Clinical Opportunities for Special Education Teacher Candidates: Developing Professional Identities that Endure Beyond Candidacy

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Clinical Opportunities for Special Education Teacher Candidates: Developing Professional Identities that Endure Beyond Candidacy

Special education teacher attrition is an ongoing issue, especially for teachers who work with students with complex support needs (Rogeman et al., 2018), due to the increased tendency toward disruptive behaviors within the classroom (Meta Amstad & Muller, 2020). Special education teachers in their first three years of teaching are more vulnerable than others to an early departure from the field (Brownell et al., 2004). Researchers have documented novice teachers leaving the field due to difficulties with classroom management (Meister & Melnick, 2003), particularly in the field of special education (Brownell et al., 2004), where student behaviors are a significant factor leading to teacher burnout (Meta Amstad & Muller, 2020). Particularly students with complex or significant support needs require specific and extensive support to participate (Benitez et al., 2009) due to significant behavior and communication challenges (Aldabas, 2020), and are typically taught in self-contained settings (Ruppar et al., 2016). Discipline for students with complex support needs in self-contained settings is typically left up to the teacher of record (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019), contributing to the pressure on special education teachers.

Problem Space

Various limitations and recommendations around special education teacher preparation emerged from recent research. Key findings from recent studies highlight the importance of preparing teachers to teach students with complex support needs (Ruppar et al., 2017), specifically toward the development of classroom management techniques for self-contained settings (Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2018; Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019). While it is known that concrete experiences lead to an increased preparedness to teach (Stites et al., 2018), preservice experience doesn’t ensure preparedness (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019), and novice special education teachers are at a particularly high risk of attrition (Heikonen et al., 2017). Though special education teachers tend to leave preservice programs feeling confident in their ability to teach, their levels of self-efficacy tend to decrease after their first experience teaching (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019). With more experience comes a higher level of self-efficacy (Aldabas, 2020), but efficacy is not always maintained into the first years of teaching, especially where classroom management is concerned (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019). Those who do report high levels of self-efficacy after their clinical experiences tend to lose their sense of efficacy after entering the field as teachers (Roegman et al., 2018). If special education teachers enter the profession feeling unprepared, they will be more likely to experience burnout and attrition (Heikonen et al., 2017), exacerbating the national teacher shortage.
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The role of experiences toward the maintenance of self-efficacy for novice teachers still needs to be understood (Putman & Polly, 2021; Stalls et al., 2018). More information is needed on the experiential strategies that promote special education teacher preparation (Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2018), including the perceptions of special education teachers after they have entered their careers (Putman & Polly, 2021). Limitations exist in the literature around classroom management (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019), students with complex support needs (Aldabas, 2020), teacher self-efficacy (Gilmour and Wehby, 2020), experiential learning through differing field experiences (Roegman et al., 2018), and the application of those experiences into the field (Putman & Polly, 2021). Prior research has focused solely on experiences obtained within preservice training programs as opposed to experiences obtained in informal settings (McElwee et al., 2018). Overall, recent research calls for an analysis of the differing experiences, formal and informal, that teacher candidates bring to the classroom (McElwee et al., 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Self-efficacy theory outlines the types of experiences learners need in order to perceive preparedness (Bandura, 1994), and experiential learning theory provides a dynamic lens through which to analyze adult learning, specifically toward the experiential stages of the adult learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). These theories, when taken together, provide a conceptual framework on which to explore experiences that improve the preparation of novice teachers. For special education teachers, their efficacy level ultimately leads to either perseverance or burnout (Salgado et al., 2018). Exposure to prior concrete experiences such as those outlined in experiential learning theory (Kolb et al., 1971) affects special education teachers’ perceived self-efficacy in managing self-contained settings with students who have complex support needs (Evans & Tribble, 1986). Without initial concrete experiences acquired from preservice training such as clinical internships, or from individual life experiences (McElwee et al., 2018), novice special education teachers do not have a reliable foundation on which to build and apply knowledge (Fry & Kolb, 1979).

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how novice special education teachers in the United States describe their experiences obtained in formal preservice training programs or informal settings that positively affect their self-efficacy to manage a classroom of students with complex support needs. Two research questions were explored based on the constructs of experiential learning and self-efficacy theories, as well as recommendations from recent literature.
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RQ1: How do novice special education teachers describe experiences obtained in formal preservice training programs that positively affected their self-efficacy to manage a classroom of students with complex support needs?

RQ2: How do novice special education teachers describe experiences obtained in informal settings that positively affected their self-efficacy to manage a classroom of students with complex support needs?

Establishing Credibility and Trustworthiness

I developed and constructed the data collection instruments based on recommendations from recent research and feedback from an expert panel. Through use of an expert panel, necessary protocol and appropriate instrumentation of the interview script and questions were implemented. The revised interview questions were utilized as a foundation for subsequent field test questions. Based on the field tests, I modified the order of the interview questions, putting those that produced more relevant codes first. I sought a thick description of participants’ experiences to provide background data, establish the context of the study, and obtain a detailed description of the phenomenon in question (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This data was then analyzed using a trustworthy coding system (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These strategies allowed comparisons of the context to be made to differing contexts and supported that the study’s findings are applicable to policy, practice, and future research.

Participant Selection

The target population included special education teachers in traditional public schools in the United States who had taught special education for three or fewer years and had taught students with complex support needs in self-contained settings for between one and three years. Participants were obtained through convenience and snowball sampling (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019) in private teacher groups on social media. Site authorization was obtained from group administrators via Facebook messenger, a recruitment post was made in the private groups, and formal consent was emailed to all individuals who replied to the invitation. The final sample consisted of 13 teachers who had taught in self-contained settings in special education for three or fewer years at traditional public schools in the United States.

Data Collection

A qualitative descriptive design was used to explore the perceptions of the participants and to develop descriptions of their experiences. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were utilized to answer the research questions. Twelve semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were facilitated and
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recorded over Zoom. A written guide with pre-planned, semi-structured questions and allotted time for follow-up questions was prepared before the semi-structured interviews and was used to facilitate them (Pell et al., 2020). An introduction to the study was provided to the participants, key terms were defined, and the structure of the process was explained. I asked if the participants had any questions and answered them as appropriate, then asked the pre-planned questions in the sequence they were written (Pell et al., 2020). Follow-up or probing questions were asked for elaboration as deemed necessary. Once the questions were not yielding any new responses or information (Pell et al., 2020). When deemed appropriate, I asked the participants if they were interested in attending a follow-up focus group. If so, they were sent a link to schedule.

Volunteers were invited to three focus groups through a Google Calendar event and were asked to attend one of the three. I completed the same process for the two focus groups. Ultimately, two focus groups were held with three participants in each. Data obtained from the focus groups was used to augment the information obtained through the semi-structured interviews, as well as to provide additional data for triangulation to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). Data obtained from the focus groups was also used to cross-check interview data. I uploaded the audio recordings to a transcription site and assigned pseudonyms to the participants. The transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking. Once this process was complete, I began reading through and analyzing the data.

Data Analysis

After transcription, I utilized inductive and deductive thematic analysis to hand-code the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first-cycle coding methods included attribute and in-vivo coding. In-vivo codes consisted of verbatim statements from participants, through which, codes were derived from the actual language of the participants (Saldana, 2021). Examples of first-round in-vivo codes included the term “thrown in,” to describe the teaching environment of novice teachers, and “challenging” to describe student behaviors. I utilized attribute coding to classify descriptions as having occurred either in formal preservice training environments or in informal settings (Saldana, 2021). When considered together, in vivo coding and attribute coding helped me to categorize the data based on the research questions. In the second round of coding, I utilized descriptive and process codes for the categorization of the data (Saldana, 2021). I utilized descriptive coding to generate a list of subtopics; For example, “Positive Experience,” “No Experience,” and “Helpful Mentors.” Process coding with gerunds was utilized to label actions described by the participants (Saldana, 2021). For example, “building relationships,” “learning from non-examples,” and “observing experienced teachers.” The codes generated
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in both rounds came together into deductive (predetermined) and inductive (spontaneously generated) categories (Saldana, 2021). Data obtained from the study include 135 pages of raw data that were analyzed into 129 codes. Both inductive and deductive categories were developed. The deductive categories were developed based on the constructs of the theoretical framework. Inductive categories were developed based on the most frequently recurrent ideas and phrases in the coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive and deductive categories were then utilized to generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and ultimately synthesized into five overarching themes.

Findings

Results from this study show that novice special education teachers described experiences imagining themselves in the role and establishing their professional identities through trial-and-error, exemplars and non-examples, and autonomous classroom and behavior management as contributors to their self-efficacy toward classroom management in self-contained settings. Five overarching themes emerged from the data. These included: Imagining themselves in the role (1), exposure to exemplars and non-examples (2), trial-and-error as a classroom management strategy (3), autonomous classroom and behavior management (4), and establishing professional identities (5).

Research Question 1: Imagining Themselves in the Role in Formal Preservice Settings

Formal preservice training consists of recognized educational programs designed to train future teachers to formally enter the profession (Villegas-Reimer, 2003), such as student teaching or clinical internships that are provided by a university. In formal preservice training environments, novice special education teachers reported experiences imagining themselves in the role as contributing factors to their self-efficacy toward classroom management. This was accomplished through observing expert teachers as examples, exposure to exemplars, and a safe environment in which to fail.

Developing a Bank of Strategies. Participants expressed having built their own toolboxes of useful strategies based on observing expert cooperating teachers. Participants described how seeing exemplary classroom structures gave them a model from which to design their own classrooms. Observing classroom management strategies that cultivated structure was among the top responses of participants toward their development of self-efficacy for managing their own classrooms.

Exposure to Exemplars. Participants described exposure to exemplary classroom routines and structure as influential to their efficacy toward classroom management. When asked if they had opportunities for trial-and-error in their
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preservice training programs, most participants replied that they had. Observing exemplary classroom structures, schedules, and routines gave participants a model from which to design their classrooms and improved their overall efficacy toward classroom management.

**A Safe Environment to Fail.** Some of the most frequently repeated codes coincided with opportunities to practice trial-and-error toward classroom management, and participants reported having a safe environment in which to fail as imperative to efficacy development. When asked where they obtained experience practicing trial-and-error, responses were mixed. Most participants reported having opportunities for trial-and-error within their formal preservice training programs. Participants reported that being able to experience trial-and-error in a “safe, structured environment” was essential to their development of confidence as a teacher.

**Imagining Themselves in the Role.** When asked if they had the opportunity to observe experienced teachers in their preservice training programs, most participants replied that they had. Many participants reported their cooperating teachers as having been especially influential toward the development of their own classroom management styles. Novice teachers felt more prepared to manage their classrooms when they had observed, received advice from, and garnered information from expert teachers and seen exemplars of classroom management in a safe environment in which to practice. This helped them to begin imagining themselves in the “teacher” role.

Findings emerged relevant to the themes associated with Research Question 1. Relevant findings include that observing experienced teachers and exemplars provided novice special education teachers the opportunity to develop a bank of strategies and ideas toward classroom management that they took into their first years of teaching. Ultimately, these experiences enabled them to imagine themselves in the role prior to beginning teaching.

**Research Question 2: Establishing Professional Identities in Informal Settings**

Informal learning is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes in settings outside of formal, structured education or training programs (Callanan, 2011), such as on the job or in a diverse environment. The top three informal settings deemed meaningful by participants were: Paraprofessional jobs, substitute teaching on an alternative or emergency license, and working within their first years as novice teachers. In informal environments, novice special education teachers reported experiences developing their professional identities through: Exposure to non-examples, trial-and-error as a process, autonomous application of classroom structure, anticipating, preventing, and intervening in behaviors, collaborating with other beginning teachers, and developing realistic
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self-expectations as contributing factors to their maintained self-efficacy toward classroom management.

Collaborating with Other Beginning Teachers. Participants described experiences observing struggling teachers as having contributed to their improved self-efficacy, and many participants described observing other teachers’ trials and errors as a primary contributing factor to their efficacy toward classroom management. A participant explained, “Just having that connection where someone is experiencing the same things as you,” as having been impactful toward their development of efficacy. Participants agreed that exposure to struggling teachers improved their efficacy toward managing their classrooms more than exposure to exemplars. Interestingly, collaborating with other novice teachers was described as having solely occurred after participants were on the job as novice teachers, and most participants reported having little to no experience observing other novice teachers prior to entering their careers.

Trial-and-error as a Process. Participants described concrete experiences independently practicing trial-and-error toward classroom management as contributors to their self-efficacy. Participants illustrated trial-and-error as an ongoing process that does not end after preservice field experiences, and that they needed to be comfortable applying trial-and-error well into their teaching careers. Experiences utilizing trial-and-error as a process occurred mainly through observation and collaboration with other novice teachers after entering the field. Most participants shared that they continue to utilize trial-and-error as a strategy toward classroom management in their self-contained classrooms as novice teachers.

Autonomous Application of Classroom Structure. Opportunities to practice classroom management autonomously produced one of the most frequently repeated codes. Participants cited opportunities to independently manage classrooms before beginning teaching as a necessary component of their self-efficacy development. While most participants reported autonomous application of classroom structure as a significant contributor to their efficacy as novice special education teachers, most reported that they did not have opportunities for autonomy prior to beginning teaching. Most participants cited opportunities to independently manage classrooms as mainly occurring after they had begun working as novice teachers.

Anticipating Behaviors, Behavior Prevention, and Crisis Intervention. Many participants reported that they were not trained to handle crisis-level behaviors and had no hands-on experience handling severe behaviors in their formal training programs. Crisis management training and experiences were reported as having occurred either within their current district or through previous informal positions. Participants reported anticipating behaviors, preventing
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behaviors, and intervening in crises as essential experiences for self-efficacy development. Participants described prior hands-on experience intervening in crisis-level behaviors such as screaming, hair pulling, fistfights, throwing furniture, biting, pinching, hitting, kicking, spitting, using profanity, threatening, stripping, screaming, property destruction, and elopement, as a top contributor to their self-efficacy toward managing classroom behaviors as novice teachers. One participant explained, “I didn't get the experience to hands-on do those things.” Participants who did have opportunities to independently manage the most severe types of behaviors had more confidence in behavior management in their classrooms.

**Exposure to Non-Examples.** Participants shared that learning vicariously from non-examples through observing struggling teachers was more impactful on their self-efficacy than exposure to exemplars. Participants described vicarious experiences with non-examples as helpful to their idea development toward classroom management strategies. For example, a participant explained, “Seeing other people’s trial-and-errors, seeing other people who struggle through it, sometimes you learn a little bit more.” Many participants described seeing other teachers’ trials and errors as a major contributing factor to their efficacy toward classroom management.

**Developing Realistic Self-Expectations.** While participants reported increased efficacy from imagining themselves in the role through observing expert teachers in formal training programs, they ultimately reported experiences working with and observing expert and experienced teachers as detrimental to the development of realistic self-expectations. Participants expressed that developing realistic expectations of themselves helped to create a baseline for stress and to know their limits. They discussed having initially set “unrealistic expectations” of themselves based on their time spent with experienced teachers. One participant reflected, “Trying to be like the veteran teacher right off the bat was not ideal.” Many participants expressed not feeling as though they had exposure to the “reality” of teaching in self-contained settings through their formal field placements. One participant shared, “You're not going to be like that minimum five-year veteran teacher right when you start, and you're gonna set too high of expectations; unreasonable expectations, for yourself… You're going to feel like you're not a good teacher.”

**Professional Identity Development.** Participants described experiences with other novice teachers as contributors to their development of a baseline for self-expectations in their first few years of teaching. These findings are in line with those of Mathews, who recently found that special education teacher candidates’ perceptions of what special education should look like shaped their professional identity development and how they defined what it means to be a good beginning special education teacher (2023). A participant in the present
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study explained, “Being able to see newer teachers will reassure you that you’re not going to be able to do it all off the bat.” Specifically, field experiences with other novice teachers helped participants to develop the professional identities that they maintained into their teaching careers.

Findings relevant to the themes associated with Research Question 2 include that practicing trial-and-error as a classroom management strategy, independently managing classrooms and crisis-level behaviors, and exposure to other novice teachers and non-examples positively affected novice special education teachers’ self-efficacy toward managing their self-contained classrooms. Participants described opportunities for autonomous trial-and-error in which failure is an option, such as those innate to paraprofessionals and substitute teachers, as having positively affected their self-efficacy to manage their classrooms. Participants reported opportunities in which they had been expected to manage crisis-level behaviors, learned about themselves, and developed realistic expectations of themselves as having occurred within their first years of teaching.

Summary of Results

Novice special education teachers describe experiences imagining themselves in the role and establishing their professional identities through trial-and-error, exemplars and non-examples, and autonomous classroom and behavior management as contributors to their self-efficacy toward classroom management in self-contained settings. See Figure 1 for a visual depiction of how the themes were synthesized around the development of self-efficacy for novice special education teachers.

Figure 1
Special Education Teacher Self-Efficacy Development
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Discussion
Results of the present study show that preservice special education teachers need opportunities to imagine themselves in the role and for experiences that foster professional identity development that endures beyond candidacy. Overall results of the study indicate that novice special education teachers imagined themselves in the role through observation of expert teachers and exemplars. Preservice teachers were able to build their own toolboxes of useful strategies based on observing expert teachers and exemplars within their preservice programs. They also had opportunities for trial-and-error in a safe environment, which helped them to begin imagining themselves in the “teacher” role. Participants developed their professional identities through exposure to non-examples and other beginning teachers. Opportunities for autonomous application of classroom structure, anticipating, preventing, and intervening in behaviors were also influential to professional identity development. Participants described the most impactful experiences independently managing classrooms as having occurred after they began working as teachers.

Key Findings
Key findings suggest discrepancies between experiences obtained in formal preservice training programs and those necessary for preservice special education teachers’ self-efficacy development. Fifty-eight percent of the categories of experiences that led to self-efficacy development and maintenance were reported as having occurred solely in informal environments, and eighty percent of the concrete, mastery-type experiences described occurred outside of formal training programs. Overall, sixty-nine percent of participants reported gaining meaningful experience through settings other than their formal preservice training settings.

The first key finding of the study was that field experiences with other novice teachers and exposure to non-examples helped participants develop their professional identities. Most formal preservice training programs require mentor teachers to be experts in the field, and it is considered optimal for mentors to have 8-15 years of experience in their teaching positions (Russell & Russell, 2011). While Participants did report higher levels of self-efficacy toward managing their own classrooms as novice teachers when they had observed expert mentor teachers, they described exposure to other novice teachers as more impactful on their self-efficacy development. Specifically, participants described experiences with other beginning teachers as having contributed to their development of a baseline for self-expectations in their first few years of teaching, which helped them to develop their professional identities. This suggests that preservice teachers need opportunities to observe other novice teachers prior to beginning their teaching careers.
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Secondly, findings from this study indicate that field experiences in which special education teacher candidates are exposed to non-examples foster the development of their professional identities. While participants did report higher levels of self-efficacy toward managing their own classrooms as novice teachers when they had been exposed to exemplary classroom management and structure, they described exposure to non-examples as more impactful on their self-efficacy development. This suggests that preservice teachers need exposure to non-examples prior to beginning their teaching careers.

Third, results support the importance of learning to apply trial-and-error as an ongoing process in classroom management. A recent study by Ruppar et al. corroborates these results (2023). They found that special education teacher candidates need support in tracking their problem-solving development across multiple contexts. Participants in the present study described experiencing trial-and-error as a process, and most participants shared that they continue to utilize trial-and-error as a strategy toward classroom management in their classrooms as novice teachers. Opportunities to make mistakes in a safe environment helped special education teacher candidates to begin imagining themselves in the “teacher” role. While most participants reported autonomous application of classroom structure as a significant contributor to their efficacy as novice special education teachers, most reported that they did not have opportunities for autonomy prior to beginning teaching. This finding indicates that special education teacher candidates need opportunities to independently apply trial-and-error and to develop their professional identities within their preservice field experiences.

Fourth, findings indicate that opportunities to independently manage classrooms and anticipate, prevent, and intervene in crisis-level behaviors prior to beginning teaching are a necessary component of the development of self-efficacy. However, crisis management training and experiences were reported as having occurred either within their current district or through previous informal positions. Therefore, implications include that opportunities to independently manage classrooms and intervene in crisis-level behaviors are essential to self-efficacy development for novice special education teachers.

The results of this study show a discrepancy between clinical internships and informal settings as a source of self-efficacy for special education teachers. Many participants expressed not feeling as though they had exposure to the "reality" of teaching in self-contained settings through their formal field placements. Ultimately, novice special education teachers cited informal settings as opposed to clinical internships as their primary source of maintained self-efficacy toward classroom management in self-contained settings. This finding suggests that there is a gap between the experiences provided within formal
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Preservice training programs and the experiences needed to foster professional identity development for special education teacher candidates.

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

Significant findings emerged in light of the existing body of knowledge. Findings support and expand on those described in the problem space and are particularly in line with studies by McElwee et al., (2018), Sciuchetti and Yssel, (2019), and Stalls et al., (2018). Background information included that special education teachers felt unprepared to teach students with complex support needs due to the complexity of the position. Further, novice special education teachers have been found to lose their sense of efficacy after entering the field, particularly toward classroom management (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019). Most experiences participants described as contributors to their self-efficacy occurred on the job or within their first few years of teaching. This finding is in line with research by Sciuchetti and Yssel, who asserted that multiple opportunities in a variety of settings are necessary for the preparation of special education teachers (2019). The finding that informal settings were cited more than formal preservice training settings is also in line with research by Stalls et al. (2018), who said a variety of field experiences contribute to teacher candidates’ overall skill sets, and those experiences are gained over time through both educational and personal experiences. Findings also support the claim that varied backgrounds influence special education teachers’ knowledge (McElwee et al., 2018). The development of realistic expectations was found to be necessary for self-efficacy. This is in line with research by Roegman et al. (2018), in that many participants reported feeling that they could not live up to their own expectations of what special education teachers should be able to do. Consequently, developing a baseline expectation for stress and learning their own limits contributes to the development of realistic expectations of themselves as novice teachers, which is necessary for the development of to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Furthermore, participants expressed that witnessing other teachers struggle reinforced their learning, through vicariously experiencing trial-and-error.

Findings from the present study differ from those of Sciuchetti and Yssel, who concluded that novice special education teachers didn’t feel prepared to manage their classrooms, even after preservice training (2019). Data from the present study shows that novice special education teachers did report feeling prepared to manage their classrooms after preservice training, but they did not cite their clinical internships as the main source. Instead, novice special education teachers mainly cited experiences in informal settings as contributors to their maintained self-efficacy toward managing their classrooms. Participants described entered the field feeling as though they had witnessed exemplars of classroom management. This result differed from that of Colson et al. (2017), who reported
that many novice teachers are unsure of what good teaching looks like, even into their first years in the profession. Participants in the present study reported having a solid understanding of what exemplary classroom management looks like in the self-contained setting based on exposure to exemplars.

Summary

Results imply that in order to create a baseline for stress and learn their own limits, preservice special education teachers need opportunities to develop realistic expectations of themselves through observation of other novice teachers and independently managing behaviors. The inability of teacher candidates to independently intervene in crisis-level behaviors sets them up for failure and ultimately burnout in their first few years of teaching, as they will not have had practice intervening in crisis situations that are typical to self-contained classrooms. While observation of expert teachers offers teacher candidates the opportunity to imagine themselves in the role, it also contributes to unrealistic expectations of themselves as first-year teachers because it does not afford them the opportunity to develop their own professional identities. Furthermore, while exposure to exemplars for classroom management offers preservice special education teachers a set of strategies to use in their own classrooms, the absence of non-examples lends to an unrealistic picture of utilizing trial-and-error within classroom management. These results are supported by self-efficacy and experiential learning theories and support the current body of knowledge on the topic of special education teacher preparation.

Weaknesses & Limitations

I am a novice researcher since the original research was a dissertation, and I was a doctoral learner at the time of data collection and analysis. Additionally, I am a special education teacher who obtained meaningful informal field experience prior to entering the field. My positionality on the topic may have influenced the data collection, analysis, and results (Rowe, 2014). I addressed this weakness through use of an expert panel. The sampling strategy used was convenience sampling, to obtain a sufficient sample size. Convenience sampling has inherent limitations. I was only able to obtain authorization from three Facebook groups. Therefore, these three groups were the only groups utilized for participant recruitment. This limits the results to participants from these three groups. I had originally planned to conduct 20 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus groups. While they did conduct 2 focus groups, they were only able to obtain participants for twelve semi-structured interviews. It was originally planned to conduct 20 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus groups with 5-7 participants in each. 13 total participants were obtained, resulting in 2 focus groups with 3 participants in each, and 12 semi-structured interviews. The effect
the sample size had on the results is that the data obtained is limited to the
descriptions provided by those specific participants (Sim et al., 2018).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Avenues for future research exist based on the results and limitations of
the study. The clinical components necessary to facilitate professional identity
development for preservice special education teachers need to be more clearly
defined. To address the effect of a small sample size on the results, future studies
should obtain quantitative data that could be applied directly to teacher
preparation program standards. Future quantitative research could more explicitly
identify and define the types of experiences novice special education teachers cite
as having positively affected their self-efficacy to manage their self-contained
classrooms. This approach would afford future researchers the ability to utilize a
broader sampling strategy. For example, researchers could utilize surveys based
on the present study’s categories or themes with a Likert scale. This would help
researchers determine which of the experiences described are found to be the most
influential toward the maintenance of novice special education teachers’ self-
efficacy into their first few years of teaching. Further, future research could focus
on developing a validated bank of preplanned experiences that provide purposeful
exposure to other novice teachers, non-examples, and autonomy toward
classroom and behavior management. Future mixed methods research could
ultimately explore the effects and measure the significance of purposefully
embedding these types of field experience opportunities within formal preservice
training programs across the United States.

**Implications & Recommendations for Practice**

Practical implications of this study include the development of realistic
self-expectations and the maintenance of self-efficacy toward classroom
management for special education teachers. More purposefully planned formal
preservice field experience opportunities for special education teachers could
include more opportunities for special education teachers to imagine themselves
in the role and to develop their professional identities prior to beginning their
teaching careers.

The first recommendation that emerged from this research is based on the
implication that along with exposure to expert teachers, special education teacher
candidates also need exposure to other beginning teachers prior to entering their
careers. In addition to exposing preservice teachers to experts in the field, teacher
education programs need to provide opportunities to observe novice teachers and
foster professional identity development that endures beyond candidacy.
Teacher educators could accomplish this by offering opportunities to observe both
experienced and novice teachers’ classroom and behavior management styles.
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To foster professional identity development that endures beyond candidacy, teacher education programs need to provide exposure to non-examples. Teacher educators could accomplish this by offering observations of a range of classroom and behavior management styles with opportunities to compare exemplars with non-examples.

Third, special education teacher candidates need opportunities to independently apply trial-and-error as a classroom management strategy within their preservice field experiences. These opportunities could provide them with the experiences needed to develop realistic expectations of themselves as beginning teachers. This could be accomplished by building guided reflection on trial-and-error into program courses that align with candidates’ field experiences.

Fourth, special education teacher candidates need opportunities to independently manage classrooms and intervene in crisis-level behaviors within their preservice field experiences. Preservice training programs should begin including crisis prevention and intervention training as well as autonomous practice in crisis-level behavior management in their field experiences. Practitioners should aim to provide clinical experiences that allow candidates to independently manage classrooms and crisis-level behaviors. To accomplish this, it may be necessary for universities to require behavior prevention and crisis intervention certification training within their programs prior to clinical experiences.

Ultimately, novice special education teachers cited informal settings as opposed to clinical internships as their primary source of maintained self-efficacy toward classroom management in self-contained settings. This finding implies that there is a gap in the experience provided within formal preservice training programs around professional identity development for special education teacher candidates. To account for this discrepancy, preservice special education teachers need more purposeful clinical experiences that foster professional identity development, and opportunities to imagine themselves in the role prior to beginning teaching. These experiences should include: Opportunities to compare classroom management exemplars with non-examples based on the observation of both expert and novice teachers, guided reflection on trial-and-error that align with field experiences, and behavior prevention and crisis intervention training and certification within preservice programs prior to clinical experiences.
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