Experiences of Special Education Teachers in Using Evidence-Based Practices

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Abstract

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are popular in education, particularly special education, and consist of instructional techniques that help close the research-to-practice gap to improve student outcomes. Implementation of EBPs in special education is an ongoing problem. This study aims to evaluate the level of EBP experience among special education teachers. The proposed study will use a qualitative research design. Data will be collected using a semi-structured interview. It will be analyzed, during and after collection, using Ethnograph qualitative data analysis software. The data will be coded, sorted by theme, and interpreted. The study will clarify where and how to improve EBP acquisition in all teachers, but particularly special education teachers.

Keywords: Evidence-based practice.

Introduction

Education, like any field of study, is constantly changing and improving. Special education, a major field of education, has passed through periods of change and reform (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2013). One recent issue in special education is the gap between research and practice (Mayton, Wheeler, Menendez, & Zhang, 2010; Carnine, 1997; Cook & Schirmer, 2006). Some suggest that this gap refers to the inaccessibility of research on the part of teachers (Kennedy, 1997). To address this issue, EBPs were instituted in 2001 through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This adaptation has particularly attracted education professionals in the United States. For instance, the federal Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) placed EBPs at the center of special education policy. Robin D. Brewer, president of the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) (2014), said that the "new CEC standards for Evidence-Based Practices in Special Education will change the landscape within the special education research community and their application will be critical to the future success of research in our field"(Council of Exceptional Children, p.1).

Evidence-based practices apply research to classroom situations in a standardized way. Cook and Cook (2011) defined EBPs as "instructional techniques with meaningful research support that represent critical tools in bridging the research-to-practice gap and improving student outcomes" (p.2). Despite the benefits from EBPs, most special education practitioners indicated that they lacked opportunities to choose evidence-based strategies (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2009; see also Jones, 2009). Therefore, this study will examine how teachers acquire teaching strategies.

Purpose of the Study

This paper will use interviews to explore the EBP-related experiences of special education teachers. Central interview questions include:

- What is your name?
- Describe your experience with teaching strategies.

- What do you know about EBPs?
- How did you build your experience?
- Has your coursework and professional development helped you to develop the skills you will need to teach special education?
- What challenges have you faced in gaining teaching experience?
- How do you suggest others build teaching experience?

Additional questions will be posed, as needed, to clarify participants' understanding of EBPs.

Significance of the Study

By exploring the experiences of special education teachers, we can better understand what they know about the teaching process. The proposed study will help to reveal the challenges special education teachers encounter and show what is needed to meet those challenges. Identifying these issues and needs will support improved special education programming and educational service districts.

The proposed study can also add to a better understanding of the underlying reasons for this gap between research and classroom practice. It will help to close this gap by showing how teachers build knowledge.

Methodology/Research Design

The proposed study is qualitative, which is typically associated with a phenomenological theoretical perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). In this approach, the researcher tries to understand the meaning of events and human interactions. Additionally, context is significant in explaining data. Qualitative studies center "on the attempt to achieve a sense of the meaning that others give to their own situations" (Smith, 1989, p. 12).

Words are not the only data collected; rather, behaviors, emotions, attitudes, sounds, and facial expressions are observed and gathered. In qualitative studies, data may consist of interview transcripts, field notes from observation, historical documents, records, and memoranda. The data is subject to rigorous ongoing analysis. Collection, coding, and data analysis are blended in this type of study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Flexibility is called for in qualitative studies; the researcher should be free to move in new directions of inquiry, collecting additional data as needed (Blumer, 1999).

Sample population

The participants will be selected from Special education teachers from Schools at Pullman, Washington. They will be selected from these schools using convenience sampling. An advertisement will be posted in the newspaper and Pullman school district that describes the research and asks students to participate. The size of the sample will be no more than 30 teachers of various ages, genders, and races. The study will offer a $50 Starbuck's gift card to encourage participation. Teachers will sign a consent form prior to participation in the study.

Instrument

The primary method of data collection will be interviews. Interviews are particularly helpful as a method of qualitative data collection because they provide abundant, appropriate, relevant information in a fast, effective, and flexible way (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Interviews are also useful to gain insight into highly subjective matters such as feelings of personal readiness and preparedness for a task, which is central to the proposed research (Gill et al.). In this qualitative research design, interviews will be highly

specific.

The various types of interviews include structured, semi-structured, unstructured, informal, and focus group (RWJF - qualitative research guidelines project | interviewing | Interviewing, n.d). Semi-structured interviews will be used in the study. Semi-structured interviews offer a relaxed atmosphere for information collection—putting subjects at ease and allowing researchers to discover nuances within the information that could not be found otherwise (Gill et al., 2008). Semi-structured interviews also offer the potential to gather directed and detailed information while allowing the participant to offer more information than would be permitted by structured interviews (Drever).

Semi-structured interviews include a mixture of in-depth and unstructured interview questions (Drever, 1995). A loose question structure will act as a baseline for the interview.

At the beginning of interviews, unstructured questions will be asked to the participants (e.g., what has it been like to be a special education teacher?) Data will be gathered using both audio recordings of the interview and handwritten notes. This will allow on-the-spot observations to be made about the participant's body language and expressions, while also capturing every word and vocal inflection. These data, along with the verbatim responses to the questions, will be recorded.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will occur at the same time as data collection—a process known as constant comparison data analysis (Fram, 2013). After each interview, and depending on interview schedules, I will search through the data for commonalities, trends, and impressions from the interviews. This method offers a greater sense of comparison between certain subjects based on other environmental factors such as class ranking and individual experience with EBP. This will also provide more nuanced and sophisticated results than could be obtained by waiting until all of the interviews are completed.

In qualitative studies, data is reduced and interpreted to find specific themes and categories from which demonstrable results can be gleaned. In data reduction, bulk data must be 'reduced' in a meaningful way, distilling the raw data that one has collected into significant components to be analyzed. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), "Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written up field notes or transcriptions" (p. 12). Data reduction allows the raw data to be turned into manageable chunks that can be more appropriately discussed, compiled, and compared, forcing the researcher to make choices about what data is important and what should be set aside. These pieces of information can then be categorized and placed into themes, which further organizes the data for more comprehensive investigation during data interpretation.

As data reduction is completed for each interview, the data will be interpreted based on data from previous coding processes. Patterns will be determined based on similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation of statements made during interviews (Saldana, 2009). For example, if the word 'COMFORTABLE' were to appear multiple times in several interviews, the data might be interpreted to mean that special education teachers are receiving substantial education in EBP. These processes will be applied based on the researcher's subjective assessment of the data, using the most common themes or impressions from EBP training for special education teachers to arrive at data conclusions.

All data will then be entered into a computer using Ethnograph qualitative data analysis software. This software uses a coding system to classify various topics and themes. Additionally, connections between themes and categories will be used to further understand the data.

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