

High-Leverage Practices in Special Education



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Preface

Special education teachers, as a significant segment of the teaching profession, came into their own with the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, in 1975. Since then, although the number of special education teachers has grown substantially it has not kept pace with the demand for their services and expertise. The roles and practice of special education teachers have continuously evolved as the complexity of struggling learners unfolded, along with the quest for how best to serve and improve outcomes for this diverse group of students.

As this complexity was addressed, those preparing special education teachers found themselves responding to conflicting external forces. New content was added to preparation programs to meet requirements of professional accreditation groups, changing state licensure requirements, and federal regulations related to teacher preparation. These programs also needed to respond to the long-term shortage of special education teachers, with intensive and rapid preparation of “highly qualified” teachers—although there was no clear guidance as to the most effective practices to target. Without clarity regarding the practices and expertise that define an *effective special educator*, this role began to be viewed by

potential teachers as less desirable than other teaching assignments despite the clear need and job assurance.

Meanwhile, research continued to establish evidence regarding practices that could make a positive difference with students who were struggling to find success in school because of learning and behavioral complexities. What was needed was guidance as to the most important of these practices that special educators needed to learn to use in classrooms—clear signals among the noise of demands placed on teacher education programs.

Development of the High-Leverage Practices in Special Education

In fall 2014, the Board of Directors of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) approved a proposal from the CEC Professional Standards and Practice Committee (PSPC) to develop a set of high-leverage practices (HLPs) for special education teachers. The PSPC, the Teacher Education Division (TED) of CEC, and the CEEDAR Center at the University of Florida endorsed this project. The CEEDAR Center, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs, provided a sub-award to CEC to



Introduction

Skillful teaching requires appropriately using and integrating specific moves and activities in particular cases and contexts, based on knowledge and understanding of one's pupils and on the application of professional judgment.

(Ball & Forzani, 2009, p. 497)

Concerns about achievement levels of students who struggle in school, including those with disabilities, have led to major changes in U.S. education policy. These changes have included increased expectations and accountability for student achievement and calls for improving the practice of teachers (e.g., the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; NCATE, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Improving teacher practice has become a major focus of policy makers and teacher educators for several reasons, including research revealing that (a) improving the effectiveness of teachers is the most direct approach to improving outcomes for low-achieving students (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Master, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2014), and that (b) many effective practices that can substantially improve student achievement are not routinely used by teachers (Cook & Odom, 2013).

The need to improve teacher practice has led several prominent teacher educators (e.g., Ball & Forzani, 2011; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanaugh, 2013) to take the position that teacher education should focus more deliberately on instructional practice, and that teacher preparation programs should be developed that address this goal. In these programs, teacher education would be centered on a set of effective practices that all teachers need to learn (i.e., practices that are used frequently in classrooms and have been shown to improve student outcomes). Programs also would embed much of teacher preparation in clinical settings to systematically support teacher candidates in learning to use these HLPs (Grossman et al., 2009; NCATE, 2010). This emphasis on using practice-based teacher education to improve instructional practice has emerged in both general and special education (Leko et al., 2015; McDonald et al., 2013).



High-Leverage Practices for K-12 Special Education Teachers

The high-leverage practices in special education (HLPs) are provided across four intertwined components of teacher practice: collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral practices, and instruction. The 22 HLPs are intended to address the most critical practices that every K-12 special education teacher should master. The Research Syntheses that follow this section delve more deeply into the rationale and evidence base for each. (As discussed in the Preface, two research syntheses were developed for the practice of providing effective feedback; this item appears in both the Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices HLPs and the Instruction HLPs.) The appendix provides a glossary of terms and additional resources for each of the HLP components. Additional resources are available on CEC's HLP website.

Collaboration

Effective special education teachers collaborate with a wide range of professionals, families and caregivers to assure that

educational programs and related services are effectively designed and implemented to meet the needs of each student with a disability. Collaboration allows for varied expertise and perspectives about a student to be shared among those responsible for the student's learning and well-being. This collective expertise provides collaborators with a more comprehensive understanding of each student's needs, which can be used to more effectively plan and implement instruction and services.

Teachers use respectful and effective communication skills as they collaborate with others, considering the background, socioeconomic status, culture, and language of the families and the professionals with whom they work. Collaborative activities should be focused on (a) designing each student's instructional program to meet clearly specified outcomes and (b) collecting data and monitoring progress toward these outcomes. Effective and purposeful collaboration should enlist support from district and school leaders, who can foster a collective commitment to collaboration,



Research Syntheses: Collaboration High-Leverage Practices

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socioeconomic status, culture, and language of the families and the professionals with whom they work. Collaborative activities should be focused on (a) designing each student's instructional program to meet clearly specified outcomes and (b) collecting data and monitoring progress toward these outcomes. Effective and purposeful collaboration should enlist support from district and school leaders, who can foster a collective commitment to collaboration, provide professional learning experiences to increase team members' collaborative skills, and create schedules that support different forms of ongoing collaboration (e.g., individualized education program [IEP] teams, co-teachers, teachers-families, teachers-paraprofessionals).



Research Syntheses: Assessment High-Leverage Practices

Assessment plays a foundational role in special education. Students with disabilities are complex learners who have unique needs that exist alongside their strengths. Effective special education teachers have to fully understand those strengths and needs. Thus, these teachers are knowledgeable regarding assessment and are skilled in using and interpreting data. This includes formal, standardized assessments that are used in identifying students for special education services, developing students' individualized education programs (IEPs), and informing ongoing services. Formal assessments such as statewide exams also provide data regarding whether students with disabilities are achieving state content standards and how their academic progress compares to students without disabilities. Teachers are also knowledgeable about

and skillful in using informal assessments, such as those used to evaluate students' academic, behavioral, and functional strengths and needs. These assessments are used to develop students' IEPs, design and evaluate instruction, and monitor student progress. As reflective practitioners, special educators also continuously analyze the effect and effectiveness of their own instruction. Finally, these teachers are knowledgeable regarding how context, culture, language, and poverty might influence student performance; navigating conversations with families and other stakeholders; and choosing appropriate assessments given each student's profile. This is an especially important consideration, given the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students and those from high poverty backgrounds in special education.



Research Syntheses: Social/Emotional/Behavioral High-Leverage Practices

Effective special education teachers establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment to support student success. To do this, they employ several practices that are critical in promoting student social and emotional well-being. First, effective teachers focus on increasing appropriate behavior by adopting an instructional approach that incorporates the explicit teaching of social skills and offers students multiple opportunities to practice appropriate social behaviors throughout the school day followed by positive specific feedback. Second, they implement evidence-based practices to prevent social, emotional,

and behavioral challenges and provide early intervention at the first sign of risk. Third, effective teachers provide increasingly comprehensive supports through a team-based problem-solving strategy, to match the intensity of student challenges guided by behavioral assessment. Finally, they implement all behavioral supports—even those in response to significant problem behavior—in a caring, respectful, and culturally relevant manner. Effective teachers recognize that academic and behavioral support strategies are more effective when delivered within the context of positive and caring teacher-student relationships.



Research Syntheses: Instruction High-Leverage Practices

Teaching students with disabilities is a strategic, flexible, and recursive process as effective special education teachers use content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge (including evidence-based practice), and data on student learning to design, deliver, and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. This process begins with well-designed instruction. Effective special education teachers are well versed in general education curricula and other contextually relevant curricula, and use appropriate standards, learning progressions, and evidence-based practices in conjunction with specific individualized education program (IEP) goals and benchmarks to prioritize long- and short-term learning goals and to plan instruction. This instruction, when delivered with fidelity, is designed to maximize academic learning time, actively engage learners in meaning-

ful activities, and emphasize proactive and positive approaches across tiers of instructional intensity.

Effective special education teachers base their instruction and support of students with disabilities on the best available evidence, combined with their professional judgment and knowledge of individual student needs. Teachers value diverse perspectives and incorporate knowledge about students' backgrounds, culture, and language in their instructional decisions. Their decisions result in improved student outcomes across varied curriculum areas and in multiple educational settings. They use teacher-led, peer-assisted, student-regulated, and technology-assisted practices fluently, and know when and where to apply them. Analyzing instruction in this way allows teachers to improve student learning and their professional practice.