

Introduction

Overview

Mentoring *New Special Education Teachers* is designed to assist educators who are developing a mentoring program for new special education teachers, for individuals selected to mentor a new special education teacher, and for new special education teachers. The field of special education experiences a frequent attrition of teachers, thus teacher retention is a prominent topic discussed in professional literature and at conferences. According to the Council for Exceptional Children (2000a), within the first five years of teaching, 4 out of 10 teachers leave the field of special education. This figure is alarming considering an *Education Week* report (2002) indicated that 98% of school districts report shortages of special education teachers. Furthermore, the number of new special education teachers predicted for the near future is astounding as current teachers retire, move into other education positions, or leave special education. According to Boyer and Mainzer (2003), during the past ten years the growth in the number of students with disabilities has increased by 30% where as the growth in teaching positions grew by 11%. More students are entering special education than there are teachers to teach them.

The Council for Exceptional Children (2000a) predicts that by the year 2005, over 200,000 new special education teachers are needed throughout the United States. Presently, there are no indications that the demand for new special education teachers will subside anytime in the near future. McLeskey, Deutsch-Smith, Tyler, and Sanders (2002) report in their review of research on the shortage of special education teachers that the shortage exists across all regions of the United States, is chronic and long term, and will worsen over the next decade. The need for mentoring programs, as a form of special education teacher retention, is vividly clear.

School districts are reacting to the shortage of special education teachers by using various strategies such as adopting the “grow your own philosophy” of training paraeducators from within school districts. Other districts are recruiting teachers from distant geographic areas where there are higher than average numbers of special education teachers. Additionally, states and school districts are implementing mentoring programs as a retention activity. According to Feiman-Nemser (1996), the magnitude of mentoring programs has increased with over 30 states mandating mentoring support for beginning



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teachers. Resource B contains a list of states that mandate mentoring programs. State education agencies and local school districts recognize that it is cost efficient to support and retain existing teachers as compared to the recurring costs of recruiting and training new special education teachers. Whitaker (2000) recommends that mentoring is provided to all beginning special education teachers. Her recommendation is gaining momentum across the nation as research data supports the success of mentoring programs.

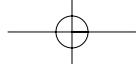
The effectiveness of special education mentoring programs is encouraging. According to Bridges to Success (2003), the Oregon special education recruitment and retention project, districts which implemented strong teacher support systems achieved a five-year teacher retention rate of 70% to 80%. In addition, the Council for Exceptional Children (2000b) suggests that special education teachers who have the support of a mentor teacher are more likely to remain in the profession. Mason and White (2001) corroborate these findings as reported in their results that 91% of new special education teachers surveyed in a national mentoring induction project reported they were satisfied with their mentoring experience.

Bey and Holmes (1990) describe three primary reasons for implementing mentoring programs:

1. To help beginning teachers cope with “dissatisfactions, disappointments, and difficulties” (p. 51) in the first year of teaching.
2. To combat high turnover and to reduce attrition.
3. To improve teacher performance.

Designing an effective mentoring program to address the issues of new special education teachers is not as simple as finding the most experienced special education teachers and pairing them with the new teachers. Mentoring programs should be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of participants and should not simply specify mentor and mentee roles.

School districts recognize that special education mentors support the mentee from their hire date, before students arrive for the first day of school, and throughout the first school year or longer. Without special education mentors, school districts risk high rates of teacher attrition and a never-ending cycle of hiring, training, and replacing special education teachers. Without a supportive mentor, the new special education teacher is also placed in a situation that can become frustrating and unfulfilling. Mentors, through their guidance, insight, and communication provide emotional and mental strength for the mentee. Having an effective mentor can make the difference between the mentee’s first year of teaching being successful or exasperating. Mentoring can make the difference between the mentee returning to teach a second year or leaving special education all together. Reminisce to your first days of teaching. Who guided you through the ups and downs of organizing your classroom, preparing and meeting the students, and delivering effective instruction while managing behavior? If you are reading this book as a mentor, you understand how important effective mentoring is to the first-year special education teacher.



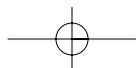
As a special education mentor, your role is not to mold the mentees to walk, talk, think, and teach like you, but to listen to their frustrations, rejoice in their triumphs, provide insight when they have questions, and just be there when the mentees need a shoulder to lean on. The mentoring process will benefit you as you learn about yourself, share your teaching philosophy and beliefs, and examine your teaching actions that have become automatic over time but now need to be explained so the mentee can learn how you think and operate. One reward of mentoring a new special education teacher is that you experience growth in the mentee and in yourself.

The activities in this book are designed to help individuals create and deliver effective mentoring programs for new special education teachers. The content has been field tested with experienced special education teachers serving as mentors to new special education teachers. Teachers have reported satisfaction with the activities and have shared vignettes of their experiences, which appear throughout the book. According to Lloyd, Wood, and Moreno (2000), a training program for special education mentors should consist of (a) the role of the mentor teacher; (b) tactics for working with adult peers; (c) ways to establish rapport and trust with the new teacher; and (d) strategies to provide both positive and constructive feedback. This book includes content that addresses these recommended components as well as timely additional information related to critical issues in mentoring new special education teachers as noted by Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, and Kilgore (2003). In their review of new teacher induction in special education, the following effective features of mentoring programs are described: frequent contact between mentor and mentee, pairing both mentors and mentees in special education, the nonevaluative role of the mentor, the mentor and mentee's understanding of the mentoring process, personal characteristics of the mentor, emotional support, and forms of support.

Moreover, Whitaker (2001) identified five factors related to the challenges many new special education teachers encounter their first year of teaching. These factors include (1) an inability to transfer learning from theory into practice; (2) a lack of preparation for many demands of teaching; (3) reluctance to ask questions or seek help; (4) the difficulty of the teaching assignment and the inadequate resources provided; and (5) unrealistic expectations and the associated loss of a sense of efficacy. This book provides the most current information that also takes in hand Whitaker's findings on the challenges facing special education teachers.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

The six chapters in this book address issues related to becoming a mentor, effective communication skills, adult learner characteristics, needs of new special education teachers, supports for new special education teachers, and elements of designing a mentoring program. Included in Resource A is a two-day workshop for training special education mentor teachers. Educators will also find figures, tables, and appendices throughout the book that provide specific activities and resources for mentors and protégés in a user-friendly format.





Chapter 1 contains special education–specific information related to the concerns of new special education teachers. The needs of new special education teachers are discussed in relation to their diverse backgrounds. For example, some new special education teachers will be recent college graduates, experienced special education teachers new to a disability area or grade level, or out-of-field teachers starting a second career. Numerous mentor-mentee activities are located in this chapter.

Supports for new special education teachers are discussed in Chapter 2. The uniqueness of special education is further identified by the inclusion of topics such as collaborating with general educators, making accommodations, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and instructional strategies. In addition, the Council for Exceptional Children knowledge and teaching skills are linked to resources for mentors.

Chapter 3 contains critical elements for designing effective special education mentoring programs. Principles from the Council for Exceptional Children Mentoring Induction project are discussed in relation to activities presented in the book, e-mentoring, action planning, evaluating progress, and fading support are additional topics discussed. A mentoring activities calendar is located in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 describes the process of identifying, recruiting, and selecting special education mentors. Educators will find a description of the skills needed by mentors, personality traits of mentors, and the roles and responsibilities of mentors. Also discussed are the benefits of mentoring a new special education teacher. Most chapters conclude with Web sites for mentors and “What if” questions for mentors to consider.

Chapter 5 contains content related to effective communication skills. All relationships, including the mentor-mentee relationship, are built on effective communication. Nonverbal and verbal communication skills are discussed as well as teaming and problem solving skills. Activities for practicing communication skills are included in this chapter.

Skills needed by mentors in the area of adult learning theory are discussed in Chapter 6. There are specific needs of adult learners that differ from school-age learners. Motivation and validating experiences shape the mentee’s behavior. The importance of matching personalities is discussed as the mentors explore their personality styles and determine whether they match their mentee’s personality.

Throughout this book the recurring philosophy is that the mentor should assist, not assess, the mentee (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). The mentor and new special education teacher are building a relationship based on professionalism and trust that would be compromised by evaluative actions from the mentor. The content of this book will facilitate the development of this mentor-mentee relationship using current information accompanied with valuable activities and resources.