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The Challenges of Itinerant Early Childhood Special Education: The Perspectives of Practitioners

Abstract

ECSE teachers who serve as itinerants face professional challenges that can differ from their classroom-based colleagues. The purpose of this study was to understand the kinds of challenges that itinerant ECSE teachers from one state face. A content analysis of comments related to professional challenges yielded six themes that focused on logistics, caseload, confidence and competence, characteristics of teachers, parents, or early childhood programs, accessing resources and professional support, and meeting the needs of specific children. Most of the comments centered on the characteristics of teachers, parents or early childhood programs. Implications for future research include the need for replication with other groups of itinerant teachers. Implications for practice focus on the need to better prepare ECSE teachers for roles as itinerants.

Keywords: consultation, coaching, early childhood inclusion, itinerant services.

Introduction

Early childhood inclusion is an emerging and valued practice in the field (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; U.S. Departments of Education & Health and Human Services, 2015). Research has demonstrated the benefits of inclusion for young children with disabilities and young children without disabilities (Odom & Diamond, 1998). As inclusion in community-based early childhood programs becomes a reality for many children with disabilities and their families, it is essential to examine how professionals can best support their success. Indeed, along with access and participation, support is one of the three

Young children with disabilities need the support of competent and nurturing adults, parents, caregivers and early childhood teachers, who can implement evidence-based intervention strategies and modify learning environments so children can be successful in meeting their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals. In order to help children be successful, these adults ALSO need the support of professionals who can provide guidance and encouragement as they seek to support these children throughout the day and across daily routines. Recently, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (2015) identified the lack of staff, training and

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critical elements in a high-quality inclusive early childhood program.

expertise in the early childhood workforce as a significant barrier to early childhood inclusion. Survey results have indicated that general early childhood teachers are not prepared to work effectively with young children who have disabilities (Chang, Early, & Winton, 2005, Early & Winton, 2001; Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006). General early childhood educators need access to early childhood special education (ECSE) professionals who are skilled "frontline implementers" (Buysse, West, & Hollingsworth, 2009, p. 5). These frontline implementers are often itinerant ECSE teachers—teachers who serve young children who have an IEP and whose primary placement may not be in an ECSE classrooms. Unfortunately, the roles and responsibilities of itinerant ECSE teachers are not well articulated or well-understood (Dinnebeil, McInerney, & Hale, 2006). While they are identified as itinerant "teachers", an important part of their job is to support general early childhood educators and parents through the provision of coaching and consultation. These individuals also engage in evaluation as well as plan and implement intervention strategies when working directly with children. Finally, they often provide service coordination to families of young children on their caseloads.

Many in the field of ECSE have emphasized the importance of consultation and coaching in order to ensure that young children with special needs receive the instructional support they need, during the absence of the itinerant ECSE teacher (Artman-Meeker & Hemmeter, 2013; Dinnebeil & McInerney, 2011; Fox, Hemmeter, Snyder, Binder, & Clarke, 2011; Sheridan, Clarke, Knoche, & Edwards, 2006). However, previous studies suggest that itinerant ECSE teachers lack the professional support and guidance they need in order to determine how to best support young children with disabilities (Dinnebeil, McInerney, Roth, & Ramaswamy, 2001Dinnebeil et al., 2006) Unfortunately, in Ohio, opportunities for enrollment of young children with disabilities in a variety of inclusive community-based early childhood programs (e.g., Head Start centers, child care centers, nursery schools) is limited. This is also the case in many other programs across the globe (e.g., Clough & Nutbrown, 2004; Fyssa, Vlachou, & Avramidis, 2014; Grace, Llewellyn, Wedgwood, Fenech, & McConnell, 2008). These programs operate under different guidelines and regulations and, although they might welcome young children with special needs, they often lack the infrastructure necessary to support a consultative approach to itinerant ECSE services. As a result, itinerant ECSE teachers encounter idiosyncratic policies and procedures that either facilitate or hinder their work. While some programs have created staffing or scheduling options that allow early childhood teachers opportunities to consult with their itinerant ECSE teacher partner, other programs have not. It appears that some early childhood program administrators may not understand the need for itinerant ECSE teachers to consult with their early childhood teacher partners, while other administrators may see the value of these coaching sessions. It also is likely that some parents may not value consultation activity, instead believing that their child would benefit more from the direct attention of the itinerant ECSE teacher. However, in order to best support effective early childhood inclusion it is important that early childhood leaders and policymakers understand the challenges facing itinerant ECSE teachers and adopt local practices to address these obstacles. Our research question were as follows: (1) What are the challenges that itinerant ECSE teachers face as they provide services to young children with disabilities? We used survey research to address the research question. While the survey focused on the professional practices of itinerant ECSE teachers in Ohio, we believe that the results have international implications as nations and programs seek to increase high-quality inclusive education for young children with disabilities. This survey was approved by the University of Toledo's Institutional Review Board.

Method

Questionnaire Development

The complete questionnaire consisted of 28 closed- and 2 open-ended questions, as well as 3 questions addressing basic demographic information. We developed the closed-ended questionnaire based on the literature related to itinerant services (e.g., Dinnebeil & McInerney, 2011; Dinnebeil et al. 2006). We piloted the questionnaire with itinerant ECSE teachers and made changes to the wording and terminology based on

their recommendations. Examples of the content of closed-ended questions included securing information about the characteristics of the children served, activities itinerant ECSE engaged in during visits to the child, as well as the degree to which itinerant ECSE teachers believed they were prepared for their job. The questionnaire was converted to a digital format using a common electronic survey platform and we requested that respondents complete the survey online. The focus of this article is the responses to one of the open-ended questions: "What is the greatest professional challenge you are currently facing as an itinerant ECSE teacher?" A copy of the questionnaire is available from the authors.

Survey Respondents

The Ohio Department of Education does not maintain a database of itinerant ECSE teachers, so we worked with the early childhood coordinators housed in the 16 statewide support teams (SSTs) (which are similar to special education regional resource centers) to identify itinerant ECSE teachers who worked in each of their regions. These 16 early childhood coordinators provide technical assistance and professional development to itinerant ECSE teachers. Fifteen of the 16 coordinators provided either contact information (email address and/or telephone numbers) for the itinerant ECSE teachers, or provided contact information for preschool special education supervisors whose districts were located in that region and who might supervise itinerant ECSE teachers. If we received supervisors' contact information from the SST contact, we contacted supervisors by telephone and/or email to obtain email addresses for their itinerant ECSE teachers. These efforts yielded email addresses for 277 itinerant ECSE teachers across Ohio. We also sent a test email message to all itinerant ECSE teachers in our database to ensure that the email addresses were valid.

Survey Dissemination

We disseminated the web link to the survey along with an introductory letter via email to the 277 itinerant ECSE teachers on our list. As an incentive to participate in the survey, we raffled ten, $100 gift cards to a national chain store. We did that by asking respondents who were interested in participating in the raffle to provide their contact information. Once we received their responses, we recorded their contact information and deleted it from the questionnaire, thereby maintaining the anonymity of the respondents with respect to a link to survey responses. One week after we sent the initial email and survey link, we sent a reminder with another link to the survey. Based on some comments we received via email from busy itinerant ECSE teachers, we decided to leave the link to the survey open until the end of June so that teachers could complete the questionnaire when they were finished the school year. These efforts yielded responses from 117 teachers, representing a 42% return rate.

Data Analysis

The focus of this article is on the qualitative responses teachers provided to the question previously stated. We used content analysis procedures (Krippendorff, 2012) to identify patterns or themes represented by the comments for each of the questions. Two of the authors (individuals who are familiar with the literature on itinerant ECSE service delivery and conducted the survey) independently read through each comment and based on that review, independently generated a set of possible themes that seemed to reflect the comments. After that, both authors met to jointly decide on the final themes. We asked the third author (who is also familiar with literature on itinerant ECSE service delivery) to review the comments and provide feedback on the validity of the themes. This process yielded the themes outlined below.

One of the authors ensured that each comment represent an independent unit of analysis. We found that the responses of 11 teachers represented more than one theme or unit of analysis. For example, when asked about the biggest challenge they faced, one teacher answered by saying "time limits and trying to plan interventions within classroom activities." We believed that this comment as well as others like it actually represented two separate thoughts—one was "time limits" and the other was "trying to plan interventions within classroom activities". Thus, we divided this statement and others into 133 separate units of analysis. Fifteen respondents failed to provide a response to this question. This process yielded a total of 133 units of analysis reported by 102 respondents.

Two of the authors reviewed the responses to each question independently and

identified possible themes or patterns represented by the responses. Then these authors met and discussed the possible themes and patterns and reached consensus on a set of definitions for the themes. These authors used those definitions to code responses. The initial coding efforts resulted in 95% agreement between the first 2 authors. There were 6 instances when the two authors were unable to reach consensus about the meaning of a comment. When that occurred, we asked the third author to review and code the comment and then the three of us reached consensus on how to code the comment. Using that process, we found that we were unable to reach consensus on 3 comments and so we deleted those from the analysis. This process yielded a total of 130 coded comments. Descriptions of the codes are included below.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic characteristics

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the 102 teachers who responded to the survey. Approximately 75% of the teachers were full-time itinerant ECSE teachers; the remaining teachers either worked part-time or served as both classroom-based and itinerant services (e.g., served as a classroom teacher in the morning and provided itinerant services in the afternoon). In terms of degree status, most teachers had a master's degree in addition to a bachelor's degree; 26% had earned either an Education Specialist degree (advanced graduate degree) or a doctoral degree. Only two thirds had begun their job as an itinerant "fully licensed" by the Ohio Department of Education. The remaining one third had been hired to provide itinerant ECSE services under a temporary credential. Respondents reported an average of 7 years of experience (SD=5.47) as an itinerant teacher. Full-time itinerant teachers had an average of 14 children on their caseloads (SD=6.83). Part-time itinerant teachers, or those who provided both itinerant and classroom-based services, served an average of 8 children on their caseload (SD=5.19).

Characteristics of the services provided by itinerant teachers and the children they served.

In addition to asking for information about teachers' demographic characteristics, we also asked them to describe the characteristics of the services they provided as well as the children they served. Forty-one percent of the respondents indicated they primarily served children in Head Start classrooms. An additional 48% of these teachers indicated that they primarily served children in community-based preschools, childcare centers or families' homes. Eighty-four percent of the respondents reported conducting itinerant visits once a week, usually for about an hour or an hour and a half. In Ohio, each child served by an itinerant teacher must receive a minimum of four hours of services each month. Finally, we asked teachers to identify the most frequent types of delays or disabilities of the children they encountered. Communication delays or disorders were cited most frequently, followed by general delays and delays in social/emotional development. Table 2 depicts those results.

Results of the Content Analysis

When asked about major challenges that itinerant ECSE teachers face, six different themes were apparent. Each is discussed below.

Logistics

Table 3 describes the major categories that resulted from the content analysis. The first, labeled *logistics,* referred to the daily challenges faced by completing paperwork, balancing professional roles (some respondents served as both classroom-based teachers and itinerant ECSE teachers), scheduling visits and meetings, keeping up with state policies and regulations, and dealing with travel between sites. For example, one respondent stated that *"It is challenging to meet the demands of an ESC and a school district and participate in both agencies' professional development."* Another stated that a major challenge she faced was *"[H]aving enough time to provide services in addition to all the extra duties I do."*

Caseload

We labeled the second theme that emerged from the content analysis as *caseload*. In identifying major challenges that they faced as part of their job, itinerant ECSE teachers cited the problems involved when they had too many or too few children on their caseloads. As one can imagine, most of the

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of teachers

Demographic Characteristic	% and # of Respondents	Average or Mean
Employment Status		
Full-time itinerant	77 (78)	
Part-time itinerant	12 (12)	
Combination classroom and itinerant	11 (11)	
Highest Level of Education		
Bachelor's degree	9 (9)	
Master's degree	64 (65)	
Educational Specialist	25 (25)	
Doctoral degree	1(1)	
Licensure and Experience		
Fully licensed when initially employed	59 (60)	
Years of itinerant experience		7.13 (SD=5.53)
Caseload		
Average caseload for part time		10.13 (SD=6.90)
Average caseload for full time		13.597 (SD=6.85)

respondents cited having too many children on their caseloads (and not too few) as a job-related challenge they faced. One teacher commented that *"[T]he greatest professional challenges I see are that my caseload is so high. I serve 19 preschool students in addition to 6 kindergarten students for a total of 25. It is very difficult to manage time to see each child. Also, I am seeing more and more students with more severe disabilities....Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Multiple Disabilities, Social/Behavior Disorders, etc. These students are very challenging and having such a big caseload can be mentally and emotionally draining."* While most teachers identified too many children on their caseload, a few teachers worried about having too few children on their caseload which that might result in loss of their job or reduction in status from full time to part time.

Confidence and competence

Having *confidence* and feeling *competent* in their role as an itinerant teacher was the third theme that emerged from the data. Respondents described feeling uncertain about their abilities to provide effective itinerant services as well as feeling doubtful about their abilities as an itinerant to appropriately serve children, particularly in regards to supporting the needs of other adults. One teacher stated that *"[B]eing another professional in the classroom...there are many different programs that provide services in the classrooms…it is difficult to be another professional providing additional intervention strategies for the teacher."* Furthermore, they expressed concern about their abilities to work in a child's home (when delivering home-based itinerant services) or in another teacher's classroom. One teacher commented *"I struggle with behavioral issues while working with a child in their home. It becomes a question of "who is in charge?" the parent or me. It can become awkward when my suggestion for a solution to the problem is over looked (sic) and the parent uses behavioral techniques that are not appropriate for the child, or not helping him or her reach their IEP goals and objectives."*

Characteristics of teachers, parents and early childhood programs.

This theme referred to behaviors and attitudes of general ECE teachers or parents, as well as the overall quality of the general early childhood program which served as the primary placement for the child that the itinerant ECSE teacher served. It included challenges teachers faced from general ECE teachers who seemed resistant to working with the itinerant and/or lacked the capacity to implement child-focused interventions or collect progress monitoring data between itinerant visits. For example, one respondent identified a challenge as *"[H]ow to 'help' teachers in classroom where the teaching is lacking in professionalism and when they don't really 'want' help."* Another respondent described her major challenge as *"[W]orking with regular educators who don't welcome suggestions of strategies/interventions and who don't follow through on implementing suggested strategies/interventions."* This theme also reflected the challenges that itinerant teachers faced in working with some parents. For example, one teacher stated that *"[T]he greatest professional challenge*

that I am facing as an itinerant ECSE teacher is when the parents do not want a teacher coming to their home." Finally, teachers commented on the difficulties that ensue when there is not a good match between the characteristics of the children and the characteristics of the classroom. For example, one respondent commented that *"[T]heir curriculum is not always developmentally appropriate, thus their expectations of the performance/skills of the children may be higher than what should be expected."*

Access to professional supports and resources

Access to professional supports and resources referred to the degree to which the itinerant ECSE teacher faced professional isolation or felt that their supervisors, colleagues, or other administrators lacked awareness about the roles and responsibilities of an itinerant ECSE teacher. This also referred to a lack of support at the state level, as well as a lack of appropriate

Table 2.
Demographic characteristics of focus children and service delivery settings

Demographic Characteristic	**% and # of Respondents**	**Average or Mean**
Service Delivery Settings		
Head Start classrooms	39 (40)	
Community preschools or child care	23 (23)	
Home	22 (22)	
Preschool operated by a public school	7 (7)	
Special needs preschool	3 (3)	
Family care home	1 (1)	
Combination of services	1 (1)	
Other: Diagnostic center	1(1)	
Frequency of visits to focus child		
One time a week	84 (85)	
Twice a month	6 (6)	
Twice a week	4 (4)	
Three or more times a week	2 (2)	
Once a month	1 (1)	
Duration of visits		
1 hour	67 (68)	
1-1.5 hours	18 (18)	
Other	7 (7)	
1.5-2 hours	4 (4)	
2 hours	1 (1)	
Duration ECSE teacher provided services to focus child		
One school year	52 (58)	
Two school years	23 (26)	
Less than six months	19 (21)	
Less than three months	4 (4)	
Other	2 (1)	
Frequently occurring disability conditions of focus children	53 (53)	
Communication delays or disorders	18 (18)	
Overall developmental delays	9 (9)	
Social emotional delay or disorder	6 (6)	
Multiple or severe disabilities	6 (6)	
Autism	3 (3)	
Fine motor delay	1 (1)	
Gross motor delay		
Age		
Average age of focus children		4.64 (.779)

Table 3.

Major professional challenges itinerant ECSE teachers face

Theme	Components of Theme
Logistics	• Balancing professional roles (e.g., classroom teacher and provider of itinerant services). • Completing paperwork • Keeping up with changes in state rules and policies • Scheduling or coordinating meetings with others • Travel logistics
Caseload	• Too many children on caseload • Too few children on caseload
Confidence and Competence in Role	• Feeling comfortable and confident in my role as an itinerant • Working in someone else's classroom • Working in a student's home • Helping others to make changes to support the child
Characteristics of teachers, parents or early childhood programs	• Quality of ECE programs and classrooms • Attitudes of ECE partner teachers • Resistant behaviors of teachers or parents • Teachers' capacity to implement child-focused interventions • Teachers' capacity to collect progress monitoring data • Mismatch between characteristics of the classroom and learning needs of students
Access to professional support and resources	• Professional isolation • Lack of support or understanding from supervisors • Lack of state level support • Access to resources (e.g., materials and equipment)
Meeting the needs of specific children	• Working effectively with students who have specific needs (e.g., behavioral concerns) • Writing functional goals • Developing meaningful activities

resources to provide high-quality itinerant ECSE services. When asked to describe major professional challenges faced as an itinerant ECSE teacher, one respondent commented that she is the *"[O]nly itinerant in the area so it is hard to meet with other itinerants and discuss what we are doing and challenges we face."* Another complained that *"[W]orking in a public school, I also feel like many of my colleagues don't fully understand how much I have to do with all the Preschool students and Kindergarten students as well. Some think I just "visit" the students when I really do much more than that."* Another teacher stated that *"[A]lthough my supervisor has a clear perception of my role as an itinerant teacher, many of my colleagues after 4 years still do not understand what exactly my roles and responsibilities are-which can make it difficult to collaborate with them. I also feel ""out of the loop"" most of the time with what is going on at my school. Since I am gone most of the day, I miss out on meetings that occur during the day or other activities planned for staff or students."*

Meeting the needs of specific children.

The final theme that emerged from the content analysis was the difficulties that itinerant ECSE teachers faced in trying to adequately meet the needs of specific children they served. This included challenges like meeting the needs of children with challenging behavior, writing functional IEP goals and developing meaningful and effective developmental or educational activities for those children (e.g., for children with severe disabilities served in the home). Examples of respondent comments included: *"I would also like to continue to grow in the area of behavioral interventions and teaching social skills"* and *"[C]urrently not being able to give all kids the classroom experience that they need. I know not all need to be in a classroom but many on my caseload NEED that interaction."*

Quantitative Analysis of Comments

In addition to identifying the major themes that emerged from the content analysis, we were also interested in determining the frequency of comments for each of the themes as well as the number of respondents whose comments were related to each theme. Table 4 includes the results from that analysis.

The greatest number of comments (48 or 37% of the total number of comments) were about *logistical* challenges. The theme *Characteristics of Parents, Teachers, and Quality of the ECE Program* had the second highest number of comments (38 or 29% of the total), followed by *Access to Professional Support and Resources* (15 or 12% of the total), *Confidence and Competence in Role* (12 or 9% of the total), *Caseload* (9 comments or 7% of the total), and *Meeting the Needs of Specific Children* (8 or 6% of the total).

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that itinerant ECSE teachers face many professional challenges. These challenges include problems handling the logistics of their job, working with diverse groups of parents and teachers, and working across a range of early childhood programs. Itinerant teachers responding to this survey described challenges they faced related to accessing professional support and the resources they needed to engage in their role effectively. This has also been demonstrated to be the case in other areas of the world including the UK (Clough & Nutbrown, 2004), Greece, (Fyssa et al. 2014), and Australia (Grace et al., 2008). Of interest is the degree to which itinerant ECSE teachers identified issues of comfort and confidence in their own abilities to provide high quality services to children, as well as the extent to which they felt they were able to meet the needs of specific children they served.

Concerns about logistics

Handling the day-to-day logistics of their job appears to be the most significant challenge that itinerant teachers face. Respondents provided significantly more comments related to the theme of logistics than any of the other themes that emerged from the content analysis. Handling the day-to-day details about one's job is often challenging and frustrating. Itinerant ECSE teachers who spend the majority of their time "on the road", face many logistical challenges on a daily basis. Unlike their classroom-based colleagues, itinerant ECSE teachers interact with far more individuals on a daily basis. The sheer number of these interactions can pose scheduling problems and difficulties. Savvy entrepreneurs can look upon this as an opportunity to develop organizational and time management systems that could help to address some of the logistical challenges itinerant ECSE teachers face. Digital applications for mobile devices could be very helpful for these itinerant teachers. Providing professional development experiences that focus on organization and time management could also be an important resource. Finally, it is important for itinerant ECSE teachers and their supervisors to streamline visitation schedules, making it easier for itinerant ECSE to do their jobs. For example, serving multiple children in one program could help decrease driving or commuting time for itinerant teachers. Another way of decreasing travel time is to increase the amount of time teachers spend during a single visit while decreasing the number of visits per child.

Table 4.
Frequency of comments per theme

Theme	# of Responses	# of Individuals	% of Total
Logistics	42	33	36
Caseload	8	5	6.8
Confidence and competence in role	11	7	9.4
Characteristics of teachers, parents, and quality of ECE program	34	27	29
Access to professional support and resources	14	9	12
Meeting the needs of specific children	8	16	6.8
Multiple Categories		14	
Total	117	101	100

Concerns about caseloads

Working "smarter" could also help to address some of the concerns about the number of children on itinerant ECSE teachers'

caseloads—another challenge they reported. Inappropriate caseloads can compromise the quality of services that young children with disabilities receive and can create frustration for the itinerant ECSE teachers who serve them. It is critical that supervisors and district personnel, along with state-level leaders, work diligently to ensure that itinerant ECSE teachers have appropriate caseloads. While increasing caseloads may seem like a way to stretch the district budget, it can actually backfire since the quality of services provided to children can easily be compromised. Itinerant ECSE teachers who serve too many children are unable to provide quality services. Consequently, the district or LEA may be wasting financial resources in supporting ineffective early intervention services.

Concerns about working with others

Although one should not underestimate the challenges that logistical difficulties and inappropriate caseloads can create, we are concerned with the challenges that respondents identified that are related to working with other teachers and parents, as well as serving children across a spectrum of early childhood programs. Those challenges are far more difficult to address and can have more serious implications for the quality of services young children receive.

The complexities involved in providing consultation and coaching to general educators has been well-documented in the school consultation literature (Downer, Locasale-Crouch, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Harris & Cancelli, 1991; Johnson, Pugach, & Hammitte, 1988). In 2011, the Region 1 Office of Child Care and the National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative published a set of competencies related to providing consultation to teachers and other professionals who work with infants and toddlers. The competencies outlined in this document are complex and exhaustive and speak to the difficult job that early childhood consultants face. While behavioral consultants who work in the K-12 school system receive formal training related to consultation, itinerant ECSE teachers, who often are called upon to do the same job, receive little or none. It is no surprise that without proper training and support, itinerant ECSE teachers find it difficult to provide effective consultation services. While parents who choose itinerant ECSE services for their children might be viewed as willing participants, they may do so without fully understanding how a consultative approach to itinerant ECSE service delivery works versus the more familiar "pull out" or one-to-one service delivery model. This is especially true for parents who advocate for a "medical model" of services for their children; a model that emphasizes the primacy of "hands on" therapy provided by experts.

The resistance that respondents identified as a major challenge to their work may be especially relevant when it comes to working with general ECE teachers who, often by default, find themselves in relationships with itinerant ECSE teachers (Harris & Cancelli, 1991). Even though participating in a consultative relationship should be voluntary (Wesley & Buysse, 2006), it often is not. Harris and Cancelli (1991) argue that the degree to which the consultee "volunteers" to work with the consultant has major implications for the success of the consultative relationship. It is not surprising that a number of respondents who identified working with teachers and parents as a major challenge, also cited a lack of confidence or competence in their role as an itinerant ECSE teacher as an associated challenge.

Concerns about quality of early childhood programs

Along with working with individuals, respondents to this survey also identified as a challenge the quality of the early childhood program in which itinerant services are provided. Itinerant ECSE teachers' concerns about the quality of the early childhood program are not new (Dinnebeilet al., 2001). Unfortunately, the history of quality child care in the United States is not positive, although recent efforts to improve quality have had positive outcomes. Many young children, both with and without disabilities, are served in early childhood programs that provide mediocre to poor care (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012) and LEAs often have little control over where parents decide to enroll their children who receive itinerant services. Recent advances in the development and implementation of quality improvement rating systems (QRIS) will hopefully help parents identify high quality early childhood programs, resulting in better outcomes for children (Mitchell, 2009; Zellman & Perlman, 2008).

In addition to poor quality care that is characteristic of some early childhood programs, itinerant ECSE teachers can encounter challenges when there is a mismatch in

the educational approaches taken by a general early childhood program staff and the needs of a particular child with a disability. While the field has made great strides in developing a joint understanding of what constitutes developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1993), many general early childhood educators reject or do not understand that some educational practices that are generally perceived as developmentally inappropriate (e.g., providing extrinsic motivation) may be individually appropriate for some children. Consequently, they may overtly or covertly reject the advice or recommendations of an itinerant ECSE teacher, as well as fail to adopt evidence-based practices in addressing the IEP objectives of children in their classroom.

Concerns about professional support

Many of the itinerant ECSE teachers who responded to this survey spoke about the challenges they face securing professional support from colleagues and supervisors. Since itinerant ECSE teachers have unique roles, they often do not enjoy the professional collegiality that classroom-based teachers experience. In addition, in Ohio, special education supervisors and administrators report confusion about the role of the itinerant ECSE teacher. As a result, some respondents identified their supervisor's lack of understanding of the role of an itinerant ECSE teacher as a challenge. They also identified the challenge that occurs when their school-based colleagues do not seem to understand what they do. Professional support is an essential element of any effective educational system. Itinerant ECSE teachers face issues that many classroom-based colleagues or special education administrators do not experience. Since these are unique challenges, having professional colleagues to turn to for support and guidance is critical.

Our state's early childhood coordinators, housed in our regional special education resource centers, have worked to provide professional support to itinerant ECSE teachers primarily through developing and maintaining communities of practice and study groups. We have also begun to use social networking to help itinerant ECSE teachers develop and maintain connections with each other. These strategies have the potential to provide the support and collegiality that itinerant ECSE teachers need in order to sustain and improve the quality of their professional practice. It's important to make sure that all itinerant ECSE teachers know about these resources and are comfortable accessing them. Even though the itinerant ECSE teachers who responded to this survey had been providing itinerant services for an average of 7 years, a standard deviation of over 5 years provides evidence that not all respondents were seasoned itinerants. Reaching out to new itinerant ECSE teachers to make sure they are aware of professional resources is important to their success and competence.

Limitations

While we learned many things about the challenges facing itinerant ECSE teachers, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study. First, although almost half of the respondents completed the questionnaire, not all of them did. There is the possibility that the responses analyzed in this study do not represent the perspectives of all the itinerant ECSE teachers in Ohio, let alone across the country. We also were not able to obtain access to the names and contact information for all of the itinerant ECSE teachers in Ohio—one of the 16 state support teams was unable to provide that information. Consequently, there is a possibility that itinerant ECSE teachers who did not receive an invitation to participate in the survey may have provided different responses.

Another limitation of this study is the possible bias that might have occurred when identifying and describing the themes that emerged from the content analysis. The first and second authors first identified themes independently and then worked jointly to develop the final definitions used in the analysis. It is possible that other individuals would have identified different themes. Replication of this study could increase confidence that the issues here are, indeed, professional challenges that are faced by itinerant ECSE teachers.

Implications for Future Research

As the provision of consultative services to support early childhood inclusion becomes more prevalent, it is critical that researchers work to identify the key components of effective consultation and other models of collaboration. The field is beginning to understand how different models of

professional support help educators learn new skills and gain new competencies (Sheridan et al., 2009). However, the terms "consultation" and "coaching" are used freely without operational definitions, and often are seen as equivalent terms or practice models. We respectfully suggest that consultation and coaching, while sharing some elements of practice, differ. Until we are able to reach an understanding of what these terms mean, we will be unable to evaluate the efficacy of their use by itinerant ECSE teachers and fully understand the challenges these ECSE professionals face.

Implications for Practice

The provision of effective itinerant ECSE services involves 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches. From a top-down perspective, itinerant ECSE teachers need direction and guidance, in the form of effective supervision, from administrators and state level leaders. Unfortunately, itinerant teachers will continue to face the challenges described in this study until they receive the support they need to advance their professional skills and practice. Developing and disseminating a shared understanding of what constitutes effective itinerant ECSE services is critical in supporting itinerant ECSE teachers. Parents and general educators must understand what to expect from itinerant ECSE teachers providing consultation services. Administrators must also understand that the most effective itinerant ECSE teachers are seasoned professionals—not novices just entering the profession. LEA administrators who hire itinerant ECSE teachers must take experience into account when filling itinerant ECSE positions. Involving the general ECE community in this discussion is key to advancing high quality itinerant ECSE services. This means engaging in systemic discussions with community leaders and making sure that general ECE teachers who work with itinerant ECSE teachers participate in the IEP process as full partners.

From a 'bottom-up' perspective, itinerant ECSE teachers require training and ongoing professional development so they can function effectively in their positions. Given the nature of most ECSE teacher preparation programs, it is highly unlikely that itinerant ECSE teachers are adequately prepared to work effectively with other adults versus focusing their interaction on one-to-one interaction with the children on their caseload. While teachers may complete a course in "collaboration in special education" as part of their preservice program, we doubt that they are required to complete formal clinical experiences that focus on work with other adults in a consultation/partnership role. One solution to the problem might be requiring an additional credential that teachers earn by completing a program of study that focuses on the critical knowledge and skills needed by consultants. However, creating this requirement could make it even more difficult to fill itinerant positions, thus limiting inclusive options and threatening the integrity of the principle of *least restrictive environment.* Career ladder options which reward ECSE teachers for acquiring "value added" credentials, voluntarily, also could motivate engaged itinerant professionals to complete advanced training that focuses on the dynamics of consultation services and the development of professional partnerships.

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