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Curriculum Decision-Making Processes of Beginning Special Education Teachers

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Context of Research

I graduated from BSU in May 2015 with my Master’s of Education in Special Education Moderate Disabilities PreK-8. Previously, I graduated from BSU in May 2014 with my Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education and Mathematics. I am currently a first-year special education teacher at a suburban elementary school district in southeastern Massachusetts. I am a special education teacher assigned to a Therapeutic Learning Classroom, splitting my time between two schools and four grades with five students on my caseload. I provide my students with a completely modified curriculum based on their current abilities, needs, and individual education program (IEP) goals.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, I worked as the Graduate Assistant for the Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders at BSU. This position provided me with many opportunities to learn and experience a range of aspects of the field of Special Education. This position also provided me with the opportunity to be a co-investigator with the research of my supervisor, Dr. Edward Carter. This research focused on the decision-making processes of 11 beginning special education teachers, all graduates of BSU M.Ed. Programs in Special Education in January or May of 2014. These teachers joined a participatory action research project designed to investigate all of the decisions they must make within their roles as special education teachers. By exploring the different aspects of decisions that special education teachers make, the hope is to better understand the roles of these important professionals.

One of the critical factors that participants emphasized when describing their decision-making processes was in regards to curriculum. Curriculum decisions are important in the classroom because they shape exactly what students are going to learn, and how they are going to learn it. As special education teachers, it is important to meet the needs of all students, but there are many different factors that impact how teachers make these decisions. As a beginning special educator myself, I am interested in exploring ways that other teachers make decisions about curriculum in their classrooms.

Area of Focus

This research focused on the decision-making processes of beginning special educators as they relate to curriculum development in their classrooms. This research explored the factors that are influencing beginning special education teachers as they make their decisions about curriculum.

Literature Review

Special education teachers play an important role in the lives of many children. Teachers directly impact the growth of student maturity, knowledge, and abilities. In order to have an impact, teachers are required to make many decisions that reflect the best interest of their class, individual students, parents, colleagues, their school, their district, and themselves. They must balance these decisions while ensuring that the needs of their students are being met from a legal and a moral perspective. There are different ideas about how these decisions are ultimately made including teachers’ personal beliefs and the setting of their roles (Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond 2015). Ruppar et al. state that, “in special education, teachers’ beliefs about their teaching skills and their expectations about what students might achieve have been identified as potentially influential to their decisions” (p. 211). Thus, it is important to have an understanding of personal beliefs in regards to teaching practices and student success in order to comprehend the decisions being made. It is also important to know what the setting of the classroom
looks like in order to understand from where teacher decisions come. In general, these decisions will then lead to either a functional or an academic path for teaching students with disabilities. This idea of functional or academic paths relates directly to the curriculum being taught in the classroom.

Since curriculum plays such a pivotal role in education, teachers must constantly be making decisions that relate to their students’ curriculum. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that all students should be provided access to the general education curriculum in conjunction with their Individualized Education Program (IEP) (2004). However, the exact amount and definition of access to general education curriculum is not clearly stated. It is unclear “whether access is met by aligning learning goals with academics standards, or whether access requires more social and academic links to general education” (Timberlake, 2014). Without a clear interpretation of this statement, teachers are left with more decisions about what access means within their classroom. In one study (2007), the authors surveyed general education and special education teachers and found teachers defined access in terms of curriculum content, location, instructor, and materials. Of 25 participants, 80% said curriculum content, 48% said location, 36% said instructor, and 32% said materials fell under the definition of access to the general education curriculum (Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, and Slagor 2007). Clearly, there is room for interpretation about how exactly to provide this access in the classroom.

Since there is seemingly some discrepancy regarding the definition of access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities, teachers are left to make these decisions in their own classrooms. In an exploration of teachers’ decision-making about literacy in their classroom, Ruppar et al. (2015) found five factors that contribute to teacher decisions: context, beliefs about students, teaching and learning, expectations, and self-efficacy. They explain that these core concepts interact to impact the literacy decisions that teachers make in their classrooms, and they “observed a dynamic relationship between teachers’ contexts and their beliefs, expectations, and self-efficacy” (Ruppar et al., 2015, p. 216). Based on their interviews, observations, and collected documents, Ruppar et al. developed a preliminary theoretical framework which states that “the relationships among teachers’ beliefs and contexts were dynamic, and teachers’ self-efficacy provided a key link between beliefs and contexts in influencing literacy decisions” (p. 221). It appears that the personal beliefs of teachers impact the decisions they make about literacy curriculum development in their classrooms.

Another study that explores how teachers make decisions about curriculum focuses on how they decide adaptations for their students. Adaptations are defined in a variety of ways including curricular, instructional, or alternative (Kurth and Keegan, 2014). Kurth and Keegan (2014) focused on the curricular adaptations that teachers were making and how these impacted their students. When asked why changes were made, the following themes emerged: “encourage student independence, increase access to the core curriculum, promote appropriate or on-task behavior, provide a separate or different functional curriculum” (Kurth and Keegan, 2014, p. 197), and because of student deficits, teachers described many different reasons for their decisions to adapt curriculum for their students. Overall, Kurth and Keegan found that educators considered “student need, ease of use, and the original assignment when creating adaptations” (p. 200). Results indicate that there are many factors that influence how teachers ultimately make their decisions to adapt curriculum, and it is implied that there needs to be more exploration of ways to promote successful adaptations.

Based upon previous research, it is known that teachers must make many decisions within their role, especially when it comes to curriculum. But what exactly influences how teachers, especially in the beginning of their career, make these decisions is a topic that has been only minimally explored? This present research study was guided by the following research question: “How do first- and second-year special education teachers make decisions about curriculum in their classroom?” By exploring how teachers make these decisions, we can further understand the complexities of being a special education teacher, and the implications this may have on how to best train special education professionals.
Methodology
Participants
In this study, data were collected from 11 first- or second-year special education teachers. The 11 participants were all recent graduates from the Bridgewater State University’s Master’s of Education program with a concentration in either Moderate Disabilities PreK-8, Moderate Disabilities 5-12, or Severe Disabilities all levels. Each participant was working as a special educator in a public school district located in southeastern Massachusetts; these districts represented urban, suburban, and rural towns. Participants represented educators in elementary, middle, and high school settings, as well as roles based in resource rooms, inclusion classrooms, and self-contained classrooms. Although there were similarities within each role, including differentiating instruction, adapting general education curriculum, managing behavior, and writing IEPs, no two participants shared the exact same student caseload, setting, or overall responsibilities.

Data Sources
Participant content maps, group interviews, individual interviews, and a survey were used in these parts of the investigation. Participants were asked to create content maps that visually displayed the main aspects of their decision-making processes. Participants’ content maps reflected the decisions specific to their roles in a format allowing unique, individual interpretation. Two group interviews were scheduled during times that all of the participants could be present in order to have open discussions about their decision-making. Between these two group interviews, individual interviews were scheduled with each participant and the principal investigator. These interviews allowed participants to further explain their content maps and group discussions. Based on the content maps, group interviews, and individual interviews, a survey was created that targeted specific aspects of curriculum that participants discussed previously. The survey was comprised of 10 questions: 5 Likert scale questions, 1 order ranking question, 3 short response questions, and 1 question that asked for the participant’s name.

Procedure
Before the data collection began, this research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Bridgewater State University. Teachers were invited, via phone and email, to attend an orientation session and first group interview for this research project. At the orientation meeting, teachers were given an overview of the project and were given the choice to participate or not. If they chose to participate, teachers signed a consent form, giving the researchers permission to use their responses for this project. Once consent was given, the first group session was held.

The teachers participated in two group sessions, on separate dates, one month apart. During these sessions, the group interviews were conducted, and participants were asked to create content maps displaying their decision-making processes. To begin these group interviews, participants were prompted with broad questions but were otherwise unscripted, allowing participants to have open discussions about decision-making within their roles. Throughout the interview, the researchers probed participants, encouraging them to explain their thoughts in depth. Group interviews were audio-recorded as well as video-recorded. Also, during the two group sessions, participants were asked to draw content maps that displayed their decision-making processes. They were asked to add details regarding each aspect of their decision-making to display their main areas of decisions in a visual format. They were encouraged to have discussions with the other participants during this time but were to create a content map limited to their own perspective, given their specific role in their specific school. At the second group session, participants created updated versions of their first content map, displaying any changes in decision-making that may have occurred.

Between the two group sessions, individual interviews with the participants were conducted. At the beginning of these interviews, participants were asked to explain in detail their roles, including details such as setting, responsibilities, caseload, and to whom they report. They were then shown the most recent content map they created. They were asked to explain what they meant by
what was displayed on their content maps. The interviewer asked questions throughout the interviews to clarify the participants’ explanations and to probe for more details when necessary. All individual interviews were audio-recorded. Based on the participant content maps and the discussions that occurred in the group and individual interviews, a survey was designed, addressing topics related to curriculum. The survey was created using SurveyMonkey and was distributed via email to all participants.

**Data Analysis Process**

**Content Maps:** For the purpose of this study, only the second participant content maps were analyzed. Since participants created content maps about their overall decision-making, the researcher focused solely on those content maps that addressed curriculum as a topic. All 11 participants had curriculum listed on their content maps with subcategories related to their decision making. Figure 1 displays each of these subcategories on an aggregate content map created by the researcher.

These subcategories were coded, and the frequency of each subcategory was found.

**Group and Individual Interviews:** All interviews were transcribed. Interviews were coded using a multi-cycle approach. First, interviews were read, and only the parts discussing curriculum were highlighted. Second, the highlighted sections were read and paraphrased in the right-hand margin by the researcher. Third, the paraphrased words were given a code and written in the right-hand margin. Finally, a list of all of the codes with examples was created. Through this coding process, multiple themes emerged, reflecting the following aspects of curriculum decision-making: what to teach, how to teach, collaborations, IEP/basic skills/functional skills vs. general education curriculum, grouping, accommodations/modifications, materials, and assessment. These themes are further explained in the results section.

**Survey:** Ten of the participants completed the survey. Results were sent to SurveyMonkey, where percentages were calculated based on participant answers. Frequencies of each response per question were generated to determine similarities and differences in participants’ decision making about curriculum. One question on the survey was disregarded due to an error in formatting.

**Results**

**Content Maps**

The participant content maps were used to best understand the different influences on curriculum decision making. Participants decided on categories that they make decisions about when it comes to curriculum in their classroom. After coding the content maps, 10 categories emerged: materials/planning, grouping, assessment, IEP vs. grade level, how to teach, what to teach, progress monitoring, functional skills vs. academic skills, general education/paraprofessional support, and modifications. Figure 2 displays an aggregate content map with each of these categories listed.

The tally marks at the end of each branch display the number of participants who listed the category on their content map. In order of most frequent, following are the resulting numbers corresponding to each category: materials/planning (6), grouping (6), assessment (6), IEP vs. grade level (5), how to teach (3), what to teach (3), modifications (3), progress monitoring (2), functional vs. academic (2), and gen. ed./para support (2). There seems to be
agreement that materials, grouping, assessment, and IEP vs. grade level are the main aspects of curriculum development. Although the other categories appear less frequently, it is imperative to note that all of the categories have at least two participants in agreement, indicating commonality among participant decisions.

Interviews

The content maps display that there are certain factors that influence the curriculum decision making of participants. The coded interviews provided deeper insight into these factors that were only briefly addressed in the content maps. Three common themes, divided into subcategories, emerged: what to teach, how to teach, and collaboration. Participants explained how these factors were impacting their decisions about curriculum.

The what to teach theme encompasses many different aspects of decisions that lead to the ultimate decision of what content teachers will be teaching their students. Many of the participants expressed that they are given subjects to cover in their classes, but from there, they must make all decisions about specifically what to teach. In an individual interview, one participant stated, “Yeah, I would say curriculum development is the biggest one for me because I had no idea what I had to teach when I started, what I wanted to teach.” All of the teachers expressed having to make decisions about what exactly would be taught in the classroom, and how difficult that could be.

This theme can be divided into three subcategories that the participants discussed. The first requires creating a balance between meeting the needs of students based on their IEPs and current performance levels, with providing access to the general education curriculum. Teachers explained how they must make decisions about whether they should teach what students’ age-appropriate peers would be learning, or if they should teach basic, functional, or life skills that match what is on the students’ IEPs. One teacher expressed how it is about finding a balance because students need both, “I mean they kind of go hand-in-hand. I refer to the IEP when I look at curriculum goals, and when I look at curriculum, I’m making sure I meet IEP goals.” This was a common sentiment from all participants, that they must balance teaching what the general education classes are doing, while making that accessible to their students through basic skills. One participant even discussed how sometimes academics are not even her main focus, she said, “we’re recognizing that, you know, academics might not even be the biggest priority at all.” Teachers really must understand what their students need in order to decide what they will teach them.

The second subcategory relates to making accommodations and modifications. Teachers must decide when students will receive adaptations to whatever curriculum they choose to teach. Teachers explained how they must know and understand their students in order to create appropriate modifications and accommodations on assignments and assessments. They use student IEPs as a basis for these decisions, but they also use what they know about students from their current performance in the classroom.

The third subcategory when deciding what to teach relates to assessment. When deciding what to teach, teachers had to consider which assessments students will be expected to complete. Students
must take either PARCC, MCAS, MCAS with accommodations, or MCAS-Alternate. While considering which of these assessments their students will be taking, teachers plan their curriculum accordingly. Thus, teachers with students taking MCAS-Alt often find themselves just teaching the specific strands for which they are making portfolios, in order to get the data collected and finished. Teachers with students taking PARCC or MCAS with accommodations also teach to the test, trying to teach their students the skills they need to be successful on their own the day of testing. No matter the assessment being taken by students, the teachers explained that knowing the expectations of the specific test influences their decisions.

The how to teach theme refers to the participants’ discussion about the presentation of information to students. Teachers expressed concerns about deciding how they would present curriculum to students based on the varying abilities, topics, and assessments that needed to be considered. They wanted to ensure that the presentation of information was accessible to all students. Teachers considered their students’ learning styles, interests, and abilities while making these decisions. But, they also discussed having to think about data collection for assessments, student energy level, and use of technology.

This theme can be divided into two subcategories. The first is decisions about materials for curriculum. Teachers explained that as special educators, they must decide which materials they use to present content to their students. Many of the participants had to combine different sources to use when teaching. Teachers tried to use a variety of sources in order to create a comprehensive curriculum for students that would be engaging and appropriate for their needs.

The second subcategory is grouping of students. This relates to how teachers will shape their instruction based on to whom they are presenting information. Teachers expressed that they have such a variety of student abilities within their caseload they must constantly be making decisions about how to group their students. One teacher expressed the difficulty of having such varying abilities: “So, I have 6 kids in classroom A who get math services, and those 6 in an ideal setting would be in 6 separate math groups based off where they’re at with their math.” Teachers must figure out how to group students to best meet their needs despite varying abilities.

The collaboration theme was a prominent one discussed by all participants. Collaborating played a huge role in decisions about curriculum. Although every participant talked about working with other professionals, there was a range of positions involved with collaboration, including paraprofessionals, general education teachers, co-teachers, other special education teachers, administration, parents, and other related services professionals. Those participants who are in a resource room/learning center or co-teaching role stated that the general education teacher has a lot of input and shared decision making about curriculum for students on IEPs. However, the participants in a self-contained classroom make the final decision about curriculum despite collaborating with others to reach that decision. No matter the role though, teachers are constantly working with other adults to make decisions about curriculum.

Survey

Based upon the themes and categories from the content maps and interviews, the survey was used to get more specific details about how teachers make the decisions that they face about curriculum. Results from the survey show many commonalities, but variability remains based on the differing roles of participants. In order to further explore the collaboration theme, teachers were asked questions about how much control they have and with whom they collaborate. Figure 3 displays how much control teachers say they have when it comes to certain aspects of curriculum development.

As shown in the graph, most teachers collaborate with others or have complete control over modifications, prioritizing curriculum, materials, grouping, how to teach, and what to teach. There is no clear majority for any of the categories.

In order to better understand what teachers consider when making their decisions about curriculum, the survey asked them to provide brief responses about the most important factor they consider when making modifications, deciding what to teach, and deciding how to teach. Figures 4, 5, and 6 show the responses and
When teachers are making decisions about how to modify curriculum for their students, the three most important factors considered are IEP goals, accessibility of skills, and students’ current ability. Teachers look at their students’ profiles in order to decide how they are going to modify curriculum to best meet their needs.

When teachers decide how to teach, most participants said that the most important factor considered is what will be most engaging and motivating for students.

When deciding what to teach, the three most important factors that participants said they consider are IEP goals, current levels of performance, and what the general education classes are doing. There is a combination of what students are currently able to do and what they are expected to be doing according to the general education curriculum.

The results from the survey give insight into exactly how teachers make decisions about curriculum within the themes that emerged from their content maps and interviews. Overall, the results of this study indicate that there are many factors that influence decisions that teachers must make about curriculum. There are some common themes in regards to these decisions, however, there does not seem to be one single, clear outline for how teachers make these decisions.
Discussion

The results of this study show that there are many factors that teachers must consider when making decisions about curriculum in their classrooms. There does not appear to be a clearly outlined path that teachers are able to follow when making these decisions. The variability in roles of the participants seems to have had an impact on how they make decisions about curriculum in their classrooms. Those participants with roles as moderate special needs teachers or co-teachers rely on collaboration with others to make their decisions much more than those in self-contained classrooms. Even though all special education teachers have to decide what and how to teach their students, there is wide variability, depending on their role and also the students they are servicing. Results indicate that special education teachers’ roles have a significant impact on these decisions. Despite having similar teaching licenses and Master’s degrees, there may be differences in the decisions teachers make.

Based on the results of this study, it is apparent that special education teachers have to consider many different factors when making decisions about curriculum. They must create a balance between what to teach, how to teach, and work with other professionals to make these important decisions for their students. However, there is not one decision making process for all special education teachers. It is important to understand that depending on the role, these decisions may be made differently.

Some limitations may have had an impact on the results of this study. Due to the small sample size of teachers from one state, results may not be generalized to the entire population of special education teachers. Additionally, only one researcher coded the interviews. Another person should complete a reliability check of codes to ensure that themes are accurately portrayed.

Despite the limitations of this study, the results still display
a great variability of special educators’ roles, and how that impacts decision making. There are definite themes that all participants addressed in their content maps, interviews, and survey questions that show commonalities across many different roles.

**Action Plan**

The results of this research can be helpful for future special educators to understand the many decisions that they will have to make about curriculum. Since there are common themes among all participants, these can be seen as useful areas to focus on when planning for the classroom. It is also important for future special educators to note the variability in roles within the field. Prospective teachers should look closely at the job description, students, and setting of their role to better understand what decisions they will face when it comes to curriculum. Since there is not one clear outline for teacher decision making, this would mean that not all special educator roles need the same supports and professional development opportunities.

Once this research project has been completed, results will be shared with the participants in a format that shares their individual stories as well as their aggregate stories. The hope of displaying their decision making in an organized way is to empower teachers to take hold of their decisions and to be confident in their roles.

There are some immediate actions that could be taken using the results of this research to better support special educators in their roles. First, teachers (both novice and veteran) should be encouraged to fully examine the specifics of their roles. By understanding the exact nature of their roles, they can better make decisions that will be beneficial for all their students. Second, administrative professionals should look closely at the specific roles of the special educators in their districts or buildings. It is imperative that administration is supportive and understands the complexity of the decisions special educators face about curriculum. These decisions change from year to year and even throughout the same year. Once there is a clear understanding by both teachers and administrators, professional development and collaboration opportunities should be provided to support teachers with their curriculum development. As this research has shown, most special educators cannot use general education pacing guides with any certainty in their classrooms. Therefore, attending professional development opportunities with general education teachers is not enough to support these teachers. Experiences planned specifically for addressing the flexibility and variability of the special education curriculum should be incorporated into these teachers’ professional development.

Finally, just as these special education students are being evaluated with various assessments, it is important to not expect cookie-cutter evaluations to work for special education teachers. Since teachers are differentiating and planning based on their students’ individualized needs, administration might consider doing the same when assessing teachers. Special education teachers can no longer be expected to fit a perfect mold of a teacher based on the vast differences within their roles.

This research has provided insight into the similarities and differences within the curriculum decision-making processes of beginning special education teachers. Although commonalities emerged across all teachers described as having to decide what to teach, how to teach, and collaboration, the emphasis and ways decisions are made on these different aspects vary among participants. Results of this research truly display how roles of special education teachers have a profound impact on how many of these decisions are ultimately made.

**References**


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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Camille Schulman**

Camille is a special education teacher in southeastern Massachusetts. She graduated from BSU with her Master's of Education in Special Education Moderate Disabilities PreK-8 in May 2015. Her research was completed in the spring of 2015 as a co-investigator with her mentor, Dr. Edward Carter.