Enhancing quality: Listening to participant voices to improve our Master's program in special education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Describe continual improvement model for a Master's program in special education.
- Relay results to date of the model based on participant feedback.
- Underscore value of collaboration with classmates to preparing for the field.
- Highlight importance of faculty modeling and encouraging collaboration.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Newly inducted special education teachers must be well-prepared to address changes in today's schools, including increased student diversity, implementation of tiered systems of support, and the need for increased collaboration with general education teachers and specialists. The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop and implement a data-based continual improvement approach to identify the strengths of our special education Master's program and address changes needed to ensure that graduates are ready to engage with the demands of their chosen profession. Using data gathered from 24 recent graduates and 20 field mentors, we describe our model and what we have done with our results over two years. An important finding is that our students greatly value the relationships they form during the program and the relationships the faculty model, and participants attribute our graduates' skills in collaboration to our program's modeling of collaborative processes and positive relationships. Implications for effective approaches to continuous improvement of special education teacher preparation programs are discussed.

Preparing high quality teachers is one of the most important challenges facing our education system (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Billingsley, 2004; Brownell, Billingsley, McLeskey, & Sindelar, 2012; Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley, & Seo, 2002). Teacher quality is the largest school-based factor contributing to higher student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002), especially for students with disabilities who receive special education (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2008; Brownell et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the scarcity of high-quality special educators who stay in the field results in special education teacher shortages across the nation and compromises the quality of education for students with disabilities (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, 2004;

Tyler & Brunner, 2014).

Special education teacher preparation programs (SETPPs) must be proactive in ensuring their graduates are well prepared for the realities in their future field (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005; Vernon-Dotson, Floyd, Dukes, & Darling, 2014). As policy requirements, expectations, professional standards and research-based practices evolve in both K-12 education and higher education, SETPPs must continually assess how they are faring in their preparation of the next generation of teachers (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; De Arment, Reed, & Wetzel, 2013; Rock et al., 2016). In the U.S., this is especially pertinent now due to the shifting roles of special educators in schools that adopt a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to ensure all students meet the goals set in the Common Core State Standards (Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2016; Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015). Clinically rich SETPPs that keep up with current

practice, provide practice-based experience, and have close connections with the field are essential in developing high quality teachers with the dispositions and skills necessary to withstand the demands of the profession (Brownell, Griffin, Leko, & Stephens, 2011). Although the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) outlines the Council of the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)-approved initial Preparation Standards for special educators, SETPPs decide how to teach and evaluate these standards. Furthermore, and as a result, there is no standardized method of evaluating the effectiveness of specific components of SETPPs.

Processes associated with accreditation have received increasing attention in the literature and in practice, both nationally and internationally (Bell & Youngs, 2011; Ingvarson, Elliott, Kleinhenz, & McKenzie, 2006), and serve as one approach to developing and maintaining high standards within SETPPs. In response to CAEP program approval processes, our master's program has developed eight outcomes-based assessments that evaluate our teacher candidates' content and pedagogical knowledge as well as their impact on K-12 student learning. Annually, we collect data on these program assessments and meet as a faculty to evaluate the degree to which they provide evidence of satisfactory progress on the part of candidates, both at an individual level and in the aggregate.

Although we have found that these annual reviews play an important role in informing our program's efforts to make continuous improvement, we have also reflected on the need to create a more robust system of data collection, analysis, and program change that ensures we are helping our students become competent special educators who have the skills and dispositions needed to excel in inclusive schools. The student outcome data central to accreditation tells part of the story of our program, but we have also seen a need to collect data on the processes through which our curriculum and field-based experiences occur, both from the candidates themselves and the mentors who support them. Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, Hartman, and Walker (2013) have bolstered program evaluation at their SETPP, conducting a three-part survey to investigate recent graduates' perceptions of their special education Master's program. Participants indicated (a) their level of preparation and confidence associated with 25 core competencies, (b) the most beneficial components of their program, (c) suggestions for improvement, and (d) current training needs. In using their data to inform program improvement, the authors noted that "Gathering and analyzing candidate data are just the first steps in improving teacher preparation. Faculty need to engage in a meaningful dialogue to determine how they will honor the voices of candidates for continuous program improvement" (Conderman et al., 2013, p. 75).

Building on this model, we assert that adding feedback from our student teachers' field mentors provides more critical depth to our data. Students in our clinically-rich Master's program complete 36 credits of coursework, of which one-third (12 credits) is spent in a culminating year-long student teaching internship. During this time, they work at least 20 h per week with a special educator in a local public school. Students are required to engage in certain tasks under the tutelage of their field mentors (e.g., observe and eventually conduct Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and eligibility determination meetings, map out systems of support for the school's MTSS, implement and evaluate the success of evidence-based interventions for students with disabilities, and co-teach with a general education teacher) and assemble portfolios exhibiting and explaining evidence to demonstrate they meet the licensing requirements in our state. As active special educators, field mentors are aware of the current demands of the field; as mentors, they know our students well and understand first-hand how they are prepared with skills and dispositions for (a) their

internship experience at the beginning of the year and (b) the field of special education at the end of their culminating field experience. Studying feedback from field mentors adds a critical dimension to understanding what our program is doing well and where it can be improved.

The purpose of the present study was to implement and report on what we have learned from a data-based continual improvement process that adds to what can be known through individual assessments collected through our accreditation process by collecting additional qualitative data from our recent graduates and their field-based mentors. Our process adopted Shewhart's plan-do-study-act cycle, which offers a systemic approach to collecting and analyzing robust data to inform program improvements in an iterative cycle (National Implementation Research Network, n.d.). In our process, we first discussed as a faculty what we would like to change about our program and why. We also collected feedback from our field mentors and recent graduates to build on the strengths of our special education Master's program to address areas where it might improve. We used these data and our own reflections and observations to examine research on best practices and to design changes to our program. After implementing the changes, we collected data again from our recent graduates and field mentors. This process is continual and ongoing, as depicted in Fig. 1; for this article, we report the first two data collection cycles. Using our continual improvement model, we collected data to answer two main research questions: (a) What are we doing well to prepare our candidates for the realities of the field?, and (b) What can we do better to make our program more relevant, effective, and inspiring? In addition, we aimed to refine our system for continually collecting and using these data to improve our program. We present the findings of this study to describe what we have done and how it has affected us in order to offer direction to other programs who are thinking about expanding the types of data they utilize to inform program improvement.

1. Method

This study included collecting and analyzing qualitative data from recent graduates and field mentors over the course of two years. Qualitative methodology enabled us to capture contextual richness and understand participants' perspectives about our research questions (Yin, 2011).

1.1. Data collection

In this study, which took place over two years, we conducted an electronic questionnaire and three focus groups to gather information from our recent graduates and their mentors to help us answer our research questions.

1.1.1. Questionnaire

The research team (including three faculty members and one Master's student) decided what information to gather through questionnaires. The first author wrote the questions and the fourth author, a Master's student, read them to ensure the language would be clear to recent graduates and their field mentors. After revising the questionnaire, we loaded the questions into our university's survey software. Each author went through the online questionnaire and provided feedback before revising and publishing it. We sent the questionnaire to recent graduates and mentor teachers in May of each of the two years.

The questionnaire for the recent graduates had three sections. The first section focused on graduates' experiences with the Master's program. Participants commented on their preparedness for each of the seven CEC initial licensure standards (2012), which