

Research Study Critique
Julie Phegley
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Research Purpose and Research Questions

The study I selected to evaluate was *The First Year as Teachers Assigned to Elementary and Middle-School Education Classroom*.

The purpose of this research was to study the experiences and opinions of 10 first-year teachers, who have complete training in best practices, as they complete their first-year teaching in self-contained, special education classrooms. These classrooms ranged from elementary to middle school and were designed for students with “moderate/severe disabilities”. In addition to the self-contained classroom, the study also looked at integrated services and supports provided (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

The research question of this study is “What are the experiences of 10 first-year teachers who graduated from a teacher preparation program emphasizing evidence-based, inclusive practices, but took jobs in separate, special education classrooms designated for students with moderate/severe and/or multiple disabilities?” (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

Alignment of Research Purpose and Questions

The research purpose and question are directly aligned. The research question took the broader topic presented in the research purpose and focused specifically on the experiences of the 10 first year teachers discussed in the research purpose.

Literature Review and Sources Support of Research Purpose and Questions

The literature review and sources provide clarity and context to the research purpose and question. The review provided a variety of sample sizes, from case studies of one special education teacher to a large group study of 156 first-year special education teacher. Although the studies ranged in grade level, from elementary through high school, they provided themes of positives and negatives experiences by first year teachers in special education settings. Lastly the

literature review provided that there was a need for this research because of the limited amount of literature and studies the researcher was able to review.

Research Method

The research method used for this study is qualitative. Throughout the research, the participants are given the opportunity to give their thoughts and reflections on their experience. This can be seen through the direct quotes in the study. One example is Elise's quote of the importance of creating a positive relationship with her students' parents, no matter their background (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018). Another example is Irene's explanation of why it was a challenge to have her students be able to eat meals with their peers in the cafeteria (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

Appropriateness of Research Method

The use of qualitative research is appropriate due to the lack of current research on the topic. By collecting qualitative data, the researchers can begin identifying trends and themes about the topic. From there additional research can be completed to begin addressing any issues. From this study, researchers identified multiple areas of concern that they could continue researching. For example, one of the subthemes was looking at the teachers' relationships with other instructional staff: mentor, general education teacher, other special education teacher, and related services personnel (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018). Selecting one of these groups could become its own area of study based on the research completed in this study.

Methods of Data Collection

Qualitative data collection is demonstrated through the researchers use of interview, monthly conversations, and focus groups. During the monthly conversations the special

education teachers are provided an informal setting to share their experiences. From these conversations the researchers wrote field notes reflecting on the topics discussed. This data was then used to identify themes and would be written up into narrative notes. During the focus group teachers were able to give qualitative responses to various open-ended questions and topics such as “rank your challenges this year” (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

Alignment of Data Collection Methods and Research Purpose and Questions

The data collection method directly aligns with the research purpose and question. By using qualitative data, researchers are able to explore the experiences of the 10 first year teachers without limiting their findings. From the data they can begin looking for commonalities and themes between the participants. Participants could, and did, discuss their experiences through the monthly conversations and focus groups. This is clearly seen through their first few monthly conversations where they discussed the challenges they experienced as a new special education teacher. They had to deal with the low expectations of students, parents, and fellow staff members that had been fostered by the previous special education teacher (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

Data Analysis Techniques

One method of analysis the researchers used was interim analysis. This is when they collected data throughout an entire school year. This can be seen through the informational interviews that were administered in August and again at the end of the school year, late May/early June. Throughout the school year additional qualitative research was collected through the monthly conversations. These two options provided the researchers with the opportunity to gain deeper understanding of their topic and guide future data collection as they went.

Another method of analysis the researchers used was transcription. This was used with the focus groups. After the focus group met, the researchers transcribed the data verbatim. To ensure accurate recording, two researchers independently reviewed the recordings.

Thematic analysis was used by researchers to create subcategories within the research topic. From the monthly discussions, researchers were able to begin identifying common themes and relationships across the participants. These were then reviewed by the participants at the end of the study.

Results of the Study in Relation to Research Questions

The study results relate to the research question of “What are the experiences of 10 first year special education teachers?”. The study clearly identifies common themes across the participants. Themes include: “what I inherited with the job,” relationships, and professional experience (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018). Within these themes, subcategories were also identified.

Within the theme of what I inherited with the job, the study clearly showed the barriers first year special education teachers face when joining a school. This is seen throughout the results as an issue for the teachers and also for their students. In the study, the teachers express their students’ placement in in Special Day Classes (SDC) created low expectations for their students and little expectation that they were part of the general school population (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

Within the theme of relationships, the study broke down the theme into subcategories of families, paraeducators, administrators, and colleagues. The study shows that the participants were able to create positive and successful relationships with their students’ families. For the other subcategories there was a mix of positive and negatives. The concerns brought up by the

study tie back to the lack of training and consistency of message about the roles of the special education teacher and the expectations for placement of special education students (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

In final theme of professional experience, the study showed that the participants have many of the same concerns as general education teachers in their first year. They struggled with time management and confidence but had the extra responsibilities of managing IEPs, trying to collaborate, and adapting curriculum to the level of their students. One subtopic of concern was frustration of the barriers they experienced. Although they gained confidence as the year went on, the participants still struggled working within the system that does not clearly defining expectations of success and limiting opportunities to interact with the rest of the school (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin 2018).

Research Findings Evaluation

When considering the trustworthiness of these findings, the study does a great job of identifying potential issues. The researchers openly acknowledge that the sample size is small and that all of the participants graduated from the same University program. Participants may have had a previous professional relationship with the researches while a student. This could influence how they responded during the study. The researches tried to mitigate this by having the informative interviews completed by a graduate assistant and having multiple research members at the monthly conversations. As with all qualitative research, there is always a chance that participants may not be truthful or may exaggerate their reflections. This is mitigated by the length of the study because it provided researchers a longer period of time to learn about and from the participants. The researches also acknowledge that the monthly gatherings created a

support system that some first-year teachers lack. This could have fostered a more positive and hopeful outlook than is experience by most first-year teachers. Throughout the study the researchers consistently crosschecked their finding with each other and with the participants to ensure trustworthiness of their findings.

Reference

Gee, K., & Gonsier-Gerdin, J. (2018). The First Year as Teachers Assigned to Elementary and Middle-School Special Education Classrooms. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 43(2), 94–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796918771708>

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