



Is it all about loving the kids? Perceptions about expertise in special education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Perspectives on expert teaching reveal assumptions about students.
- Perspectives on expert teaching reveal assumptions about the purposes of special education.
- Forms of expert teaching met different functions depending on expectations.
- Positive narratives about teachers and students contrasted with deficit-oriented views.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers, school leaders, and faculty ($n = 32$) were interviewed regarding their perceptions about the expertise of teachers of students with significant support needs. While participants agreed that expert instruction was characterized by knowledge about the student and positivity, their beliefs differed in relation to the functions of those expert skills. Findings revealed that deficit- and asset-oriented views of students were related to views about the professionalism of teachers. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to the apparent link between deficit views about students and views of special education teachers as professionals.

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1. Introduction

A variety of individual and social factors affect the experiences of students in schools. Teachers' and school leaders' beliefs, knowledge, and expectations about student capacities underscore these factors. Images of ideal classrooms and teaching, known as *visions of instruction* (Hammerness, 2001), have been used to reveal the (often hidden) assumptions that drive teachers' practice. While some visions are sharply focused, reflect a broad perspective on the changes that can be affected by teaching, and articulate a long-range plan for improvement, other visions are narrow, vague, and short-sighted. Less-developed aspects of visions of instruction can sometimes point to tacit beliefs about students and the teacher's professional role (Britzman, 1991; Clandinin, 1986;

Hammerness, 2001).

For students with significant support needs, who are often physically and socially separated from the school community, visions of instruction among important stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, and teacher educators, can affect students' and their teachers' sense of belonging in the school, and their access to high-quality instructional resources and opportunities (Greenway, McCollow, Hudson, Peck, & Davis, 2013). We define students with significant support needs as children and youth who are "most likely to need ongoing, individualized supports to participate in inclusive communities and enjoy a quality of life similar to that available to all people" (TASH, www.tash.org). They usually qualify for special education under the categories of intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities. Because teaching expertise is context-dependent (Berliner, 2004), and for students with significant support needs diagnoses and educational placement often intersect, an understanding of how teachers' expertise is conceptualized and understood within overall visions of

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instruction can shed light on the ways that students with significant support needs and their teachers are positioned in schools.

1.1. Expertise among special educators of students with significant support needs

Teachers of students with significant support needs must adapt to a wide variety of teaching situations and must be prepared to teach any content that a student needs to learn (Kurth, Born, & Love, 2016; Ruppap, Roberts, & Olson, 2014; 2017). Ropo (2004) noted that teaching expertise is particularly situation-specific, and expert teaching is not likely transferrable among different teaching situations. This could be especially important for studying expertise in special education. Special education teachers might teach and support students in preschool, elementary, middle, high school, transitioning from school to work, or in a postsecondary setting. On a given day a teacher of students with significant support needs could be teaching in a calculus class, English literature class, the cafeteria, physical education, a local store, the public bus, and even such private spaces as the bathroom or nurse's office. Within those settings, the teacher might be working with different students who present with different competencies and challenges, and require instruction on highly individualized goals. This presents challenges for defining expertise in the field. Because of the wide range of conditions under which a teacher of students with significant support needs might be expected to engage in instruction, defining what constitutes "expertise" depends, in part, on the instructional setting.

In a series of studies, Ruppap and colleagues examined perceptions about expertise among special education teachers of students with significant support needs (see Roberts, Ruppap, & Olson, 2017; Ruppap, Roberts, & Olson, 2014; 2017). Teachers described how they leveraged deep relationships with students as they made instructional decisions, set high expectations that included a clear vision of positive outcomes, believed in the interconnectedness of teaching and advocacy, and forged strong collegial relationships with other professionals as well as family members. Similarly, Stough and Palmer (2003) found that expert special education teachers used their extensive knowledge about students to assess students' emotional and academic needs. Urbach et al. (2015) found that while less accomplished teachers focused on relationships and protecting students, more accomplished teachers believed that high-intensity instruction was necessary, and clearly understood that students' academic achievement was the teacher's responsibility. Together, these findings suggest that knowledge about students is a hallmark of teaching expertise, and expectations for student achievement among expert teachers reflect assumptions that students have the capacity to learn and achieve positive outcomes. However, teachers of students with significant support needs have reported that other teachers and school leaders do not understand their roles and responsibilities (Greenway, McCollow, Hudson, & Peck, 2013; Roberts, 2013). While previous research has uncovered perceptions about expertise in teaching students with significant support needs, additional information about stakeholders' assumptions about students with significant support needs and their teachers is embedded in visions of expert instruction. By examining visions of expert instruction, the intersection between beliefs and practice can be explored.

1.2. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how expertise among teachers of students with significant support needs is defined by three groups of individuals with special knowledge of the phenomenon: (1) teacher education faculty specializing in the

preparation of teachers of students with significant support needs; (2) school leaders responsible for evaluating teachers of students with significant support needs; and (3) teachers identified as experts in teaching students with significant support needs. We chose these three groups of stakeholders because we reasoned they would be positioned to provide definitions that are grounded in their own experiences and observations, and their definitions might shed light about current social understandings and definitions of expertise in relation to teaching students with significant support needs. In particular, we explore the congruencies and diversity among their understandings about various forms of teaching practices, and the functions they believed those practices serve. In the current analysis, we specifically addressed the question: *What do perceptions about forms and functions of expert teaching reveal about how students with significant support needs and their teachers are positioned in schools?*

1.3. Theoretical framework

According to Hammerness (2001), a vision of instruction is a set of ideal images of classroom instruction. For example, Munter (2014) found that mathematics teachers envisioned features of high-quality instruction across four dimensions: (a) the role of the teacher, (b) the nature of classroom discourse, (c) the classroom environment, and (d) student engagement (p. 597). Within each dimension teachers articulated characteristics of specific activities and behaviors that contributed to high-quality instruction. In examining definitions and visions of expertise, we analyzed our data in terms of the *forms* and *functions* of the teaching behaviors they described. Saxe, Gearhart, Franke, Howard, and Crockett (1999) described form and function as the instructional practice (form) and the pedagogical rationale for why that specific practice is used or how it should be used (function). For example, Saxe et al. found that specific forms of mathematics assessments shaped students' mathematical thinking in different ways; in other words, certain assessment forms served a different function than others and were used for different purposes. Since people might perceive different functions for similar practices, the ways in which teachers in the Saxe et al. study articulated the function of specific assessment forms, which provided insight into their pedagogical decision making, skills, and values. In the current study, we examined the varying ways that participants described expert teachers' work (specific forms) and examined how those descriptions might explain the intended outcomes of their work as teachers from the participants' perspectives (intended functions).

2. Research design and methodology

In this comparative qualitative interview study, we examined the experiences and perspectives of participants regarding a specific social phenomenon: Expertise among teachers of students with significant support needs (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

2.1. Participants

We recruited participants as part of a series of studies on expertise among teachers of students with significant support needs (see Roberts, et al., 2017; Ruppap et al., 2015; Ruppap, et al., 2017). A total of 32 participants were recruited from three separate groups: (1) teachers of students with significant support needs, (2) school leaders who supervised and evaluated teachers of students with significant support needs, and (3) teacher education faculty at institutions of higher education with expertise in

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