

Using Early Career Special Educators Voice to Influence
Initial Teacher Education

Elizabeth A. West and Roxanne F. Hudson

University of Washington

Abstract

Early career special educators must be engaged in conversations with developers of preservice teacher preparation programs to co-construct initial teacher education programs which meet their needs. The process of listening to the teachers themselves could serve to ensure that teachers are an explicit element of program design. This article describes a research project which explores early career special educators' views of the quality of their teacher preparation program. Six themes from focus group data were identified and rank ordered. Examples are provided to illustrate the ways in which one institute of higher education is using the information to renew elements of their program. Results are informing the preservice teaching and learning opportunities.

Introduction

Students with disabilities and the adults who teach them have made many gains in the United States since 1975 when Congress passed PL 94-142 mandating that *every* child has a right to free and appropriate public education. Educators have made progress in changing what education for students with disabilities looks like physically and programmatically as many of these students are now successfully and meaningfully placed in general education contexts. Despite the progress, teachers continue to struggle to meet the needs of a diversifying student body, meet the challenges of teaming with a variety of qualified related service personnel, and prepare a new generation of teacher leaders that will educate those students who still fight to be counted.

With the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act legislation passed in 2004, the regulations for Part B released in 2006, and the expected changes in Washington state licensure requirements, it is critical that preservice teacher preparation programs go through a process of renewal and change to be certain every special education teacher they graduate meets Federal and State requirements as highly qualified teachers). Teacher educators must now ensure that all graduates have the necessary scientifically based skills and knowledge to be successful in serving children with high incidence disabilities (HID). Children with disabilities are now expected to meet high standards for learning in core academic subjects, regardless of classroom setting, and their teachers need the skills and knowledge to help them. This is especially important in the education of students with HID.

Every new elementary special education teacher must meet the requirements outlined in § 300.18 of the Part B IDEA Regulations. Specifically, each new teacher who will be teaching a core academic subject must (a) hold at least a bachelor's degree, (b) obtain a full State certification as a special education teacher, (c) not have had their special education certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis, and (d) demonstrate, by passing a rigorous State test, subject knowledge and teaching skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and other areas of the basic elementary school curriculum. In addition, preservice personnel preparation programs must include training in (a) the use of new instructional technologies; (b) early intervention and response to intervention (RTI), (c) transition services; (d) how to effectively involve parents; (e) evidence-based practices for culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities; and (f) positive behavioral supports.

The University of Washington (Seattle, USA) has been working to meet this need, by drawing on many of the principles of program renewal developed by John Goodlad and his

colleagues (Goodlad, 1994). The notion of *renewal*, as distinguished from the more commonplace idea of *reform*, is based on the belief that the most creative and enduring work of programmatic change is accomplished when the people who regularly participate in the work are empowered to take charge of the change process themselves. The assumption is that programmatic change is not simply a technical process, but a process of engaging diverse community members (in this case faculty, students, veteran teachers, and individuals with disabilities and their families) in dialogue aimed at analyzing program strengths as well as weaknesses, envisioning possibilities for program improvement, and building individual and collective commitment to change. Program renewal is currently a major priority within the UW College of Education. This project, using early-career teachers' voice, is thus ideally situated to capitalize on, and influence the course of vigorous program renewal efforts.

There is a shortfall of highly qualified teachers serving children with HID and there is ample evidence that a focused renewal process is necessary to restructure our teacher preparation program for elementary special education teachers to ensure that graduates of these programs are able to meet the highly qualified teachers' requirements. One key element contributing to the reshaping of our teacher preparation program is engaging in discussion with recent graduates. Information generated from these discussions has contributed to a comprehensive redesign of our program.

Use of "teacher voice" is different from the standard exit interviews and surveys that have been historically a part of IHEs. Soliciting teacher input using focus groups generates extensive qualitative data from those on the front-lines that was compared and contrasted with additional focus group data generated from a variety of stakeholders including families, agencies, and organizations dedicated to the improvement of services for students with HID. This project contributes to the existing standard exit interviews and surveys by forming a more cohesive, useable database for continued renewal.

Gathering information from teachers as a way to design their ITE is a first step to increasing its effectiveness. This is especially important in an area such as special education where educators must have a variety of skills to meet the needs of learners with disabilities, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Graduates of our current program take special education positions in schools serving very diverse student groups. They must have knowledge and skills in connection with identification, placement, curricula, instruction, and supports appropriate for working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Formal training for these graduates includes at least one multicultural education course focused on teaching diverse cultural and language backgrounds. The program prepares special education teachers to address the specialized needs of children with HID from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, including limited English proficient children with disabilities.

We rely on the Council for Exceptional Children's (i.e., an international community of educators; CEC) diversity terminology to illustrate our definition of diversity including elements around: country of origin, cultural identity, culture, diversity, ethnic or multicultural group, ethnicity, geographic location, multicultural, and race (CEC, 2008). The increase in diversity of children can be juxtaposed with the decreasing diversity found in the teaching pool. The low enrollment of individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in colleges of education and the low numbers in the field of special education alert us to the lack of preparedness for teaching diverse learners (Sleeter, 2001). This lack may result as an outcome of the mismatch between the teacher and the children and families they serve. Add disability into the mix and teachers may feel unprepared to meet the needs of their students and families. Developing the

ability and capacity to meet the variety of learner needs well requires consistent support for teacher learning and growth, which in turn results in increased student learning (Smylie, 1995).

Teachers must be given a voice from which ITE practices can be developed. Developing a sense of community through a forum of discourse is important for educators (West, Jones, & Stevens, 2006). This appears to be a key ingredient in successful programs that prepare teachers to work with a wide diversity of children with disabilities and their families. The use of data generated from teacher interviews can be a cost-effective way to identify instructional knowledge and skills necessary for a particular setting. These data can contribute to the design and implementation of model ITE programs for teachers who will work with students with disabilities and explicitly include them in the planning. Using this method, ITE goals can be developed that reflect the voice of the teachers. In this paper, we describe a research project that explores early career special educators' views of the quality of their ITE as a way to inform future teacher preparation efforts and make necessary changes. Data generated from a focus group interview illustrates elements of what this group of participants identifies as qualities of an excellent beginning special education teacher related to teaching students from multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This research offers one example of a way to solicit teacher voices to co-construct culturally responsive learning opportunities. The present study was designed to examine the perspectives of early-career special educators with regard to their perceived effectiveness of their ITE.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants. This sampling method entails selection based on participant knowledge of or experience in the topic of interest and possession of characteristics identified by the researchers as selection criteria (Brotherson, 1994). To secure participants we obtained a list of recent special education graduates from our IHE. Emails that described the study and identified a date for the focus group were sent to these graduates. Those who wanted to participate contacted the program manager to confirm attendance.

The IHE is a research-oriented university located in the Pacific Northwest of the United States of America with a graduate-level two year teacher preparation program. Students enter the program with a Bachelor's degree and graduate with a Masters Degree and Initial Teaching Certificate in Special Education. Graduates of the IHE typically take teaching jobs in local school districts that serve many types of families. English is the dominant language spoken and Caucasian is the largest cultural group. Other large groups in the area are Asians from Vietnam, Korea, China, and Laos as well as Africans from Somalia and Ethiopia. The largest school district in the area serves families who speak more than 94 languages.

The focus group was held at the IHE and was convenient and comfortable for participants. Participants were nine recent graduates who were employed for one year (10 months of teaching) in a variety of special education positions. Table 1 presents participant demographic information. All participants spoke English as their first language and were female early career teachers. We did not ask for identification of ethnicity and participants held demographic variables similar to the general teaching force in the United States.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Teaching Position	Experience (10 months)
1	Female	Early Childhood NGO serving children Birth to Three Years Old	First-year teacher

2	Female	Emotional and Behavioral Program	First-year teacher
3	Female	Emotional and Behavioral Program	First-year teacher
4	Female	Developmental Kindergarten	First-year teacher
5	Female	Developmental Preschool	First-year teacher
6	Female	Developmental Preschool	First-year teacher
7	Female	Self-Contained Autism Program	First-year teacher
8	Female	Special Education Teacher in School	First-year teacher
9	Female	Special Education Teacher in School	First-year teacher

Data Collection

A single focus group interview with each group of informants served as the data collection method. This type of group interview is unique because a group of participants typically meets only once (Brotherson, 1994). The specific intent of focus groups is to provide insights about how people perceive a situation rather than infer, generalize, or make statements about a population. Focus groups afford three particular advantages for incorporating teacher voices into professional learning. First, focus group dialogue creates a synergistic effect, allowing a wider range of information and insight than would private individual responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Second, focus groups are particularly useful as the process provides participants with a vehicle for reflecting upon their own lived experiences. Third, focus groups provide important information to decision makers before a program or service is initiated, such as in planning and program design (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups also have disadvantages, including (a) lack of opportunity to develop a sense of comfort and rapport with other participants over time and (b) participants' hesitancy to say things in a group context that they might be willing to share in a one-to-one interview.

In this study, participants engaged in a 1-hour focus group discussion in separate groups facilitated by the first author, who was known by seven of the new teachers. There were five focus groups held in total; one with fathers, one with mothers, one with new teachers, one with a group of school administrators, and one with a group of special education directors. These focus groups were part of a larger project directed by the second author and funded by the United States Department of Education to evaluate and renew the ITE program. Both authors are assistant professors in the special education department who speak English as their first language and teach classes in the ITE program. One is Caucasian and the other is Native American.

Prior to the initiation of the discussion, the facilitator described the process and obtained informed written consent from all participants. Participants were provided with a two-part questionnaire that contained questions about their demographics and open-ended questions about teacher preparation and the characteristics of excellent beginning special education teachers. The questions ranged from what is your gender? and What is your job title in the school district? as examples of demographic questions, to the main five questions. These were: What are the most critical needs in your district related to special education? What do you think a beginning special education teacher should know or be able to do on day one? What distinguishes a great special education teacher from an "okay" teacher? If you were going to design a special education teacher-training program, what would you include? Do you think your beginning special education teachers have the strategies to work with the population of students they serve?

Participants were encouraged and given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire. Once completed, the facilitator began the discussion portion of the focus group and participants were allowed to reference their written response to the open-ended questions. We used the

written responses before the discussion in order to probe thinking around the topics. In addition, these documents were read later and used as another form of data verification. The focus group protocol was designed in a manner wherein a group facilitator kept the discussion on track by asking a series of open-ended questions, which flowed from general to specific.

Critical issues that were raised during discussions were probed and answers were mirrored back or summarized by the facilitator. This data collection strategy was used for recent graduates to express their thoughts about needs related and working with learners who have disabilities. The focus group interview was recorded using a digital audio device and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.

Data Analysis

The qualitative paradigm for research offered the present study a process that gave participants an opportunity to express their views, and the researchers a strategy for listening and developing categories to reflect these views. Qualitative research offers an interpretive and analytical model of inquiry. It is the search for meaning that makes the qualitative paradigm particularly relevant to this study. Atkinson, Delamont, and Hammersley (1993) state that the qualitative perspective offers the opportunity to explore the present actors' perspectives and strategies on their own terms.

Data reduction began immediately after fieldwork. During this data-reduction phase, all pages of transcripts were read and reread individually by the first author and two research assistants. These three members of the research team participated individually and then collectively in the category development phase. Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) approach was followed to analyze the interview data after they were transcribed. The first step was to "reach a position where one has a stable set of categories and has carried out a systematic coding of all the data in terms of those categories" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 213). The next step was to work on the analytic categories that appeared to be of significance to determine if there was a clear boundary between them. Then, similarities with and differences to other data that had been similarly categorized were noted. After such a test, each category (a) remained intact, (b) was subdivided into two or more categories, or (c) was merged with other categories to form a new one. After the categories were firmly established, they were compared with each other to determine if they were related. Categories that appeared to be connected to each other were combined under a broader category.

Trustworthiness

Numerous strategies were implemented to ensure trustworthiness. Many were employed at the operational level, including (a) multiple informants, (b) multiple researchers and analysts, (c) comparable data collection protocols across the several focus groups, (d) coding checks (inter and intrarater agreement), (e) verbatim transcripts providing thick descriptions, and (f) peer debriefs.

Results

Overall Themes

Themes that emerged from the categories identified in the coding are presented in Table 2. Overall, the participants discussed six areas that related to beginning teacher quality and working with diverse students and families. These included areas related to: recruitment and retention, preservice training, inservice training, partnering with families and interpreters, resources, and dispositions. In Table 2, each of these themes is presented with the specific elements that fall within that category. The means that are presented reflect the average number of times each element was mentioned by participants as counted by the three coders. For example, a higher

level theme of “Resources” was identified with specific elements that correlated to it: family/community and teacher. The coders individually counted the number of times that each of these specific elements were cited by participants. Next, a mean was calculated based upon data generated from the three coders. The range identifies the highest and lowest counts across coders. Any range with a difference greater than four was collaboratively checked for accuracy by the coders and an agreement reached.

Table 2

Results from Individual and Collaborative Data Analysis Reflecting Themes and Associated Elements

Theme	Specific Elements	Mean	Range
Recruitment and Retention	• Awareness	1.0	1–1(0)
	• Quality Mentors	9.3	8–11(3)
	• Within Teacher Diversity	1.7	0–3(3)
	• Salaries	5.0	3–7(4)
	• Understaffed and Underfunded	3.3	2–5(3)
Preservice Training	• Coursework	12.3	12–13(1)
	• Field Experiences	11.0	10–12(2)
	• Mentorship	2.3	2–3(1)
Inservice Training	• Mentorship	4.7	4–6(2)
	• Acclimating	0.7	0–1(1)
	• Community	3.0	2–4(2)
Partnering with families and interpreters	• Relationships	5.0	4–6(2)
	• Communication	3.0	2–4(2)
Resources	• Family and Community	1.7	1–2(1)
	• Teacher	5.7	4–7(3)
Dispositions (Personal Characteristics)	• Positive Attitude	2.0	1–3(2)
	• High Expectations	2.0	1–3(2)

Specific Elements within Themes

We rank ordered the specific elements found within themes by the mean number of times they were mentioned and identified the top six elements. These Elements included: coursework, field experiences, quality mentors, teacher resources, relationships and salaries.

Two elements fell under Preservice Training and two fell under Recruitment and Retention, and one of the top elements came from Resources and one from Partnering. We will present the results for each element below with representative quotes.

Coursework. Our recent graduates reported the need for flexible and varied coursework during their ITE. Specifically, they mentioned the need for flexible coursework related to cultural and linguistic diversity, course content on using interpreters with students and families who spoke another language, and the need for coursework at the IHE to do more than focus on diversity around holidays and food. When topics such as holidays and food are the sole representation of a diversity curriculum the IHE runs the risk of these being a token gesture rather than an authentic representation of cultural diversity. A recent graduate reflected on an experience that was beneficial for her learning:

I had a little bit of flexibility in my program and I really appreciated that, like because I was already teaching I got the chance to not take classroom management and take an ELL class instead.. (P3)

The need for “more real class experience versus book training” was evident. Students come to the program with a variety of life–experiences ranging from a little to a lot of familiarity in working with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. Students discussed the need for instructors to first understand the experiences they have gained and develop programs to allow for flexibility based upon their individual prior experiences.

Field experience. Participant comments related to field experience during their ITE program centered on working with very diverse families. They suggested that while they were learning to be teachers, a protocol for interacting with diverse families, diverse/multiple field placements, more practice to improve comfort levels, observations in diverse schools, hands on application and more fieldwork with different kinds of children would have been very helpful. It was clear that the recent graduates wanted more time in the field in diverse settings during preservice training. One participant expressed the view of many about performing field experiences in a variety of schools in order to gain the type of experience she thought would be useful to her as a beginning teacher: “So it was really useful to get to see different schools. Now they are still entirely different even when they’re a couple miles apart. Entirely different schools.” (P1)

Several participants discussed experiences that were helpful for them as they created disequilibrium and moved them out of their comfort zone. The experiences mentioned by participants related to the early weeks of school and their attempt to partner with families from diverse backgrounds. Participants discussed how uncomfortable this was for them as they had limited practice during their ITE programs.

Quality Mentors. Under the Recruitment and Retention theme, our graduates discussed the need to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. This theme was related to the need for quality mentors who could serve as role models. Students clearly were looking for mentors that could support them in their early–career work; however, they wanted mentors that were good teachers. One participant referenced the mentor assigned to her stating,

I could go to that mentor teacher and say have you ever dealt with this. And they have to be in the classroom for at least five years before they can do it, and they have to be highly qualified and all that stuff. (P9)

The participants connected “quality mentors” to the initial stage of overall district recruitment of quality teachers.

Teacher resources. Key to the resources theme was the need for teacher resources related to working with diverse populations. Specifically, participants discussed the need to know strategies on how to find resources and how to make contacts in the community. Many teachers expressed that they were unprepared for the way poverty affects families, students, and schools. Teachers reported that they wanted information on resources related to assisting families with basic necessities like food, heat, and housing. As one participant stated:

The culture of poverty especially. Like, I know we read a couple things on that in our multi–cultural class but not enough to let me know how severe it can actually be. And having homeless families and stuff like that blew me away. (P8)

Teachers expressed a collective sentiment that they needed to know how to access strategies and resources for particular contexts.

Relationships. The need to establish relationships to effectively partner with families and interpreters was cited as being important to recent graduates. Participants expanded on this element to include the need for home visits and to establish personal and family relationships. One participant echoed the sentiment of many as she stated: “Well, one thing that hit me hard this year was working with families that were English as a Second Language and interpreters.” (P3)

Participants identified the need to do home visits as part of their preservice training. One participant cited the potential benefits of attending a home visit with a teacher: “... so actually doing a home visit or being involved, just going with a teacher who does one would be, I think is a really important thing.” (P3)

Discussion

In this section we discuss the findings across participants and suggest directions for ITE and future research. This project has generated interesting insight into a small group of teachers’ views on their own ITE experience and has raised many ideas that have implications for IHE programs. Clearly, the sample does limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other teachers in other settings and other countries, but it does highlight particular areas of potential interest for those who design and implement teacher training programs. This research provides an example of how the use of focus groups to obtain teacher insights could contribute to the development of contextually specific ITE experiences.

Results of this study indicate that this group of teachers would benefit from additional preservice field experiences in diverse settings; coursework that includes real experiences with families from many backgrounds; skills in obtaining contextually specific resources, and home visits. This data is being used to renew our program in many ways and examples are provided below which illustrate some of the applications to practice.

Based in part on the results of the evaluation and feedback from focus groups and as a part of the teacher education renewal process, all syllabi are being examined and revised as necessary. We are making changes in the formats in which content/courses are delivered (for example, co-teaching, on-line courses). We have begun to develop a series of content modules that will replace or supplement current courses. We have analyzed and revised program syllabi to include evidence-based practices (literacy, behavior, assessment, instructional practices, inclusive strategies) and a greater focus on culturally and linguistic diversity. All special education and applicable elementary education course syllabi will be analyzed for how they address culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities and their families.

Harry and Klingner (2006) provide culturally inclusive ways to build relationships with families and suggest that a multicultural emphasis in IHE programs should focus on process rather than cultural content. Knowing the characteristics of the learners and context is the first process in developing culturally responsive programs. Artiles (2002) and Gee (2001) identify that instructional methods do not work or fail as decontextualized generic practices, but work in relation to the social-cultural contexts in which they are implemented. Implications for ITE programs are the need to assist teachers in making the connection between theory and practice. Designing coursework and field experiences that have relevancy to classroom and community contexts can facilitate this connection. Preservice teachers must engage in internships and placement in diverse cultural and socioeconomic settings to further their knowledge related to learners and context. These experiences will serve early-career teachers as they engage in the realities of their classrooms, which will most likely reflect elements of diversity (i.e., language, customs, culture) that they may be uncomfortable and/or unfamiliar with.

Currently, field placements take place in urban schools with high numbers of CLD students. One purpose of this placement is to help preservice teachers understand the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-racial communities they will teach in. A second purpose is to help them understand different types of expertise and value the knowledge students, especially those with disabilities or who speak English as a second language) bring with them to school. We currently have field placements in high-poverty schools in the Puget Sound area, and as a part of the renewed program, we will work to focus on placing our preservice teachers in schools that need highly-qualified teachers or are not making adequate yearly progress (an important metric in the United States) in order to help support the education in those schools and give our teacher candidates a chance to learn the skills needed to succeed in these environments. As a part of this plan, we will ensure that the supervision from UW, problem-based seminars, and choice of mentor teachers will be sufficiently strong and supportive to bring our preservice teachers to a high level of skill in evidence-based teaching practices.

A hallmark of the renewed program is the strong connection between conceptual learning activities (coursework) and practica / internships. We see this coursework-fieldwork linkage as essential for acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become a highly qualified special educator (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2003). Clearly, this linkage was important to our recent graduates. Students will have varied practica / internship assignments each quarter of the program, so every student will have internship experiences in special education *resource rooms*, *co-teaching* settings, and *inclusive classrooms*. HID preservice teachers will also work with students in *linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse urban and suburban* settings. At present, preservice teachers in the HID programs complete at minimum 12 credits of supervised practica and nine credits of full-time supervised/mentored student teaching, spread across the program. We will evaluate these field experiences to determine whether they are sufficiently long and focused enough to meet the needs of both the teachers and their future students. These placements provide trainees with experience teaching a wide range of learners under direct supervision of program staff and with highly qualified mentoring teachers.

We will provide support to preservice teachers and new graduates in how to solve complex real-life teaching problems from their practice (e.g., how to provide strong, appropriate instruction to all students in highly heterogeneous student groups) through a series of problem-based seminars that will run in concert with school practica and internships. The seminars will be offered to preservice teachers, recent graduates, practicing teachers, and cooperating teachers and use “problems of practice” to demonstrate the application of evidence-based practices in authentic settings.

The focus group with recent graduates provided information for the development of induction and mentoring components. This data were used to contribute to the development of an online resource to support new special education teachers and facilitate an online community of learners. This website will be easily accessed by the new teachers after graduation using their existing UW information and is facilitated by faculty members and doctoral students.

Early career teachers in this study talked about strategies they relied upon when they were presented with unfamiliar situations. Critical to this group was the need to have quality mentors, knowing how to access appropriate resources, and experience in visiting the homes of their students. ITE developers can examine program components to insure that students have the opportunity to be paired with mentors to perform home visits, have access to quality mentors to apply and receive continuous coaching and support, and are provided with ways to access

resources. Several teachers stated that they relied upon the Internet to access information and resources. Given that the Internet is now widely available across schools this would seem to be a viable avenue to promote during ITE. Further, this has implications for developers of ITE programs who can promote online information and resources that can be utilized by preservice and inservice teachers. Online information (including research) and resources must be made accessible and ITE programs should teach students how to evaluate the information for credibility.

Conclusion

The early years of teaching are often difficult as teachers' transition from their role as a student to the role of a teacher. They have to quickly shift from being responsible for their own learning to the responsibility for the learning of others. This study identified areas for which early-career teachers most frequently reported needing assistance. Concerns around working with families and children who are culturally and linguistically diverse topped the list. ITE developers can play a major role in transforming programs to better align with what early career teachers report as needs. If today's teachers are to be adequately prepared to meet the challenges they are facing, they must be provided with appropriate, quality ITE based upon their needs. ITE is likely to have a greater impact on practice if it is closely related to what teachers cite as important for their preparation. Recommendations from early-career teachers around what worked or did not work during their ITE training can be used to revise and renew programs to better prepare teachers.

This project illustrates themes of need relating to factors that could easily be addressed in ITE programs. The issues of culture, language, disability, and inclusion are complex and the work related to addressing the needs in these areas cannot simply involve the creation of new courses. Rather, the process must engage early career teachers in conversations that generate information to transform ITE. The above highlights the innovative work that has been generated from use of "teacher voice." This dialogue generated specifics for the renewal process that could not have been anticipated from knowledge of best practices in IHEs or a review of the literature. We encourage developers of teacher training programs to use special educators' voice to influence initial teacher education. The above illustrates how information generated from one group of teachers is being used to renew many elements of a program.

Authors Note

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