the literature on co-teaching and collaboration between SETs and GETs, which were completed from 1999-2007, as well as a number of other co-teaching studies are discussed extensively in our paper. Briefly, some general findings across these studies were: teachers' attitudes toward teaming (generally positive); volunteer status (teams who volunteered were most compatible); SET's role (often subordinate to GET in instruction if SET lacked content knowledge); adequate co-planning time (rarely enough); retention (some positive effect); mentorship role (more experienced teacher assumed); and self-containment (SETs felt marginalized from GETs.

Co-teaching research has typically ignored relationships among co-teaching, team teaching, and school-wide collaboration. The paper explores studies that take this larger view with implications for the role of school context for novice SETs. Categories of research detailed in this section include a three-study series funded by U.S. Department of Education that include co-teaching, an illustrative range of collaborative strategies to implement inclusive education, structured collaborative teaming, and middle school teaming.

Research on Co-teaching and Teaming for Beginning Special Education Teachers

This research suggests that co-teaching and teaming continue to be viewed as beneficial by most participants for personal and professional support. SETs are more likely to view these colleagues as sources of support and as equals sharing. They appreciate the opportunity to learn the general education curriculum, which may widen their base of support and contribute to their socialization as members of the school as well as members of the professional special education community. However, in co-teaching contexts, most SETs are in the background, serving as assistants rather than fully engaged in instruction. In general, one of the biggest limitations of this body of literature is that it is not extensive. Although there are hundreds of publications about co-teaching, the percentage of empirical studies is quite small, particularly in studies of student learning. Research analyses do not cover issues related to induction and retention or disaggregate data on years of experience so that novice or veteran status can be identified. Future research topics related to novice SET induction in co-teaching or team teaching settings are:

- comparisons of the experiences of novice SETs who volunteer and those who are assigned to co-teaching or team teaching settings
- comparisons of the experiences of novice special education co-teachers and team teachers in stronger and weaker collaborative school cultures
- studies of novice SETs' primary professional identities when all novices are either co-teaching or team teaching
- studies of the various sources of support valued by novice teachers who are co-teaching or team teaching
- studies of how novices who are co-teaching or team teaching implement curricular and instructional innovations
- comparisons of student learning in co-teaching and team teaching settings that have either novice or veteran SETs
- descriptions and comparisons of the early career experiences of novice SETs who co-teach compared with those who team teach.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this review has been to identify issues raised in the literature related to collaboration—specifically, ideas that can contribute to our thinking about how better

support can be provided to novice SETs at the level of the school community itself. The purpose of support at the induction stage is to increase both retention and quality of teaching for this important group of professionals. The paper develops at length three major themes directly related to how the school context itself can serve a strong induction function:

- establishing schools as non-balkanized, integrated workplaces
- supporting the quality of novice special educators' practice
- learning how school leaders can build teacher communities to include novice special educators.

Each theme is driven by a core action that serves as the foundation for thinking about how schools can better support novice special educators.