

TED 2025 Conference Proceedings

UNITED IN STRENGTH



NOVEMBER 11-14, 2025
KANSAS CITY, MO

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Table of Contents

UNITED IN STRENGTH: PREPARING YOUR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR SCHOOL EMERGENCIES Vicki Abbinante & Susanne James.....	1
A MATCH MADE IN EDUCATION: WHY DISTRICTS AND UNIVERSITIES BELONG TOGETHER Brittany Auernig-Roan & Natalie Orsak-Neff.....	4
SUPPORTING PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATORS THROUGH AI-SUPPORTED FEEDBACK: ENHANCING TRANSITION PLANNING IN TEACHER PREPARATION Stephanie N. Baker & Louise M. Yoho.....	7
THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE: WHAT SPECIAL EDUCATORS BELIEVE GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS SHOULD KEEP IN MIND Gina Braun, Nina Weisling, & Courtney Barcus.....	10
REIMAGINING PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATING VISUAL AND AUDITORY STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS, PHONEMIC AWARENESS, AND PHONICS Teresa Cardon, Jane Kelley, & Audrey Carlson.....	13
UNITED IN STRENGTH! EMPHASIZING THE COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION: TEACHING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS CASE MANAGEMENT SKILLS Colleen Commisso & Brittany Severino.....	16
MINDFULNESS PRACTICES FOR THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENT Rama Cousik.....	19
EQUIPPING FUTURE EDUCATORS: INTEGRATING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION Kimberly Coy.....	22
EXAMINING BURNOUT IN EARLY CAREER EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATORS Samantha Didrichsen.....	25
UNITED TO MOVE FORWARD: CONNECTING TEACHER CANDIDATES TO THEIR FUTURE THROUGH AUTHENTIC SPECIAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCES Shantel Farnan & Tamara Lynn.....	28
SUPPORTING TEACHER RESIDENTS AT A HISTORICALLY TWO-YEAR COLLEGE Wendy Farr.....	31

UNITING TO GATHER FEEDBACK FROM A VARIETY OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS ON INTERVENTIONS USING QR CODES Kathleen M. Farrand & Jae Young Jung.....	34
HOW DID WE GET HERE? PATHWAYS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION Lindsay Foreman-Murray.....	37
UNITED IN STRENGTH: ADVANCING INCLUSIVE LESSON PLANNING THROUGH COLLABORATION ACROSS GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS Danielle M. Frith, Carol McArthur-Amedeo, Ai Kamei, & Wendy Harriott.....	40
DESCRIBING CULTURALLY SUSTAINING TEACHING PRACTICES WITH STUDENTS WITH INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES Lindsay M. Griendling & Danielle A. Waterfield.....	44
TEACHING LITERACY TO D/DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS: RESEARCH- INFORMED STRATEGIES Angela Hinojosa.....	47
UNITED IN STRENGTH: BOLSTERING ACCESSIBLE DEGREE PATHWAYS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD-SPECIAL EDUCATION Kandace M. Hoppin, Amy K. Noggle, & Ashley Gilman.....	50
FORGING AHEAD WITH AI: SUPPORTING FUTURE SPECIAL EDUCATORS WITH PRACTICAL TOOLS AND STRATEGIES Catherine S. Howerter & Teresa Cardon.....	53
USING A HISTORICALLY RESPONSIVE LITERACY FRAMEWORK IN SPECIAL EDUCATOR PREPARATION AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES Rachel Juergensen & Diamond Lee.....	56
FUTURE READY OR FALLING BEHIND? EXAMINING TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS Lema Kabashi & Leslie Rogers.....	59
LEAVE, MOVE, OR STAY? AN EXAMINATION OF RETENTION FACTORS AMONG NOVICE DUAL-CERTIFIED TEACHERS OF COLOR Cathy D. Kea, Fanica Young, & Tahnee Wilder.....	62
FORGE AHEAD! BY EXAMINING CURRENT TRANSITION-RELATED REQUIREMENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PREPARATION AND LICENSURE POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES Jessica Keefhaver.....	65

STRONGER TOGETHER: BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNITY THROUGH ECSE COHORT-BASED LEARNING Shae Keeley.....	68
UNITED IN STRENGTH! INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS TO PROVIDE MICRO STUDY ABROAD OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES Amy Kilpatrick & Tricia K. Strickland.....	71
THE ‘WONDER ‘OF AN INCLUSIVE BOOK CLUB TO MOVE US FORWARD TOGETHER: UNITED IN STRENGTH AND COMMUNITY Leigh Ann Kurz & Ashley Whary.....	74
USING A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH IN SPECIAL EDUCATION COURSES TO ENGAGE TEACHER CANDIDATES Kristine E. Larson.....	77
UNIFYING THOUGHTS: CONCEPT MAPPING AS A MEASURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS Jeremy Lopuch, Christopher O’Brien, Debra Lockwood, Sequita Lipscomb.....	81
EXPLORING THE DIFFERENCES IN LITERATURE BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE AND TRADITIONALLY CERTIFIED TEACHERS K. Alisa Lowrey & Leonard Troughton.....	85
PRESERVICE TEACHER COLLABORATION FOR RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING Amanda L. Mazin & Jessica F. Riccio.....	88
MODIFY THIS! A NEW PROFESSOR’S JOURNEY TOWARDS AUTHENTIC APPLICATIONS OF LEARNING WITH A BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION ASSIGNMENT Elena McLaughlin.....	91
CULTIVATING GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS: COLLABORATIVE PREPARATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN BRAZIL AND THE UNITED STATES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS Maria Paula Mello, Sígla Camargo, Adriana Borges, & Carlo Schmidt.....	94
UNITING EDUCATION: NEPANTLERAS STRENGTHENING THE IN-BETWEEN Concepción Moncada-Cummings & Ángela Hinojosa.....	97
R.I.S.E. ABOVE: SUPPORTING TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH AUTISM THROUGH SPECIALIZED COACHING Allison Oliver.....	100
COPING STRATEGIES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	

Kelly O’Neal-Hixson, Teddy D. Roop, Haley Olson, Melissa Gerleman.....	103
CHALLENGING ABLEISM: RETHINKING ACCESSIBILITY AND DISABILITY INCLUSION IN SOCIETY Sujata Pisharoty-Norman.....	106
CULTIVATING COMPASSIONATE CLASSROOMS: CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION Sujata Pisharoty-Norman.....	110
AN UPDATED SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW: USING COACHING TO IMPROVE FIDELITY OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES Kathleen M. Randolph, Larry B. Fisher, & Glenna M. Billingsley.....	113
IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER CANDIDATES’ TECHNOLOGICAL PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: FROM LEARNING TO APPLICATION – LESSONS FROM TWO SUMMERS IN LUXEMBOURG Leslie Rogers & Lema Kabashi.....	116
ERASED: TRACKING THE RAPID DISAPPEARANCE OF DISABILITY FROM EDUCATION DISCOURSE AND PUBLIC POLICY Annette Romualdo & Lynn Scott.....	119
UNITED IN STRENGTH THROUGH STORY AND STRATEGY: USING INSTRUCTIONAL AVATARS TO PREPARE PRESERVICE TEACHERS FOR LICENSURE SUCCESS Lynn M. Scott.....	122
MARCHING FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE JOSEP SPECIAL ISSUE ON POLICY AND ADVOCACY Jennifer Sears, Catherine S. Howerter, Danielle A. Waterfield, Caitlin Criss, Alison Kearley, & Kaitlyn Brennan.....	125
MOVING THE NEEDLE FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES: THE TEACHER CANDIDATE SUPPORT NETWORK UNITING TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR MENTORSHIP Jennifer Sears, Jane Strong, Ruby Owiny, Bethany McConnell.....	128
UNITED IN STRENGTH! RESEARCHING THE IMPACT OF TEACHING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS TO MANAGE A SPECIAL EDUCATION CASELOAD Brittany Severino & Colleen Commisso.....	131
SUPPORTING NEW SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER TRANSITION INTO THE CLASSROOM Julie D. Southward.....	134

UNITING EFFORTS TO USE PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Jennifer Webb.....137

INDIVIDUALIZED HIGH QUALITY TRANSITION PLANS IN TEACHER PREPARATION

Louise M. Yoho & Stephanie N. Baker.....140

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United in Strength: Preparing Your Pre-Service Teachers for School Emergencies

Abstract

Many college students today have experienced school emergencies. Research shows teachers want clear guidance on managing such crises (Abbinante, 2017). This session offers teacher educators a chance to explore how to better prepare preservice teachers for emergencies and ensure student safety.

Background/Rationale

Over the past 25 years, active shooter events in the United States have increased significantly and are now at their highest recorded levels. While the overall frequency of school mass shootings has not risen proportionally, these incidents have become notably more deadly (Drane, 2023). This has become extremely harmful to the well-being of all students and educators, not just those who experience school-related gun violence firsthand. School-based interventions have the potential to mitigate these threats (Rapa et al., 2024). School shootings of greater severity were more likely to involve older individuals who were not enrolled as students. The presence of school resource officers was unassociated with any reduction in school shooting severity. The type of gun used was strongly associated with casualties and fatalities. Study findings suggested a need for prevention efforts beyond those commonly used in schools and improved school safety legislation (Livingston et al., 2019).

One promising approach is options-based response training, which empowers educators to make informed decisions during crisis situations. This type of training builds confidence, increases preparedness, and may enhance survival outcomes (Abbinante, 2017). However, school safety extends beyond gun violence. Bullying remains a persistent and critical concern. In earlier research, K–12 teachers identified bullying as the top safety issue they face daily (Finley, 2002). A 2020 study by Mahon et al. examined preservice teachers' ability to recognize and respond to bullying. Results showed a clear training gap, highlighting the need for more comprehensive preparation in this area to maintain a safe and supportive school environment.

Additionally, pre-service teachers are very concerned about the possibility of school shootings. They view existing policies as ineffective and damaging to their pedagogical practice and to their relationships with students. They believe current policies are out of step with teachers' concerns (Hara, 2020). In Texas, the creation of specific policies designed to arm school personnel was explored, including the Marshal Plan and the School Firearm and Safety Action Plan, known as the Guardian Plan. Attention was given to best practices for educating preservice teachers about

these plans. However, Everytown for Gun Safety (2022) emphasized the risks of this type of training.

Finally, fostering situational awareness—a skill common among first responders—should be integral to teacher preparation. This aligns with reflection-in-action, a concept introduced by Schön (1980), which describes a teacher’s ability to assess and adapt their teaching in real-time. When extended to crisis preparedness, this reflective capacity becomes a crucial skill, enhancing both instructional effectiveness and physical safety.

Key Session Takeaways

During evacuations and lockdowns, most staff lack the training to provide accommodations to students who need protocols tailored specifically to their needs (Waitoller & Maggin, 2022). A national survey revealed that only 45% of special educators receive annual disability-specific emergency training (Deans-Wilson, 2024). The following key points can be used to remedy this situation:

- Instruct pre-service teachers on situational awareness and ensure they understand that it is a daily part of teaching called “reflection-in-action”.
- Enlighten all stakeholders in the idea that teachers are the “immediate responders” during a crisis.
- Understand the pre-service training requirements for school safety in your state.
- Recognize best practices for training pre-service teachers and developing an Individual Emergency Preparedness Plan (IEPP).
- Instruct pre-service teachers in the development of “go bags” for disabled students.
- Understand the legal implications of developing IEPPs.
- Instruct pre-service teachers in developing Behavioral Threat Assessment strategies for use with students with disabilities.

Additional Resources

- READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER. (2021). Integrating K–12 students with disabilities into school emergency management planning. In *READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER FACT SHEET*. https://rems.ed.gov/docs/DisabilitiesFactSheet_508C.pdf
- *Center on PBIS New Resource: Aligning Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management with MTSS/PBIS to Enhance School Safety and Student Wellbeing*. (n.d.). <https://www.pbis.org/announcements/new-resource-release-aligning-behavioral-threat-assessment-and-management-with-mtss-pbis#:~:text=%E2%80%8DAaligning%20Behavioral%20Threat%20Assessment,%2C%20wellbeing%2C%20and%20school%20climate.>
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A MATCH MADE IN EDUCATION: WHY DISTRICTS AND UNIVERSITIES BELONG TOGETHER

Abstract

The partnership between the University of the Pacific, Benerd College, and Elk Grove Unified School District exemplifies a sustainable collaboration between an institution of higher education (IHE) and a local education agency (LEA) focused on preparing and retaining high-quality, diverse educators. The partnership is grounded in frequent communication, shared responsibility for outcomes, and aligned goals, enabling a continuous improvement model within the REACH Residency Program. Regular collaboration, including twice-weekly meetings between district and university leadership, supports recruitment, problem-solving, and program responsiveness. Shared expectations for residents, mentors, and partner sites foster trust, relationship-building, and timely feedback. Practicum alignment, weekly observations, and annual contextualization meetings ensure curriculum relevance and responsiveness to district priorities. Continuous improvement is driven by resident performance data and mentor feedback, resulting in targeted enhancements such as strengthened classroom management and literacy supports. The success of the REACH program demonstrates how strong IHE–LEA partnerships can promote equity, meet local workforce needs, and build a sustainable educator pipeline.

Background/Rationale

School districts nationwide face persistent challenges in recruiting, preparing, and retaining a diverse, high-quality educator workforce, particularly in high-need subject areas and communities. Traditional teacher preparation pathways often lack sufficient alignment with district priorities, classroom realities, and sustained mentorship, contributing to early-career attrition. Research increasingly points to residency-based models and strong partnerships between Institutions of Higher Education and Local Education Agencies as effective strategies for addressing these challenges. Purposeful collaboration, shared accountability, and continuous improvement are essential to ensuring that preparation programs remain responsive to district needs while supporting teacher development and retention. The REACH Residency Program emerged from this context as a strategic partnership between the University of the Pacific, Benerd College, and Elk Grove Unified School District, designed to strengthen educator preparation through aligned coursework, embedded clinical practice, and ongoing data-informed refinement. This partnership model responds directly to local workforce needs while advancing equity and long-term sustainability in the teaching profession.

Key Session Takeaways

The presentation highlights how intentional collaboration between a university and a school district can fundamentally strengthen teacher preparation and retention. At the core of the REACH Residency Program is a shared vision between the University of the Pacific and Elk Grove Unified School District, grounded in aligned goals, clearly defined non-negotiables, and shared responsibility for outcomes. Darling-Hammond (2017) highlights the importance of such partnerships in creating teacher preparation models that are responsive to local needs and grounded in real-world experience. This common purpose creates stability and ensures that both partners are working toward the same definition of success.

A key factor in the program's effectiveness is frequent, structured communication. Regular meetings between district and university leadership support transparency, build trust, and allow challenges related to recruitment, program design, and resident support to be addressed quickly and collaboratively. This strong communication infrastructure enables the partnership to remain responsive rather than reactive. Ingersoll et al. (2018) support the notion that collaborative residency programs significantly improve teacher retention by providing comprehensive support throughout the preparation process.

The residency model's success is also driven by close alignment between coursework and practicum experiences. Ongoing resident check-ins, mentor feedback, and real-time observations ensure that learning is immediately applicable to classroom practice. Data from resident performance, credentialing assessments, and district evaluations are intentionally used to inform curriculum adjustments and targeted supports, reinforcing a continuous improvement cycle. According to Zeichner (2010), teacher preparation programs that engage in ongoing assessment and refinement, based on mentor feedback and resident performance data, are more likely to produce effective teachers who are better prepared for the challenges of the classroom. Together, these elements have resulted in a sustainable, equity-centered pipeline of well-prepared educators who are ready to meet district needs and transition successfully into full-time teaching roles.

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SUPPORTING PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATORS THROUGH AI-SUPPORTED FEEDBACK: ENHANCING TRANSITION PLANNING IN TEACHER PREPARATION

Abstract

This proceeding summarizes a quasi-experimental study of an AI-supported feedback tool designed to scaffold preservice special educators in drafting high-quality individualized transition plans (ITPs) for students with disabilities. Thirty-four candidates completed case-based planning tasks and then revised them using structured feedback from an application developed in PlayLab AI. Across rubric domains (specificity, clarity, alignment, feasibility), statistically significant gains with large effect sizes were observed, alongside substantial growth in perceived knowledge across key transition domains (e.g., postsecondary outcomes, course of study, self-determination, interagency collaboration). Grounded in practice-based teacher education and cognitive apprenticeship, the AI tool functioned as a scaffold for deliberate practice, structured reflection, and iterative learning rather than a replacement for mentorship (Anthony et al., 2018; Matsuo & Tsukube, 2020). Practical guidance is offered for integrating AI in coursework, addressing ethics and equity, and scaling feedback-rich supports in teacher preparation programs (Hanna et al., 2025; Holmes et al., 2022).

Background/Rationale

Transition planning mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires educators to align student-centered goals, assessment data, courses of study, and services with postsecondary outcomes (Kohler et al., 2016). Novice teachers frequently produce plans that are vague or misaligned, underscoring a need for structured rehearsal of complex planning tasks with timely feedback (Morningstar et al., 2024). To address this need, an AI-supported feedback cycle was embedded within three case-based applications in teacher preparation coursework. Drawing on cognitive apprenticeship within practice-based teacher education, the cycle comprised drafting, AI-generated guidance tailored to the submitted draft, structured reflection and revision, and instructor debrief (Anthony et al., 2018; Matsuo & Tsukube, 2020). The approach aimed to reduce barriers to deliberate practice while cultivating professional judgment by requiring candidates to interrogate AI outputs against evidence-based transition frameworks and course instruction, thereby maintaining human oversight (Evmenova et al., 2024; Kohler et al., 2016; Saha & Mondal, 2024; Wehmeyer et al., 2007).

Key Session Takeaways

Design of the AI-Supported Learning Cycle.

The intervention operationalized cognitive apprenticeship by sequencing authentic drafting, targeted AI guidance, reflective revision, and instructor debrief. The PlayLab AI tool prompted candidates to strengthen Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) statements, align postsecondary outcomes with assessment data, map courses of study to outcomes, specify services and activities that build requisite skills, and write measurable transition goals with short-term objectives (Baker, 2024; Kohler et al., 2016). The cycle positioned AI as a scaffold to elicit reasoning, with human oversight required to evaluate accuracy, feasibility, and equity.

Quantitative Outcomes and Practical Meaning.

Across all three case studies, AI-supported feedback produced consistent and meaningful improvements in transition planning quality and candidate knowledge. In Case Study 1 (PLAAFP and further assessment), scores rose from $M = 26.33$ ($SD = 5.27$) to $M = 32.64$ ($SD = 5.47$), a 6.30-point gain ($d = 1.57$), with all vignette groups showing significant increases. Case Study 2 (assessments, outcomes, course of study) improved from $M = 27.73$ ($SD = 5.80$) to $M = 31.88$ ($SD = 5.33$), a 4.15-point gain ($d = 1.08$), with three of four groups significant. Case Study 3 (services, activities, goals, STOs) increased from $M = 19.07$ ($SD = 5.17$) to $M = 22.46$ ($SD = 5.17$), a 3.39-point gain ($d = 0.66$), though vignette-specific effects varied. Pre-post knowledge scores showed the largest change, rising from $M = 31.03$ ($SD = 7.00$) to $M = 55.32$ ($SD = 6.26$), $\Delta = 24.29$ ($d = 3.62$), with 12 of 13 domains improving significantly, especially postsecondary outcomes, course of study, self-determination practices, and interagency collaboration, while annual IEP goals remained stable, likely due to a ceiling effect. Collectively, these findings indicate that structured AI guidance accelerates acquisition of complex planning skills and reinforces alignment with best practices.

Prompts and Feedback Moves That Worked.

Effective prompts asked candidates to (a) anchor PLAAFP in specific assessment findings; (b) articulate measurable postsecondary outcomes; (c) align outcomes and course of study; (d) specify services and activities that build prerequisite skills (e.g., CBI, job sampling); and (e) convert outcomes into annual goals and STOs with progress monitoring. Feedback emphasized clarity, specificity, feasibility, timelines, responsible parties, and cross-component alignment.

Reflective Routine and Professional Judgment.

Candidates were guided to compare AI suggestions to evidence-based transition frameworks and accept, adapt, or reject suggestions with a written rationale, and document revisions. This centered pedagogical reasoning and mitigated overreliance on automation by making evaluation criteria explicit. Instructors reported that debriefs focusing on reasoning (rather than products alone) improved calibration across instructors.

Instructor Implementation Guidance.

Embedding within existing coursework requires explicit rubrics, exemplars, and timelines; scheduled debriefs that surface decision rationales; and authentic case vignettes that reflect varied disability categories and contexts. Instructors should model how to interrogate AI outputs,

demonstrate fidelity checks, and calibrate expectations across sections. Programs seeking to replicate these processes should (a) adopt vetted AI platforms; (b) co-design prompt libraries tied to local rubrics and state standards; and (c) gather routine data on effectiveness and equity to inform iterative improvement. Such moves sustain feedback-rich practice while preserving human mentorship and compliance with IDEA.

Additional Resources

- PlayLab AI – Transition Plan Development Support App:
<https://www.playlab.ai/project/cm5pebx8h0bvs12hd5vwxmkee>
- CEEDAR Center – Practice-based Teacher Education Resources: <https://ceedar.org>
- IDEA – Office of Special Education Programs Transition Guidance: <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>

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THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE:
WHAT SPECIAL EDUCATORS BELIEVE GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS SHOULD
KEEP IN MIND

Abstract

General education teachers (GETs) often report limited preparation and confidence for supporting students with disabilities, while special education teachers (SETs) bring specialized expertise that is frequently misunderstood or underutilized. We gathered qualitative data from current SETs, asking, “What do you wish your general education counterparts understood about special education?” Thematic analysis identified four recurring themes: shared responsibility for *all* students, professional parity, accurate understanding and use of accommodations/modifications, and inclusion as belonging (not just placement). We translated these insights into actionable recommendations for educator preparation programs (EPPs), school leaders, and classroom practitioners to improve collaboration and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Background/Rationale

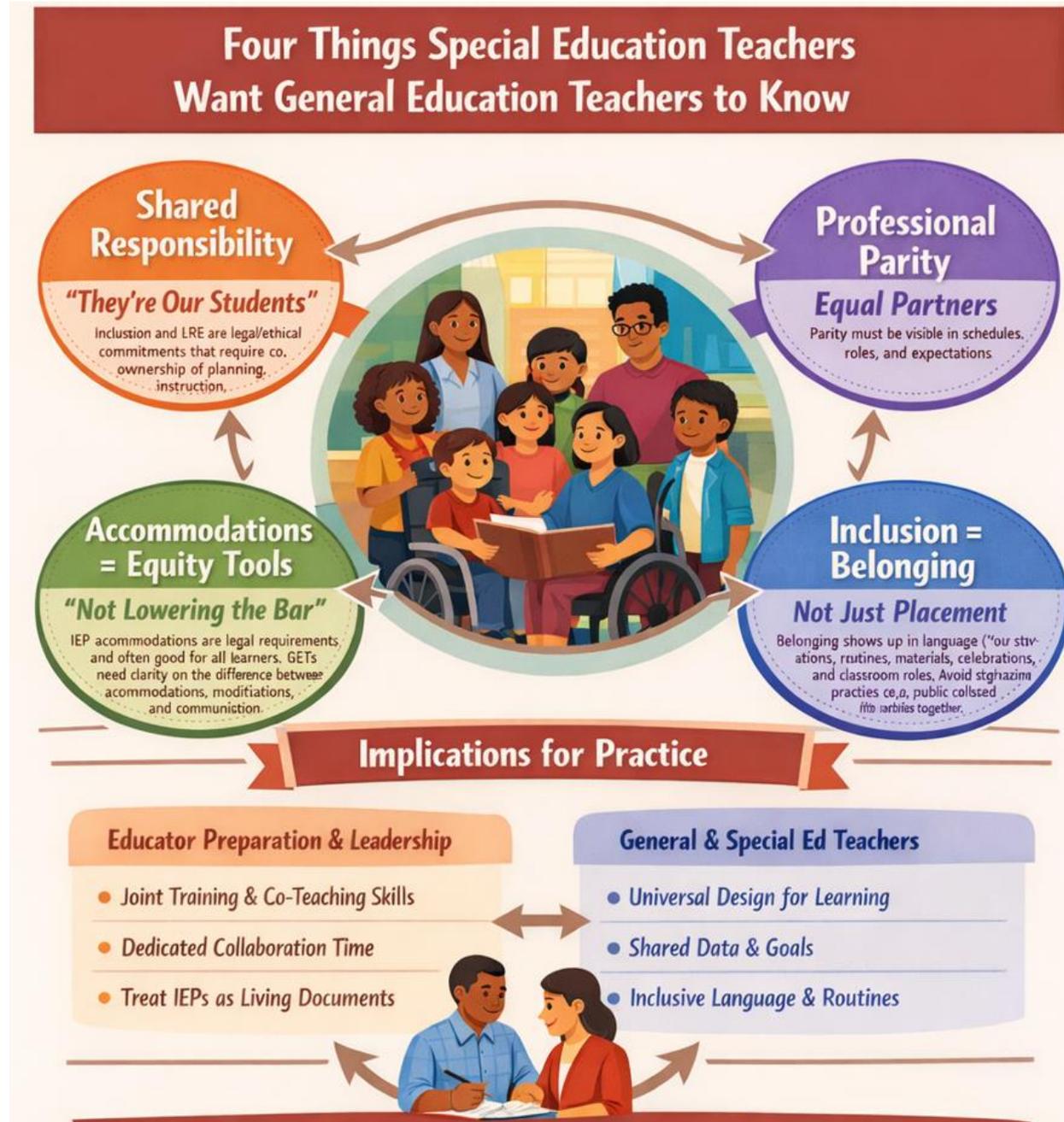
Since IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015), about two-thirds of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs; swIEPs) spend $\geq 80\%$ of the day in general settings. Yet GETs commonly report feeling underprepared for inclusive, which can depress self-efficacy and implementation of evidence-based supports. SETs, conversely, carry complex instructional, collaborative, and compliance responsibilities across grades and settings. Elevating SET perspectives clarifies where preparation, structures, and mindsets break down—and how to fix them.

When teachers receive instruction on special education law, their knowledge, skills, and confidence increase (Horner et al., 2019). The purpose of this TED session was to provide special education faculty the tools necessary to teach the proposed conceptual framework to their preservice teachers, in order to increase their knowledge, skills, and confidence.

Method

We collected open-ended responses from practicing SETs via survey within professional communities and conducted a collaborative thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2013), establishing inter-rater agreement on codes and themes.

Findings



Conclusion

SETs' perspectives converge on the four levers above. Addressing these through integrated preparation, protected collaboration, and visible parity moves inclusion from compliance to culture—and improves learning for all students.

Additional Resources

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REIMAGINING PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATING VISUAL AND AUDITORY STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS, PHONEMIC AWARENESS, AND PHONICS

Abstract

Research shows a strong link between phonological awareness (PA) and early reading. If pre-service teachers have insufficient knowledge of PA it can result in ineffective feedback and over-reliance on context clues. We used visual and auditory strategies to enhance pre-service teachers' understanding of PA, including how to teach it.

Background/Rational

Research supports a causal link between phonological awareness and early reading (Hogan et al., 2005); therefore, it is critical that we teach pre-service educators what phonological and phonemic awareness is and how it relates to phonics and reading instruction. Pre-service teachers receive a range of support for teaching reading to students with and without reading difficulties and demonstrate “a wide range of preservice teacher knowledge related to phonemic awareness” (Clark et al., 2017). Teachers without a good working knowledge of phonological and phonemic awareness, and phonics (PAX2P) “may provide inappropriate feedback to children's errors or encourage maladaptive strategies such as guessing at words based on context rather than paying close attention to all of the letters in a word” (Spear-Swerling et al., 2005, p. 268). A variety of tools (i.e. podcasts, videos) have been used, but what has not been explored is how to increase pre-service educators' own PAX2P skills while also teaching them how to teach those skills. Using a variety of visual and auditory strategies (e.g., mouth-sound pictures, articulator's, vowel shapes, etc.), we aim to increase pre-service teachers' knowledge of PAX2P while also teaching them explicit strategies they can use to teach future students.

Key Session Takeaways

Research shows that phonological awareness and phonics are essential for developing early reading skills in students (Hogan et al., 2005). However, many elementary educators lack their own skills in phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics (referred to as PAX2P), which makes it challenging for them to effectively teach these skills to their students (Puliatte & Ehri, 2018; Stark et al., 2016). Specifically, teachers who don't have a good working knowledge of PAX2P "may provide inappropriate feedback to children's errors or encourage maladaptive strategies such as guessing at words based on context rather than paying close attention to all of the letters in a word" (Spear-Swerling et al., 2005, p. 268). It is of particular importance that we teach pre-service educators what PAX2P is and how it relates to reading instruction (Hogan et al., 2005). Teaching pre-service educators early literacy content, and subsequently how to teach literacy skills, is imperative for their future students to become competent readers (Binks-Cantrell et al., 2012).

This study involved pre-service students enrolled in educator preparation programs at two different universities across the United States. These students completed pre-, mid-, and post-assessments to evaluate their PAX2P skills and identify areas that needed further improvement. Additionally, surveys were conducted to assess the students' perceptions of their ability to teach PAX2P and the effectiveness of the course activities and resources provided. Students participated in learning activities that emphasized visual and auditory representations of phonemes, such as images of mouth movements, articulator placements, and auditory strategies, to enhance their own PAX2P skills (Lindamood & Lindamood, 2011; McIntyre et al., 2008). They learned various systematic teaching strategies, including vowel shapes, phonemic discrimination, segmenting, and blending, to support the development of early literacy skills in elementary students. Additionally, we examined the perspectives of pre-service teachers regarding their ability to teach PAX2P, identifying the most effective learning activities and educational resources that made them feel more prepared to instruct young readers (Berenato & Severino, 2017; Mather et al., 2001).

Results indicated pre-service educators' understanding of PAX2P increased significantly at both study locations during a single semester period. Pre-service educators at both locations showed growth overall and on individual PAX2P skills at each assessment period. After participating in PAX2P instruction, pre-service educators' perspectives on their abilities to teach PAX2P increased.

Pre-service educators that received explicit and systematic instruction on PAX2P skills demonstrated a high level of mastery of, and confidence in, teaching those skills to K-2 students. Pre-service educators benefit from having an entire semester with continued practice on PAX2P skills. Multimodal PAX2P instructional activities and review helps to reinforce major concepts in early literacy.

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UNITED IN STRENGTH! EMPHASIZING THE COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION: TEACHING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS CASE MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Abstract

What does being a special education case manager include? That question is difficult to answer and even harder to teach! This idea-sharing conversation provided examples for how a case management project with real-life application can be embedded within full semester, abbreviated semester, in-person, or virtual learning courses for pre-service special educators. Teaching examples include how to meaningfully teach and assess skills related to managing paperwork due dates, data collection, collaborating with Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members, participating in meetings, responding to electronic or face-to-face concerns, and how to prioritize and respond to the unexpected events that occur during a school day.

Background/Rationale

Teacher attrition is plaguing the country with casualties in special education more than other groups (US Department of Education, 2022). Younger, less experienced teachers exhibit higher rates of burnout and turnover (Brunsting, et al., 2014). Increased workloads of special education teachers, including roles as case managers, are positively associated with burnout levels (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Caballero, 2024). This requires a focus on how teacher preparation programs review the responsibilities of case management. Mehrenberg (2013) interviewed 18 Special Education Teachers from around the United States to discover most participants felt their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them for the multi-tasking requirements of being a caseload manager.

Previous scholars have explored and provided recommendations for how specific, isolated components, of case management can be improved in coursework including practicing parent communication skills (Mulholland & Blecker, 2008; Strassfeld, 2018), discussion of time management strategies (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017), and simulated IEP meetings (Mason, 2023; Toledo, 2023; Werts et al., 2002). However, no studies have required pre-service SETs to engage in all the tasks required to come to an IEP meeting prepared or how to handle unexpected situations that arise during the school day as a SET. This session provided examples of teaching strategies that can be embedded within existing special education courses to help pre-service special education teachers learn how to complete the various aspects of case management cohesively, just like they will need to once certified and working full-time in the field.

Key Session Takeaways

Teaching case management skills were embedded within a 15-week and abbreviated 5-week face-to-face undergraduate courses. All pre-service teachers were given a fictitious caseload of 18 students and a daily schedule as an elementary or high school special education teacher. Students used this information to complete several learning activities connected to the requirements of case management. These activities included:

- Creating a spreadsheet for when all paperwork was due for the school year for the students on their caseload.
- Creating a calendar to plan when they would use their prep time to complete the necessary paperwork and data collection for their caseload.
- Evaluating progress monitoring data for academic and functional IEP goals and generating a progress report.
- Drafting emails to general education teachers to introduce the student on their caseload, review accommodations and modifications, and request data or input.
- Drafting emails to school administrators for IEP meeting availability and to provide updates regarding student concerns.
- Responding to parent concerns via email, phone call, and face-to-face meetings.
- Creating and maintaining a parent communication log for documentation.
- Prioritizing unexpected tasks or requests during their workday (Figure 1).
- Responding to in-the-moment concerns regarding students on their caseload.

Figure 1. *Student Work Example: Prioritizing Unexpected Tasks*

Good morning! It is the start of your work day! You enter your classroom and sit down to figure out how you will organize your day. You open your computer and read through the emails you have received since yesterday. You also have a couple of items on your desk that need to be completed. The table below includes five of these tasks. For each task, identify the priority to which you would respond to it, how you would respond, when you would respond (use your daily schedule), and any other considerations to accomplish all five tasks today. You can do this!

Tasks	# of Priority 1-5 & Why	How Will You Respond	When Will You Respond/Do the Task	Any Other Considerations
A student on your caseload has a science test to take during 3rd period and is scheduled to take it in the school's testing room for full read-aloud. You received an email saying that the person who works in the testing room is absent today and it will be closed.	Priority 2: This is a problem because the child needs to take the science test today in another room since the testing room is closed. This is a required accommodation in their IEP.	See if another teacher or faculty member (or ask principal for support) would be able to cover my 3 rd grade recess duty so I can have the student come to my classroom or office and take the test with full read-aloud	I can call my colleagues in the morning to find recess duty coverage. I can email the science teacher to let them know the change. I would try to see the student during advisory or call their advisory teacher to let them know the change in location for 3 rd period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If someone else (possibly a paraprofessional) is available and can provide read aloud • Don't want to reschedule as the student could miss course content

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MINDFULNESS PRACTICES FOR THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENT

Abstract

This paper explores the significance of mindfulness practices to reduce teacher stress and student stress. Mindfulness practices can help reduce stress and anxiety, improve attention, and enhance self-awareness. When teacher candidates and teachers develop strength and resiliency, they can work collaboratively within and across schools to promote student success. I provide strategies for teacher candidates to combat stress induced by workload and to help regulate their emotions, thereby directly impacting the emotional climate of classrooms.

Background/Rationale

Mindfulness training suggests benefits for teacher candidates' capacity to cope with college demands and family expectations increases capacity to self-regulate (Bai et al., 2020). Most teacher candidates enrolled in college usually work as part time or full-time teachers. A survey by the National Education Association (2022) found 90% of more than 3500 educators reported feelings of burnout, that more than 60% of special educators in their study reported severe stress, and nearly 40% had at least one or two symptoms of mental illnesses (McGrew et al., 2023). In their own study more than 60% of special educators reported “dangerous levels of exhaustion” according to the authors. Research has shown that stress in special educators leads to burn-out due to emotional exhaustion, cynical attitude towards work, and a low self-evaluation. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with work and stress and exhaustion leads to higher teacher turnover among special education teachers (McGrew et al., 2023; Pavlidou et al., 2022). Both school and college students on the other hand, are pressured by constant need for time, focus, attention, alertness, and for applying analytical critical thinking skills, and writing skills. The resulting stress affects their health, well-being, and emotional balance.

Mindfulness training can benefit both teachers (Agyapong et al., 2023; Ruble et al., 2025) and students. According to research “School-based mindfulness for children and adolescents have gained a solid foothold in recent research. Mindfulness has become increasingly common in schools, with application across a range of issues, including autism-related difficulties, ADHD, and anxiety (Garo et al., 2023). The authors state that mindfulness practices help reduce stress, improve social emotional regulation, increase attention, and enhance self-awareness in those who practice regularly. Furthermore, mindfulness encourages empathy and compassion with peers, friends, supervisors, guides, teachers, mentors, and families (Maher, 2021). Mindfulness benefits include mental clarity, emotional balance, and overall health (Chopra, 2018).

Key Session Takeaways

The benefits of mindfulness practices for teachers and students include:

1. **Focus and Concentration:** Mindfulness trains your brain to stay in the present moment, which can help improve your attention span and productivity. This is particularly valuable when juggling multiple tasks and deadlines.
2. **Stress Reduction:** Mindfulness practices, such as deep breathing and meditation, activate the body's relaxation response, reducing the harmful effects of stress and anxiety induced by managing large classrooms and student behavior problems.
3. **Emotional Resilience:** By observing your thoughts and feelings without immediate reaction, you can build greater emotional resilience, helping you to cope with setbacks and challenges more effectively.
4. **Lasty, regular mindfulness practice leads to improved relationships.**

Additional Resources

Deepak Chopra's Go-To 3-Minute Meditation To Stay Focused

<https://youtu.be/4Bs0qUB3BHQ?si=ACz8vPi57OH17E0D>

Mindfulness training models (Garo et al., 2023):

Mindful Schools (Brensilver et al., 2020)

MindUP (The Hawn Foundation, 2011)

A Still Quiet Place (Saltzman, 2014)

The Mindfulness Curriculum (Smiling Mind, 2021)

Learning to Breathe (Broderick, 2013).

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EQUIPPING FUTURE EDUCATORS: INTEGRATING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION

Abstract

This presentation describes a model for integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into special education teacher preparation programs. It highlights strategies for building AI literacy among pre-service, intern, and graduate students while promoting ethical, equitable, and inclusive practices aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The session explores how AI tools such as Google Gemini, Microsoft Co-Pilot, NotebookLM, and ChatGPT Pro can support instructional planning, individualized education program (IEP) development, personalized learning, and progress monitoring. Emphasis is placed on addressing the digital divide and preparing future educators to critically and responsibly use AI to enhance outcomes for students with disabilities from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Background/Rationale

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping educational practice, yet teacher preparation programs—particularly in special education—often lag behind these developments. Special educators face increasing demands related to individualized instruction, compliance, and documentation, all within contexts of teacher shortages and inequitable access to resources. Preparing future special educators to use AI ethically and effectively is therefore both timely and necessary. This initiative integrates AI literacy into credential and graduate-level special education coursework at California State University, Fresno, aligning with institutional priorities of innovation, equity, and student-centered learning. Grounded in Universal Design for Learning, the model emphasizes accessibility, flexibility, and culturally responsive practice while ensuring AI is used to reduce—rather than exacerbate—educational inequities.

This session highlighted a developing model for integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into special education teacher preparation across credential, master's, and doctoral programs at California State University, Fresno. Participants examined how AI is reshaping education, accessibility, and learning equity, and discussed why special education must be included—if not lead—in this transformation. The discussion emphasized that teacher preparation must evolve to support classrooms that do not yet exist, while remaining grounded in human-centered, ethical practice.

Key Session Takeaways

The session demonstrates how AI tools can be embedded into teacher preparation coursework and fieldwork experiences to support inclusive instruction. Participants explore sample modules and mentoring structures that model responsible AI use for IEP development, personalized learning, and progress monitoring. Ethical considerations—including data privacy, bias, and overreliance—are addressed through guided discussion and reflection. The session also illustrates low-tech and accessible approaches to AI integration, ensuring applicability across diverse institutional contexts. Attendees leave with practical strategies and frameworks to begin or expand AI integration in their own special education programs.

Practical examples demonstrated how AI tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Co-Pilot, and NotebookLM are used to support instructional planning, IEP development, personalized learning, and progress monitoring. Attention was given to helping teacher candidates understand both the promise and limitations of AI, including issues of accuracy, bias, hallucinations, and data privacy. Rather than focusing on technical mastery, the session emphasized judgment, reflection, and transparency in AI use.

A key component of the session was the introduction of an AI Engagement Policy embedded in course syllabi. This policy encourages thoughtful experimentation with AI while requiring disclosure, reflection, and integrity. Participants discussed the value of co-creating AI norms with students to promote shared responsibility, metacognition, and ethical decision-making.

Finally, the session foregrounded equity by highlighting Fresno State and CSU system initiatives that expand access to AI tools for Pell Grant–eligible, first-generation, and multilingual students. By intentionally addressing the digital divide, the model positions AI as a tool for closing opportunity gaps rather than widening them, reinforcing the role of special educators as critical thinkers, advocates, and designers of inclusive learning environments.

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EXAMINING BURNOUT IN EARLY CAREER EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Abstract

Early childhood special educators face burnout and are at risk of leaving the profession within the first five years of teaching. This TED presentation showcases preliminary results of a mixed methods phenomenological research (MMPR) study that seeks to understand how the phenomenon of burnout is described by early childhood special educators and how to best support their mental well-being. Using a sequential design for analysis, three quantitative measures targeting burnout, self-regulatory skills and self-efficacy beliefs were given first during the quantitative phase, followed by a PHEN (qualitative) phase, where semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the experience of burnout. Results of this study will contribute to the discourse surrounding burnout in special education teachers and may give implications for how to support early childhood special educators' mental well-being and retention.

Background/Rationale

A recent study on the early childhood special educator profession conducted by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) found that nearly half of respondents planned to leave the field within the next 5 years (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024, with burnout being one of the largest contributing factors. Mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression are present in these early childhood special educators experiencing burnout (Jeon et al., 2022, 2024), yet there are those who have these symptoms and are able to persevere and fight to stay (Walter et al., 2023). This suggests that there are internal factors at the individual level that affect teacher well-being, attrition rates and professional fulfillment, as described by Walter et al.

Foundational studies have shown that when self-efficacy beliefs in an occupation are high, an individual may overcome struggles (Bandura & Locke, 2003). There is also a relationship between one's self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulation skills and risk of depression (Bandura, 1991) with genetic sensitivity to stress affecting one's self-regulation skills (Blair & Ku, 2022). The purpose of this study seeks to understand how the phenomenon of burnout is described by early childhood special educators and how to best support their mental well-being.

Key Session Takeaways

Based on preliminary data analysis at the time of presentation at TED 2025, results showed the following:

1. Early childhood special educators may be prone to the “overextended” burnout profile based on the MBI-ES survey (Figure 1). They may have high self-efficacy skills (Figure 2), but poor coping skills to manage their self-regulatory behaviors; high self-regulatory scores (Figure 3) were due to overthinking and overanalyzing of their teaching skills and experiences as presented in participant interviews.
2. Early childhood special educators described burnout as akin to dread, an aversion of going to work, mimicking depression.
3. An early childhood special educator with high self-efficacy describes teaching experiences with confidence, while an early childhood special educator with low self-efficacy describes teaching experiences with uncertainty and anxiety.
4. Early childhood special educators report work-day strategies such as taking a breath or taking a break, and home strategies such as receiving therapy, medical supplements, mindfulness activities and hobbies they enjoy.
5. Early childhood educators report that having supportive administration, more autonomy and a caring community would positively affect their well-being

Figure 1.

MBI-ES (Maslach Burnout Inventory: Educators Survey) Participant Profiles

MBI-ES Burnout Profiles			
Engaged	2		
Ineffective	0		
Overextended	7		
Disengaged	0		
TSES	Engagement	Instruction	Management
Engaged	27.5	21	29.5
Overextended	25.1	28.4	25.1
Burnout	23.5	26.5	23

Figure 2.

TSES (Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale) Results by MBI-ES Profile

Figure 3.

MSR-T (Marburg Self-Regulation Questionnaire for Teachers) Results by MBI-ES Profile

MSR-T	Planning	Monitoring	Reflection
Engaged	27.5	26.5	24.5
Overextended	30	30	29
Burnout	32	28	29

Additional Resources

- Samantha Didrichsen’s research website and blog: www.samanthadidrichsen.com
- SSRN preprint on HTKS-Kids, a gamified self-regulation task that may offer equitable assessment opportunities in early childhood education: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5418957>
- Engaging and inclusive strategies for online instructors: <https://sites.psu.edu/ajeforum/2025/05/31/empowering-online-college-instructors-through-udl-engaging-and-inclusive-strategies-by-kristen-smigielski-and-samantha-didrichsen/>

- A corpus of audio recordings and transcripts of young children engaged in play and storytelling activities, the HTKS-Kids task, and language assessments that researchers may request the use of for empirical purposes: <https://chilides.talkbank.org/access/Eng-AAE/Cameron.html>

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UNITED TO MOVE FORWARD: CONNECTING TEACHER CANDIDATES TO THEIR FUTURE THROUGH AUTHENTIC SPECIAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

Abstract

This work showcases the impact of authentic, profession-based instructional opportunities and field experiences embedded within a comprehensive special education educator preparation program. Aligned with Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) standards, these experiences intentionally bridge theory and practice while developing teacher candidates (TC) knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions for inclusive instruction. A data-driven approach to continuous program improvement was employed, using program outcome data and TC feedback to refine curriculum design and enhance profession-based learning and embedded field experiences. Findings from program data and TC reflections indicated increased confidence, preparedness, and instructional effectiveness, highlighting the value of integrating authentic learning experiences across coursework and clinical practice. Collectively, these results support innovative, profession-based approaches that unites and strengthens educator preparation (EPP) and promotes teacher readiness for real-world instructional contexts.

Background/Rationale

Special education EPPs are challenged by preparing TCs to meet diverse learner needs across academic, behavioral, and collaborative contexts. Many EPPs operate in isolation, limiting pre-service teachers' exposure to the authentic, profession-based experiences necessary to translate theory to practice. Research emphasizes the importance of integrating innovative instructional methods with authentic field experiences to promote teacher effectiveness and retention. Without immersive, real-world learning opportunities, candidates often hesitate to apply instructional strategies and lack the confidence to respond to diverse learner needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Faculty used a continuous improvement cycle that aligned coursework and field experiences with CEC's Initial Preparation Standards (CEC, 2020) and high-leverage practices (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; McLeskey et al., 2017).

This program scaffolds coursework, clinical experiences, and data-driven reflection to ensure TCs application in real-world contexts. Guided by andragogical principles (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) and Covey's (2004) *begin with the end in mind* concept, the team mapped program objectives to job descriptions and clinical experiences, profession-based learning opportunities, authentic assessment strategies and district partnerships (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Campbell & Dunleavy, 2016; Wiggins, 1998). By integrating project-based learning, laboratory school field experiences and a residency practicum (RP) (Shields & Lynn, 2025), our program aims to close gaps to ensure that teacher candidates enter the profession prepared to meet diverse student needs.

Key Session Takeaways

Collectively, the key takeaways from this work highlight a practice-embedded special education EPP. TCs engaged in scaffolded coursework, authentic instructional strategies, data-informed decision making, technology-enhanced learning, and diverse field experiences that promoted confidence, instructional competence, and professional readiness. Across coursework and clinical practice, candidates developed specialized content knowledge, assessment literacy, collaborative dispositions, and the ability to apply evidence-based practices in real-world contexts. Table 1 synthesizes these key takeaways by explicitly aligning program components to the CEC Initial Preparation Standards which could be replicated by other EPPs.

Table 1

Program Components Aligned to CEC Standards

CEC Standard	Program Components
5: Supporting Learning Using Effective Instruction & 6: Supporting Social, Emotional, & Behavioral Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of Marzano & Kagan Cooperative Learning Strategies ● EBPs research and video modeling ● Poster presentation of EBPs aligned to disability areas ● Use of Station Teaching ● Intensive small group instruction during RP
4: Using Assessment to Understand Learner & Learning Environment for Data Based Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Observation and Interview project with teacher ● Use of MTSS, Golden Thread, and UDL principles ● ABC scaffolded video data collection ● CBM data case study, administration, and analysis ● Development and use of data collection tools in RP
2: Understanding & Addressing Individual's Development & 4 (see above)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of SpEdTrack Evaluation/IEP system ● AI focused assignments ● BIP-creation, evaluation, and alignment to EBPs ● Parental Bill of Rights ● Use of technology to administer CBMs and collect data ● Administer PPVT and teach individual lesson
1: Engaging in Professional Learning & Practice w/in Ethical Guidelines & 7: Collaborating with Team Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Diverse field experiences & lab school lessons ● Embed cross-curricular approaches (adaptive p.e.) ● Co-teaching models in co-taught methods class ● Collaborate w/stakeholders & practitioner guest speakers ● Participation in P/T conferences and IEP meetings
1 & 7 (see above)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interview questions embedded in courses ● Mock Interview and Career Day participation ● Self-reflection tied to standards ● Mock IEP with all required participants ● Interview parent (transition) and Sped teacher

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SUPPORTING TEACHER RESIDENTS AT A HISTORICALLY TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

Abstract

Student demographics in public schools have shifted significantly over the years, yet the teaching workforce remains largely unchanged. The need for greater diversity among teachers is evident when examining current enrollment patterns in local education agencies. Today, public schools serve approximately 23.5 million students, primarily taught by a predominantly Euro-American female teaching force that continues to dominate the profession (NCES, 2023). Despite a majority Hispanic and Black student population, most educators in the study region are White. As of 2020-2021, educators are 57% White, 28% Hispanic, 11% Black, 2% Asian, and 2% other (Schaeffer, 2021). This TED 2025 presentation highlights data from a newly developed bachelor's degree program at a historically community college-based institution, designed to prepare teachers for early childhood through sixth grade with an emphasis on special populations. Findings demonstrate that implementing targeted student supports can significantly improve student retention and teacher licensure outcomes.

Background/Rationale

This program was developed to address the persistent teacher shortage in a large urban metroplex while simultaneously increasing access to affordable higher education. By offering a pathway to a four-year degree at community college pricing, under \$10,000, the program removes one of the most significant barriers to entry for aspiring educators: cost. This affordability is transformative for students who have historically been excluded from traditional university systems due to financial constraints.

The initiative is grounded in the belief that expanding access to teacher preparation programs will diversify the educator workforce and better reflect the demographics of the PK–12 student population. Providing this opportunity at a historically two-year institution creates a new model for equity in higher education, ensuring that more learners can pursue teaching careers and, in turn, support the growing and diverse student population in the region.

The goals of this TED presentation are to share data collected since the program's inception in Fall 2021 and to highlight the targeted supports implemented based on student feedback. These supports include academic interventions, financial assistance, and professional development opportunities which are all intentionally designed to improve retention and licensure outcomes. By disseminating these findings, the presentation aims to inspire other institutions to adopt best practices that promote access, persistence, and success for teacher candidates

Key Session Takeaways

The Grow Your Own program is grounded in a robust theory of action designed to strengthen and diversify the educator workforce through strategic collaboration with local district partners (Carver-Thomas, 2018). The program emphasizes affordability, racial equity, paid residency experiences, expert mentorship, performance-based assessments, and real-time coaching and feedback. This comprehensive approach not only supports teacher residents but also benefits PK-12 students, families, and the broader community by ensuring that future educators are well prepared and culturally responsive.

Central to the program is the prioritization of learning experiences that equip candidates to meet the diverse needs of students. This is achieved by five key competencies that guide the curriculum and fieldwork. By the end of our program completion, our teacher candidates will: 1) Know themselves and be equipped to respond (versus react) in diverse settings, 2) Prioritize learning about their students, families, and communities and be equipped to use this knowledge in service of effectively meeting students' needs, 3) Identify, contextualize, and use high-quality instructional materials, 4) Elicit and interpret student thinking, and 5) Effectively differentiate instruction. These competencies are embedded in coursework, clinical experiences, and coaching cycles to ensure mastery.

Barnett et al. (2000) highlight that cohort models foster peer support, collaborative learning, professional networking, and persistence, which are critical for teacher preparation programs. Cohorts create a sense of community that improves retention and engagement. The program is structured for student to participate in once-a-week cohort meetings and also receive one-on-one coaching from specialized faculty who have experience in the PK-12 setting as well as higher education. These faculty are out in the field observing residents 5 times per semester. Data is collected in both quantitatively and qualitatively from these faculty, students, community partners, etc.

Additional supports such as senior success coaches, on-campus childcare, paid residencies, and tuition assistance further remove barriers to degree completion. This discussion is significant to the field because it shares ongoing and current data from the first college in its state to offer a bachelor's in education program at a historically community college program. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of the diversity of students who were in the senior year residency.

Figure 1. 2023 Senior Year Residency Data

All Races/Ethnicities	All Genders		Transgendered or non-binary	Prefer not to say or unknown
	Women	Men		
1. # of residents for SY23	145			
2. # of residents for SY23 identifying as people of color	126			
3. # of residents for SY23 by race and ethnicity, and gender				
All Races/Ethnicities	145	132	13	0
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0	0	0
Asian or Asian American	4	3	1	0
Black or African American	13	12	1	0
Hispanic or Latine/x	109	100	9	0
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
White	18	17	1	0
Other race or ethnicity	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to say or unknown	1	0	1	0

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UNITING TO GATHER FEEDBACK FROM A VARIETY OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS ON INTERVENTIONS USING QR CODES

Abstract

This conference proceeding describes how to utilize QR codes to collect feedback from a wide range of education stakeholders on interventions implemented in PK-12 education settings. Using a district-wide therapy dog program as a case example, the session demonstrates how QR codes were used to collect qualitative feedback from 343 stakeholders, including students, families, educators, administrators, and staff. Findings highlight how QR code-based data collection supported participation, protected anonymity, and enabled real-time access across school contexts. QR codes can serve as a bridge that connect diverse voices to data-driven decision-making and program improvement in education.

Background/Rationale

Gathering feedback from a variety of education stakeholders, such as students, families, educators, and community members, is essential for informing decisions about interventions implemented in PK-12 education. This need is particularly important for emerging, whole-school interventions, such as therapy dog programs, that aim to support well-being and teaching and learning across diverse educational contexts. Therapy dogs are increasingly integrated into PK-12 settings as evidence-based supports that promote emotional regulation, engagement, social connection, and positive school climate (Farrand & Jung, 2025). However, much of the existing literature has focused on outcomes for individual students or clinical populations, with fewer studies capturing perspectives across multiple stakeholder groups within school systems.

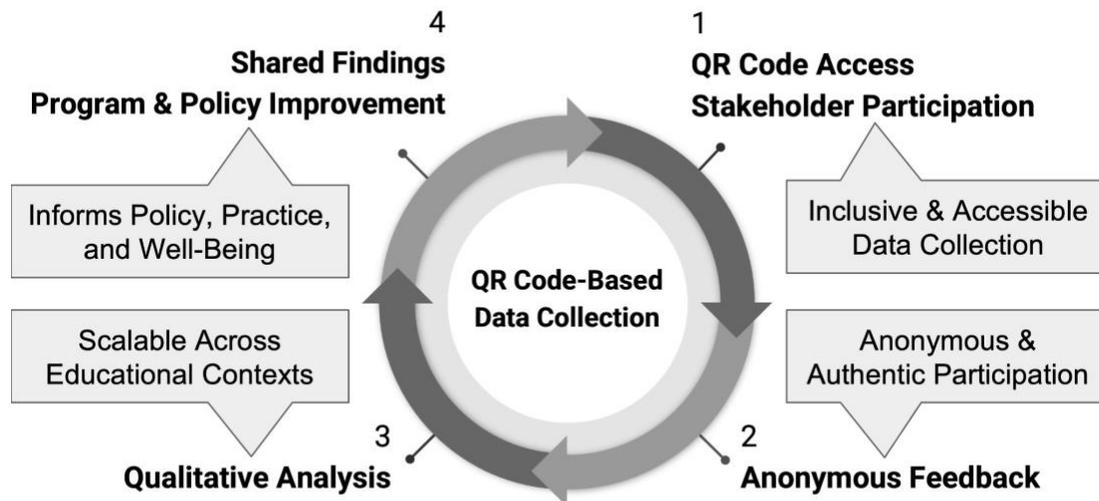
Evaluating therapy dog programs through a multi-stakeholder perspective is critical, as educational stakeholders experience and interpret these interventions in distinct yet interconnected ways. Without systematic approaches to gathering stakeholder feedback, important perspectives related to program effectiveness, ethical implementation, and contextual fit may be overlooked. Evans (2018) identified several persistent challenges in stakeholder feedback collection, including time demands, cost, representation, and accessibility, which can limit participation and unintentionally exclude certain voices. QR codes offer a practical solution to address these challenges by providing a quick, cost-effective, and accessible method for collecting stakeholder perspectives in education spaces. When strategically implemented, QR code-based data collection can increase participation, support multilingual access, and protect anonymity, fostering more authentic and inclusive feedback. QR codes can function as effective tools for gathering real-time qualitative data from diverse education stakeholders, particularly when examining interventions related to well-being and school climate (Farrand & Jung, 2025).

Key Session Takeaways

QR codes function as bridges rather than simple technological tools, connecting diverse education stakeholders to research and decision-making processes. In this session, QR codes were used across a large PK-12 school district to gather qualitative feedback on a district-wide therapy dog program (Farrand & Jung, 2025). Codes were placed in classrooms, offices, and common areas at participating school sites, allowing students, families, educators, administrators, and community members to provide anonymous, real-time feedback using personal mobile devices. The use of QR codes supported inclusive participation by reducing barriers related to time, access, and language. Stakeholders were able to share their perspectives in ways that were convenient and confidential, which encouraged more authentic responses. Data collected through QR codes were analyzed using thematic coding and triangulation to identify patterns related to well-being, teaching and learning, and school climate.

Findings from the therapy dog program illustrate how stakeholder feedback can inform both policy and practice simultaneously. Feedback highlighted positive impacts on well-being and teaching and learning, demonstrating how QR code-based data collection can amplify stakeholder voices and support data-driven educational decision-making. This approach builds on prior research demonstrating how QR codes can be used to gather inclusive, anonymous stakeholder feedback to evaluate educational interventions related to well-being and teaching and learning (Farrand & Jung, 2025). Figure 1 presents a visual summary of key takeaways from the session, illustrating how QR codes support inclusion, accessibility, and meaningful feedback to inform educational interventions.

Figure 1. *Key Takeaways for Using QR Codes in Education Research*



Additional Resources

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HOW DID WE GET HERE? PATHWAYS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

Abstract

A national shortage of special education teachers makes both retaining existing teachers in the field and recruiting new teachers to join essential. The pool of available special education teachers also lacks racial and ethnic diversity and faces challenges related to the distribution of teachers by locale. This TED presentation reports the results of an ongoing, multi-year effort to boost enrollment in our program while increasing the diversity and improving the distribution of our graduating teachers.

Background/Rationale

There is a national shortage of qualified special education teachers (SET) to meet the needs of students with disabilities (SWD), while teacher education programs nationally are struggling to attract students to the field. This issue is pressing, as research has shown that having qualified teachers is critical for the provision of a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) and providing the supports students need to make academic, social, and behavioral progress (Mason-Williams et al., 2019; 2023). These shortages particularly effect diverse and lower-SES students. In a 2019 study, Mason-Williams and colleagues identified that low-SES, rural, and remote schools had difficulty attracting and retaining SETs (Mason-Williams et al., 2019). Within this shortage there is a more acute shortage of teachers of color (TOCs; Scott et al., 2023). In special education, the shortage of TOCs is particularly acute. An analysis by Billingsley et al. (2019) found that 82% of special educator respondents to the 2012 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) were White, but only 53% of SWD were White.

Researchers have identified promising practices for recruiting and retaining pre-service teachers and pre-service teachers. Lowering or eliminating financial barriers, utilizing grow-your-own programs that enable pre-service teachers to be employed in the field while pursuing their degrees, and paid teacher residencies have all shown promise (Gilmour et al., 2023). Recruitment efforts in high schools and among paraprofessionals were also found to be effective, as were programs in which individuals in the community who may be interested in teaching are identified and supported to pursue teacher training and certification (Gilmour et al., 2023). Recruitment of racially and socioeconomically diverse candidates may be buoyed by these same efforts (Carver-Thomas, 2018). In a study of Black male SETs, participants cited reasons for joining the field included the availability of financial support and opportunities for flexible pathways (Scott & Alexander, 2019).

Key Session Takeaways

We presented our recruitment strategies through four overlapping categories, each of which aimed to increase the volume, diversity, and distribution of our student body in its own way. These categories were visibility, outreach, program development, and responsiveness and accommodation. Our messaging in each of these categories was informed by an ongoing study of who joins our program and what motivates them to become special education teachers. The major themes this project has uncovered are a dedication to social justice and inclusion, a desire to make a difference in the lives of students, and the drive to build a stable career in a field with frequent job openings.

Visibility

Efforts to improve the visibility of our program took several forms. We aimed to improve our visibility on campus by tabling at information fairs, accepted student days, and other large gatherings of the University community. We also posted informational fliers across campus, including spaces demarked for diverse affinity groups. We extended these efforts into the community by tabling at farmer's markets, especially in an adjacent agricultural area where many Spanish speaking families live and posting fliers in community locations.

Outreach

In addition to making ourselves easier to find for interested students, we sought to find those students ourselves. We sent outreach emails to every student who indicated an interest in education as a career as well as emails to qualified applicants to other teaching programs who had not been accepted for capacity reasons. We reached out to pathway programs for diverse students, students into education careers, and to related departments, research centers, and Minor programs. We built relationships with both College and University level advisers to ensure that these individuals were well informed about our programs, field, and admission requirements.

Program Development

We built out programs designed to better support those changing careers and meet local needs. These programs include a program designed for paraprofessionals to pursue a teaching degree while continuing to work full-time, a paid residency program, and programs preparing teachers to earn dual endorsement in special education and multilingual education. These programs feature evening classes, an adjusted plan of study, and are in regions with a significant need for new special education teachers.

Responsiveness and Accommodation

Generally, we have endeavored to make our program as accommodating to students as possible. We strive to make our program work for students facing particular challenges (health conditions, housing insecurity, family responsibilities, etc.). We have instituted an open-door policy in our offices, in which an administrator is always available to support students during business hours. We respond to every inquiry email and offer appointments (virtually or in-person) to every interested student.

Through these efforts we have more than doubled our pool of applicants in the last three years and are currently enrolling full cohorts of qualified students each quarter.

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UNITED IN STRENGTH: ADVANCING INCLUSIVE LESSON PLANNING THROUGH COLLABORATION ACROSS GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Abstract

Faculty from general and special education teacher preparation programs collaborated on an initiative for teaching lesson planning. We discussed the current stage of this initiative, which includes a discussion about using survey data that examined student knowledge, skills, and confidence related to lesson planning before student teaching and the study's intervention.

Background/Rationale

Teacher educators frequently teach about and conduct activities related to lesson planning, lesson plan writing, and application of theory in the development of effective lessons. Our template was designed to help teacher candidates focus on the content (e.g., logical sequence of skills, appropriate accommodations, including guided and supported practice, flexible grouping, measurable goals and assessment strategies, UDL principles) of the lesson instead of an exercise in quantity of writing. Our teacher education program implements a merged model for elementary education, as defined by Pugach and Blanton (2009). Our university's model offers a coordinated preservice curriculum where elementary education candidates can receive initial licensure in both general and special education. Faculty from both departments collaborate extensively in the program review process, including reconceptualization of course content and clinical experiences (Pugach & Blanton, 2009). The interdisciplinary approach to developing and teaching lesson planning was designed to improve consistency across programs (Ashby & Exeter, 2018; Spelt et al., 2009).

Key Session Takeaways

A discussion took place about the pre-assessment related to the knowledge, skills, and confidence of preservice teachers just before entering their full-time student teaching placement. Participants received a lesson plan format developed by the presenters, complete with a glossary sheet. This format was designed to support preservice teachers in effectively applying theory to practice by writing detailed plans (e.g., logical sequence of skills, appropriate accommodations, including guided and supported practice, flexible grouping, measurable goals, and assessment strategies). Participants learned from both general and special education program faculty the successful collaborative process used to create an inclusive lesson plan format and the subsequent professional development sessions. Participants left equipped to initiate similar collaborations between general and special education teacher preparation programs. Such initiatives aim to better prepare teacher candidates to teach students with diverse needs, and potentially increase teacher retention and provide more high-quality teachers for students with special needs.

Additional Resources

Lesson Plan Template and Glossary

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pbbebZnNNSuvR4FvWiQXH-sFQWTcglHC/view?usp=sharing>

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DESCRIBING CULTURALLY SUSTAINING TEACHING PRACTICES WITH STUDENTS WITH INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES

Abstract

Educators must develop a contextualized understanding of what culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) looks like in practice for Black students with dis/Abilities to promote culturally sustaining classroom and school environments with potential to reduce persistent educational inequities that students embodying these intersecting, traditionally marginalized identities often experience. In this TED presentation [*see slide deck linked under “Additional Resources”*], a convergent mixed methods multiple case study exploring how Black adolescents with high-incidence dis/Abilities and their parents describe CSP-in-practice was discussed. With a focus on convergences and divergences within and between parent-student cases’ perspectives, the study’s findings highlight the importance of supporting educators’ engagement in *genuine* communication with students and families, as well as fostering students’ *whole-person* identity development. Implications for practice, policy, and future research directions were also discussed.

Background/Rationale

Students with intersectional identities, such as Black students with dis/Abilities, often navigate multiple marginalizing systems (e.g., racism and ableism), increasing their likelihood of experiencing symptoms of psychological distress (e.g., anxiety and depression) and impacting their relationships, motivation, engagement, and achievement in school (Debnam et al., 2013; García & Ortiz, 2013; Tortura et al., 2014). Scholars purport CSP as potential means for improving such negative schooling experiences and outcomes (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017); yet, multi-faceted implementation challenges—including ambiguous, theoretical descriptions, as well as fear toward or misconceptions of CSP—hinder educators’ uptake of this approach (Bottiani et al., 2018; Neri et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2012). Due to the individualized and context-based nature of culture and CSP, researchers must employ methods which attend to the situated, experiential knowledge of Black students with dis/Abilities and their families to effectively describe what this approach looks like in practice and support educators’ understanding and uptake in classroom and school environments.

Key Session Takeaways

The following research questions were the focus of this presentation: (1) How do participants in the present study describe CSP? and (2) How do their perspectives diverge, relative to their cultural identities and contexts? Cases included three pairs of parents and Black students with high-incidence dis/Abilities. Participant-selected pseudonyms are reflected in the following brief case descriptions—Case 1: Gwen (parent) and Maria (student with ADHD, autism, gifted, anxiety, depression); Case 2: Cherice (parent) and Lenny (student with autism, echolalia, anxiety); and Case 3: Ashley (parent) and Makayla (student with a speech/language impairment in the form of a stutter). Analysis of interviews and publicly-available school data resulted in two emergent themes for the first research question, and three points of divergence for the second research question. [*See slides 7-14 for more information about the method and participants.*]

RQ 1—Common Descriptions of CSP: First theme—educators should communicate genuinely with students and families to learn about their cultural identities and experiences, and demonstrate understanding through culturally responsive actions. Second theme—educators should foster whole-person identity development through (a) inclusive representation in the classroom and broader school environment, (b) opportunities to engage in positive and encouraging interactions with peers and adults, and (c) sensemaking activities that allow students to think about academic content in relation to themselves and their experiences. [*See slides 15-21 for more information and direct quotes from participants.*]

RQ 2—Divergence Within & Between Cases: Divergence #1 was found between two students (Maria and Makayla)—Maria was able to describe some concrete examples of CSP implemented by past teachers, while Makayla could not. Divergence #2 was found within one of the parent-student pairs (Ashley and Makayla)—Makayla indicated a desire for more conversations around race, while Ashley seemed unconcerned or appreciative of the limited focus. Divergence #3 was found between all parents (Gwen, Cherice, and Ashley)—they all discussed experiences with racism during their own K-12 schooling, but they differed in how they describe their responses/feelings toward a lack of focus on race/ethnicity in their children’s schools. [*See slides 22-25 for more information and direct quotes from participants.*]

Implications: Practice—teachers should foster social capital and actively engage in conversations with students and families, using newfound knowledge to tailor inclusive representation, positive and encouraging peer/adult interactions, and sensemaking activities. Policy—current censorship of race-related discourse in schools is promoting fear among teachers and parents, limiting adolescents’ necessary engagement in identity sensemaking. Research—efforts to continue defining CSP should increase student voice and locally contextualize with students, families, and school staff in ways that promote safety of all participants; and such efforts accounting for these implications are underway. [*See slides 30-35 for more information about recent and future research directions.*]

Additional Resources

[Click on this link](#) to view the PowerPoint slide deck that was presented at the TED Conference.

[Click on this link](#) to view the list of culturally sustaining practices developed through subsequent pilot activities extending this work, which are described on slides 31-34.

- *Note.* The staff, students, and families who participated in these activities granted permission for the practice list to be shared in this presentation. Any names, locations, or other potentially identifiable information included therein was removed.

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TEACHING LITERACY TO D/DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS: RESEARCH-INFORMED STRATEGIES

Abstract

Deaf and Hard of Hearing (d/DHH) students frequently face persistent gaps in reading and writing outcomes, often due to instruction that assumes auditory access to phonology. This paper outlines three evidence-based strategies for teacher educators to include in preparation programs: making phonology visible inside explicit decoding, bridging sign and print explicitly, and teaching short strategy routines for writing. By moving beyond "hearing-centric" phonics and leveraging visual tools like Visual Phonics and fingerspelling chaining, educators can create equitable access to literacy for d/DHH learners in both specialized and general education settings.

Background/Rationale

Despite the growing inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings, there remain persistent gaps in reading and writing outcomes for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (d/DHH) learners. Many of these students are placed in cross-categorical or general education classrooms where standard literacy instruction relies heavily on auditory phonemic awareness. Typical lessons often assume access to sounds and "tiny word parts" that d/DHH students may not perceive clearly through hearing alone. This disconnect creates a barrier where the instruction, rather than the student's ability, limits literacy acquisition.

Teacher educators must equip preservice teachers with strategies that make print and phonology visible. The evidence base supports shifting from a purely auditory model to a multimodal approach. Research indicates that outcomes improve when instruction aligns with the student's sensory access. Specifically, studies support the use of visual phoneme supports in explicit decoding (Trezek & Wang, 2006), explicit connections between fingerspelling and orthography (Scott et al., 2019), and balanced, interactive strategy-based writing routines (Wolbers, 2008). These strategies allow educators to make print more visible through "small daily moves" rather than requiring an entirely separate curriculum.

Key Session Takeaways

Making phonology visible inside explicit decoding is a high leverage move for many d/DHH learners because traditional phonics instruction often assumes robust auditory access to phonemic information. In practice, teachers can pick one grapheme phoneme pattern per day, pair it with a consistent visual cue (e.g., Visual Phonics hand cues, Cued Articulation, mouth pictures, or mirror work), and guide students to blend 6 to 8 words that include the target pattern. A brief dictation of three words and one short sentence supports segmentation while writing and provides immediate feedback. When errors occur, a quick correction sequence of model, guided try, and independent try keeps momentum and reduces guessing (Trezek & Wang, 2006).

Purposefully bridging sign and print strengthens connections among meaning, fingerspelling or orthography, and morphology. For students who sign, a chaining routine (sign to fingerspell to point to print) helps map a known concept onto the written word. For educators who are not fluent in sign, the same routine can be done with a modeled sign or picture support and coordinated with an interpreter, speech language pathologist, or d/DHH teacher. Morpheme mapping can then extend the chain by highlighting the base word, adding a prefix or suffix in print, and having students explain how the morpheme changes meaning in a signed or spoken sentence (Scott et al., 2019).

Short, repeatable strategy routines help students transfer skills across lessons and content areas. A daily 10-to-12-minute decoding micro lesson can be paired with a comprehension routine such as Stop - Check - Fix. Students Stop after a dense sentence, check by restating in their own words or in sign, and Fix using context, morphology, or a model sentence. For writing, interactive writing and sentence level scaffolds such as a Fitzgerald Key or color-coded sentence frames support syntax and revision while keeping instruction responsive to diverse language profiles (Wolbers, 2008). These routines align with a bilingual, bicultural stance by treating students' sign language and Deaf cultural knowledge as assets, not add ons.

Additional Resources

Visual Phonics & Phonics Support

- <https://icli.org/>• International Communication Learning Institute (ICLI): The official home of See the Sound/Visual Phonics, offering training information and background on the multisensory system. <https://icli.org/>
- <http://seethesound.org/>• See the Sound / Visual Phonics: Resources and materials for implementing Visual Phonics in the classroom. <http://seethesound.org/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fft9upTmHwo>• Visual Phonics A to Z (Video): A demonstration of the complete Visual Phonics handshape alphabet for practitioner reference. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fft9upTmHwo>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn5DaRUjgFQ>• Visual Phonics Chant (Video): A guided practice routine for reviewing Visual Phonics handshapes and corresponding sounds. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn5DaRUjgFQ>

Cued Speech

- <https://cuedspeech.org/>• National Cued Speech Association: Resources, advocacy, and training information for Cued Speech users and professionals. <https://cuedspeech.org/>
- <https://cuecollege.org/>• Cue College: Offers online courses, tutoring, and educational materials for learning and implementing Cued Speech. <https://cuecollege.org/>

Fingerspelling & Syntax

- <https://fingerspelling.xyz/>• Fingerspelling.xyz: An interactive, browser-based tool for practicing receptive fingerspelling fluency with real-time feedback. <https://fingerspelling.xyz/>
- <https://www.communicationcommunity.com/fitzgerald-key-for-aac/>• Fitzgerald Key for AAC: An overview of the Fitzgerald Key color-coding system used to support sentence structure and syntax generation. <https://www.communicationcommunity.com/fitzgerald-key-for-aac/>

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UNITED IN STRENGTH: BOLSTERING ACCESSIBLE DEGREE PATHWAYS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD-SPECIAL EDUCATION

Abstract

Historically, traditional preservice teacher preparation programs have been crafted in such a way that limits accessibility for certain bodies of students. Teacher preparation programs have often been designed to be in-person, with daytime classes, and with a full-time credit load. This offers a poor fit for students who must continue to work to support themselves and their families, but who hope to pursue a teaching degree and certification. We highlight a recent, accessible degree pathway created to support personnel in early childhood education settings who would otherwise be unable to pursue a bachelor's degree and subsequent teaching certification. With a specific focus on early childhood and special education (ECSE), we share data and lessons from the first two years of implementing this degree pathway to support early childhood personnel currently working in licensed childcare centers or public-school early childhood education (ECE) settings across our state.

Background/Rationale

There is an urgent national need for both quality childcare providers and certified early childhood/early childhood special educators. Educational stakeholders recognize that high teacher turnover has long plagued the field, yet the loss of teachers in the field of early childhood education (ECE) seems to have grown exponentially, leading to even more drastic turnover when compared to those in grades K-12. Additionally, the field of special education (SPED) is not without its own significant turnover. These shortages and turnover rates in both ECE and SPED fields come together to underscore the importance of training teachers in ECSE, a dual certification program in early childhood *and* special education.

Our project addresses this need by providing an innovative, flexible and learner-centered program specifically designed for early childhood education personnel in childcare centers and schools. Our new bachelor's degree pathway aims to keep students employed in ECE settings, provide a pathway to a degree and certification in ECSE, and to be sustainable and replicable for additional cohorts of students. This replicability may in turn attract early childhood education personnel to seek employment at centers and schools, knowing that they may now be able to pursue higher education without having to give up their current career path and years of income.

Key Session Takeaways

Our accessible ECSE degree pathway is based on the need for flexible, job-relevant, evidence-based preparation pathways for early childhood education personnel. Given the current and projected teaching shortages in our country, it was imperative that we began to ‘think outside the box’ regarding teacher training. Our traditional ECSE program included a series of field placements and internships in local public schools (including Part B/C programs under IDEA, public PreK, and grades K to 3). Our redesigned ECSE pathway includes a *hybrid* approach of online, evening courses, and ‘on the job’ field placements and internships, allowing candidates to gather relevant, job-embedded experience that is connected to their day-to-day work with children.

Students in our pilot accessible ECSE pathway (cohort 1) are employed at accredited childcare centers; students in our second and third phase (cohort 2 and 3) are employed at either a licensed childcare center or public preschool setting. Our core mission was to provide access to our coursework so that our students would be afforded the opportunity to remain employed while gradually working toward their degree and ultimately, certification in early childhood and/or special education (Birth – 8). Another key focus of ours was to not take away in any shape or form from the capacity of each center or school. Our project is rooted in parallel goals to 1) allow students to remain employed at their centers or schools as they continue to serve young children, while adding to their own knowledge base, and 2) Use this knowledge base as a gradual build toward an ultimate bachelors in ECSE and subsequent teaching certification in our state. Although the development of a hybrid bachelor’s degree program is not a novel concept, the operationalization of an undergraduate degree leading to initial dual teaching certification via online courses and ‘on-the-job’ (OTJ) internships is less common. Our accessible ECSE degree pathway reflects a complete redesign of our traditional teacher preparation program in order to cater to non-traditional learners who need to maintain employment. In doing so, we hoped to bolster the early childhood-special education workforce. Table 1 reflects key changes made from the traditional ECSE program and the new accessible ECSE pathway.

Table 1. *Differences between traditional ECSE and accessible ECSE pathway*

<i>Traditional ECSE Program</i>	<i>Features of Redesigned Accessible ECSE Pathway</i>
2-year program	3-year program
15-18 credits per semester	6 – 9 credits per semester
No winter or summer classes	Planned winter and summer courses
Classes scheduled Monday through Friday between hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. (with exception of evening senior seminars)	Classes scheduled various weeknights (Monday through Thursdays after 6 p.m.)
All coursework delivered face to face (F2F)	All coursework delivered virtually through online learning platform, and synchronous + asynchronous activities
All field placements and internships located at contracted public-school settings	All clinical experiences embedded on-the-job (OTJ), within the student’s workplace (licensed early childhood education settings/centers/schools)

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FORGING AHEAD WITH AI: SUPPORTING FUTURE SPECIAL EDUCATORS WITH PRACTICAL TOOLS AND STRATEGIES

Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can support pre-service special educators through personalized learning, differentiated instruction, and time-saving administrative tools. This session highlights AI applications like MagicSchool AI, Diffit, and Brisk Teaching, and addresses both their instructional potential and the ethical considerations around equity and bias in special education.

Background/Rationale

Special educators face growing demands, individualized instruction, behavior support, and extensive administrative responsibilities. AI-powered tools can streamline tasks like IEP documentation, progress monitoring, and lesson planning, allowing educators to focus on meaningful student engagement.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers powerful ways to enhance teaching, learning, and efficiency in special education. By automating routine administrative tasks like progress tracking and documentation, AI allows educators to focus more on direct instruction and relationship-building. Adaptive learning platforms use AI to tailor instruction, providing immediate feedback and personalized pacing based on each student's needs. For example, AI can adjust lesson difficulty, identify learning gaps, and generate data-informed insights to support intervention planning. Used responsibly, AI doesn't replace the special educator, it amplifies their ability to individualize learning and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Many AI tools are already embedded in educational platforms and instructional design, but few teacher preparation programs directly address how these technologies impact teaching and learning in special education contexts. By focusing on AI's potential and limitations, this session empowers teacher educators to prepare future special education teachers to use these tools both ethically and effectively.

Key Session Takeaways

Successful AI integration in special education is grounded in inclusive design and intentional pedagogy. Frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emphasize flexibility and access through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (UDL; CAST, 2018; Rose & Meyer, 2002). The SAMR Model guides educators to use technology purposefully, from substituting traditional methods to redefining instruction through innovation. Combined, these frameworks form the Inclusive Technology Integration Framework (ITIF; Adeshina, 2024), which ensures that AI tools not only enhance learning but also promote accessibility and equity for all students.

Productive outcomes for teacher educators include gaining a deeper understanding of specific AI tools, such as adaptive learning platforms, text-to-speech, speech-to-text, predictive text, and grading assistants, and how they can support individualized instruction, accessibility, and efficiency.

AI Support for Administrative Tasks		
Task Area	How AI Is Used	Examples
Data Analysis & Monitoring	Analyzes student performance data over time to identify learning patterns, trends, and potential learning gaps.	Identifies which students are struggling with specific sub-skills (e.g., math, reading); notes patterns of disengagement in digital lessons.
Personalized Instruction	Creates and adapts learning content based on a student's unique needs, strengths, and pace.	Adaptive learning platforms adjust the difficulty of exercises, while AI tutors provide personalized feedback and recommendations.
Administrative Support	Automates administrative tasks, including generating Individualized Education Program (IEP) documents, progress notes, and other reports.	AI can draft parts of an IEP, suggest data-backed goals, or create easy-to-understand summaries of student progress for parents.
Creating Learning Materials	Generates customized lessons, assignments, and activities tailored to a student's learning profile or specific accommodations.	AI can reformat content to lower the reading level, shorten tasks for students with processing delays, or add visual scaffolds for those with dyslexia.
Communication & Accessibility	Enhances communication and makes content more accessible through features like speech-to-text and text-to-speech.	AI-powered applications can convert speech to text for students with communication disorders or transcribe meeting notes into different languages for parents.
Behavioral Support	Analyzes behavioral data to help identify patterns and inform intervention strategies.	Platforms can track and analyze student behavior in real-time to help educators create personalized behavior plans.

Additional Resources

Tool/Platform	Icon	Overview	Training
MagicSchool AI		80+ tools, assists teachers with lesson planning, assessments, IEPs, email communication.	Self-paced certification pathway, four levels of certification
Diffit		Adapts reading levels and creates differentiated materials for a variety of reading levels.	Self-paced course introduction course, digital badge
Brisk Teaching		Chrome extension tool that provides support for feedback, assessments, and creating differentiated curriculum	Professional Deck, Videos, and Webinars (live and recorded)

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USING A HISTORICALLY RESPONSIVE LITERACY FRAMEWORK IN SPECIAL EDUCATOR PREPARATION AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

Preparing special educators to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities requires curricula that address identity, history, and systemic inequities alongside technical skills. This session examined the integration of the Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework (Muhammad & Williams, 2023) into special educator preparation at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Using the Culturally and Historically Responsive Education (CHRE) model, five required special education courses were systematically analyzed across the HRL pursuits of identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy. Findings indicated cultural and historical responsiveness was most consistently evident in skills and intellect through evidence-based practices, legislative analysis, and applied advocacy. Opportunities for growth emerged in centering Black historical experiences, deepening critical analysis of racism and ableism, and fostering joy. This work contributes to the research by illustrating how HRL can be integrated into special educator preparation and highlights implications for program design and continuous improvement.

Background/Rationale

Integrating the HRL framework (Muhammad & Williams, 2023) into special educator preparation coursework provides future special educators space to learn about important issues, identify and critique injustices and inequities, and develop advocacy skills to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The education quality of students of color in special education can be greatly improved by implementing curriculum that reflect their cultural heritage, experiences, and perspectives (Gay, 2002). Moreover, using a culturally responsive approach in special education facilitates engagement, increases a sense of belonging, improves academic achievement, and improves development of critical thinking skills (Goggleeye, 2023). The HRL framework is built upon and extends previous work focusing on cultural theories such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay & Howard, 2000), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). What sets HRL apart is adding the history dimension to these existing frameworks. HRL focuses on the historical literacy backgrounds and experiences of Black people and works to cultivate the genius that already exists in these individuals. There is intersectionality when it comes to students with disabilities and students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and there is a critical need for special education preservice teachers to be prepared to respond to the intersectionality of their students (McCray, 2023; Obiakor, 2025).

Key Session Takeaways

This session examined the integration of the HRL framework (Muhammad & Williams, 2023) into special educator preparation at a HBCU. Grounded in the historical mission of HBCUs as teacher preparation institutions, this work positions HBCUs as critical contributors to the preparation of special educators who are equipped to address the intersectionality of race, disability, language, and culture in K–12 educational contexts (Gay, 2000; Irvine & Fenwick, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The session reinforced the need for preparation programs to move beyond technical skills toward the development of educators who teach for educational equity. Using the HRL framework's HILL Evaluation tool, five required special education courses were systematically analyzed across the five HRL pursuits of educational equity: (1) identity, (2) skills, (3) intellect, (4) criticality, and (5) joy (Muhammad & Williams, 2023). Findings indicated that cultural and historical responsiveness was most consistently evident in the areas of skills and intellect. Coursework emphasized evidence-based literacy and behavioral practices, data-based individualization, legislative analysis, and applied advocacy projects, demonstrating that rigorous professional preparation can coexist with culturally responsive pedagogy.

Analysis of coursework related to identity revealed meaningful opportunities for preservice teachers to examine personal beliefs, professional language use, and historical contexts shaping special education practices. Activities such as case studies, reflective writing, and examination of landmark legislation supported preservice teachers in connecting personal identity to professional responsibility. However, the analysis also identified opportunities to deepen this work by more intentionally centering Black experiences.

Findings related to criticality highlighted both strengths and areas for improvement. Preservice teachers engage with issues of disproportionality, exclusionary practices, and bias through documentaries, action research, and policy-focused assignments. Nevertheless, results suggest that critical analysis of racism and ableism within special education systems was uneven across courses and often dependent on instructor facilitation. These findings underscore the importance of explicit program-level structures and faculty development to ensure consistent opportunities for critical engagement.

Joy emerged as a promising yet underutilized component of special educator preparation at this HBCU. Multimodal assignments, strengths-based IEP practices, and the inclusion of art, poetry, and narratives of disability pride contributed to joyful learning environments that challenged deficit-based perspectives. Centering joy supported preservice teachers in recognizing the beauty and cultural wealth of students with disabilities and their families.

The findings highlight the importance of intentional curricular design that balances skill development with identity, intellect, criticality, and joy. Implications for practice include the need for increased faculty support, expanded opportunities for critical dialogue, and program-level commitments to historically responsive pedagogy in special educator preparation.

Additional Resources

HILL Evaluation Tool:

<https://www.canva.com/design/DAGgHz3ASk0/3SAf691HHKtso4giHbpXFg/edit>

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FUTURE READY OR FALLING BEHIND? EXAMINING TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Abstract

Technology proficiency is essential for teacher candidates, yet integration varies across preparation programs. While K-12 schools follow ISTE-aligned frameworks, teacher preparation programs differ in meeting national and state standards. This presentation examines two programs, describing the processes, challenges, and goals for preparing educators for rich-technology classrooms.

Background/Rationale

Technology proficiency is essential for teacher candidates in both general and special education programs, as professional standards emphasize the importance of effective technology integration in education. In the United States, most teacher preparation programs align their curricula with widely recognized frameworks such as the Model Core Teacher Standards from the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards. Additionally, many states have their own teacher preparation standards that reflect national expectations for educator competencies, reinforcing the significance of technology in teaching and learning.

Teacher education programs, particularly those focused on dual certification or special education, also adhere to professional standards such as those set by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). For example, CEC Standard 4 highlights the role of technology in assessment, requiring teacher candidates to evaluate students' strengths and needs, determine eligibility, communicate progress, and adjust instruction using technology to enhance student learning (CEC Standards, 2020).

However, while national and professional standards often include technology-related competencies, some states do not explicitly embed technology requirements within their teacher education program standards. For instance, Wisconsin's Teacher Standards (WTS) do not contain specific language addressing technology integration in teacher preparation. Instead, Wisconsin has developed a distinct framework known as the Information and Technology Literacy (ITL) standards. Built upon the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards for Students (revised in 2017), these standards emphasize the ability to independently and collaboratively use digital tools to access, evaluate, and apply information. The goal is to ensure that individuals develop the skills to solve problems, communicate

effectively, make informed decisions, and generate new knowledge, products, or systems (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2017).

Wisconsin's ITL standards encompass seven strands—empowered learner, digital citizen, knowledge constructor, innovative designer, computational thinker, creative communicator, and global collaborator. These competencies are intended to be integrated across all content areas and educational experiences from kindergarten through grade 12 (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2017). Given that Wisconsin designed these standards to ensure that K-12 students graduate as proficient users of technology, it logically follows that teacher candidates—many of whom were once those K-12 students—should receive the same level of technological preparation in their teacher education programs.

Without explicit technology requirements in teacher preparation, there is a risk that future educators may enter classrooms without the necessary skills to implement digital tools effectively. By embedding the competencies outlined in both ISTE and ITL standards into teacher education, programs can better prepare future educators to meet the evolving demands of digital learning environments, ultimately enhancing student engagement, learning, and digital literacy.

Recognizing the need for a more integrated approach to technology in teacher preparation, a teacher education program at a Midwestern university has taken a structured approach to data collection and analysis to inform its practices. Previously, the program required a standalone technology course for teacher candidates. However, this requirement has been removed, with the expectation that technology will now be embedded throughout all courses in the program. To assess how this shift was being implemented, a dedicated task force was established to examine the use of technology across the curriculum. A faculty survey was conducted to gather insights into how instructors were incorporating technology in their courses and their perspectives on its effectiveness. The findings were then discussed among faculty members to evaluate both the role and purpose of technology in teacher preparation, identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Following this internal review, the program expanded its data collection efforts to include school districts that partner with the university's teacher education program. A second survey was distributed to these districts to gather input on their technological needs and expectations for teacher candidates. The collected data were carefully analyzed and discussed with faculty to ensure that the program's technological integration aligned with the evolving demands of partner schools. By transitioning from a single technology course to a comprehensive, embedded approach, the program aims to better equip future educators with the skills needed to effectively integrate technology in diverse instructional settings.

At another university - located in a western state - the work began by listening to in-service educators to better align university-based professional development with their needs. These conversations revealed that innovation—particularly in technology—was already a top priority. Educators weren't seeking to be taught new tools but rather wanted support and structures to promote the impactful technological work they were already doing. Although technology wasn't our initial focus, it became central to our efforts. We are now gathering

stories, visiting national models, and engaging preservice teachers in learning directly from in-service educators—laying the groundwork for a future Education Innovation Center shaped by the voices and practices of those in the field.

Key Session Takeaways

- Technology proficiency is a critical expectation in teacher preparation, grounded in national, professional, and state standards, and is essential for effective and inclusive teaching in today’s classrooms.
- When technology expectations are not explicitly embedded in teacher education programs, teacher candidates risk entering the profession underprepared to use digital tools to support learning, assessment, and engagement.
- Embedding technology across coursework, rather than relying on standalone technology classes, requires intentional program review, data collection, and collaboration with faculty and partner school districts.
- Centering the voices of in-service educators and aligning preparation with real classroom needs strengthens innovation and ensures teacher candidates are prepared for evolving, technology-rich learning environments.

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LEAVE, MOVE, OR STAY? AN EXAMINATION OF RETENTION FACTORS AMONG NOVICE DUAL-CERTIFIED TEACHERS OF COLOR

Abstract

Novice teachers of Color (TOC) leave the profession at higher rates than their White peers, often due to inadequate preparation, poor working conditions, and racialized school climates. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study investigates how structural factors influence the decisions of novice dual-certified TOC who leave, move, or remain in the profession. As part of a larger research project, in this quantitative study, we surveyed 17 participants who completed a dual general and special education undergraduate program at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Through our analysis we identified four primary drivers of retention: educator preparation; mentorship; administrative and district support; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Findings provide empirical evidence that novice dual-certified TOC navigate unique challenges and supports that influence their professional trajectories. Implications emphasize the importance of educator preparation, intentional mentorship, and systemic reforms at school and district levels, with recommendations for future research to address teacher attrition and retention.

Background/Rationale

Research demonstrates that TOC face systemic barriers, including racial bias and daily microaggressions, that contribute to racial battle fatigue, job dissatisfaction, limited retention, and, ultimately, attrition (Bettini et al., 2020; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Ingersoll et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2024; Scott et al., 2023). Despite increased recruitment efforts, retention rates of TOC remain disproportionately low and continue to pose a significant challenge (Kohli, 2018). Many TOC report that the absence of same-race peers and the lack of cultural competence among administrators and staff foster feelings of isolation and a diminished sense of belonging, further accelerating decisions to leave the profession (Cormier, 2021; Dixon et al., 2019; Griffin & Tackie, 2017). Specifically, studies focusing on novice general and special education TOC have indicated that attrition is driven by difficulties with students and families (e.g., navigating complex family dynamics), colleagues and administrators (e.g., limited support, lack of collegiality, inadequate mentoring), and curriculum and pedagogy (e.g., exclusionary practices), in addition to broader issues such as challenging working conditions, insufficient preparation, and racial battle fatigue (Bhana-Lopez et al., 2024; Bettini et al., 2021). These challenges often manifest differently across teaching contexts, with general and special education TOC navigating

distinct yet overlapping barriers that impact their career trajectories and decisions to stay, move, or leave the profession.

Beyond workload and pay, racism and daily microaggressions often weigh most heavily in TOC's decisions to remain in or leave the profession (Frank et al., 2021). Other studies highlight that novice general education TOC frequently describe antagonistic school cultures, feelings of being undervalued, and a lack of agency and belonging as central to attrition (Dixon et al., 2019; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Similarly, Scott and colleagues (2020) showed that Black special education teachers across career stages were motivated by advocacy for students and families of Color, but many also described systemic bias, professional isolation, and limited belonging as major barriers. These barriers appeared most consequential for novices, as Scott (2020) documented in a study of early-career Black special education teachers, where inadequate mentoring, racial battle fatigue, role abuse, cultural insensitivity, and insufficient classroom resources contributed to early departures from the profession. Overall, these findings suggest that while general and special education TOC often enter the profession with a deep commitment to supporting students with and without disabilities, systemic inequities and oppressive school structures continue to undermine their retention.

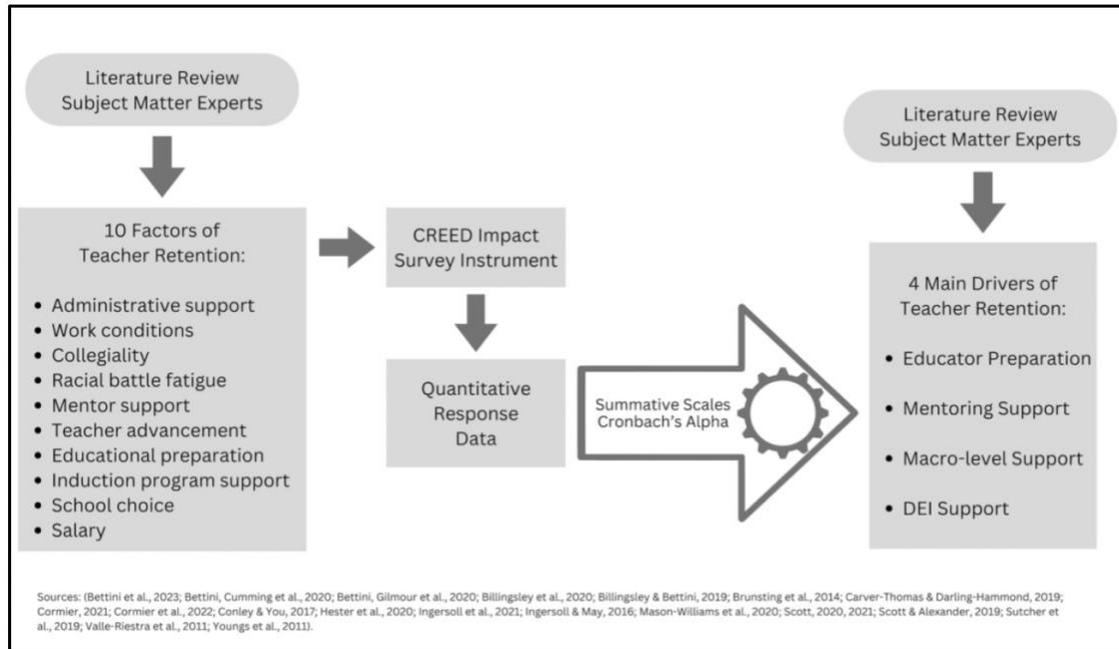
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which represent just 3% of U.S. higher education institutions, produce 50% of the country's Black teachers, play a pivotal role in addressing persistent teacher workforce shortages, particularly among teachers of Color (Coprige et al., 2023). The attrition and retention of Black dual-certified general and special education teachers prepared in undergraduate preservice programs remains underexamined. Expanding research in this area is critical to better understanding the challenges novice Black teachers face as they enter and navigate the profession, as their experiences are markedly different from those of their White peers.

Key Session Takeaways

- **Preparation alone does not ensure retention.** Even well-prepared novice dual-certified TOC left or moved due to unsupportive school and district conditions.
- **Mentorship quality matters more than access.** Inadequate, culturally misaligned, or inconsistent mentoring contributed to stress, mobility, and attrition.
- **Administrative and district support shapes career decisions.** Strong leadership and inclusion in decision-making encouraged teachers to remain in the profession, often by moving rather than leaving.
- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) support is the strongest driver of retention.** Teachers who experienced inclusive school climates and a sense of belonging were more likely to stay.
- **Retention requires system-wide alignment.** Sustainable retention depends on coordinated supports across preparation programs, schools, districts, and policy contexts.

Figure 1 illustrates the process used to identify four primary drivers of teacher retention from an initial set of ten literature-derived factors.

Figure 1. *Process of Identifying the Four Key Drivers of Teacher Retention*



Drawing on ten factors identified in the literature, survey responses were analyzed to determine four central drivers of teacher retention. Responses were organized around these factors and situated within the ecological systems framework guiding the study. A multi-step analytical process was used to examine which factors most strongly influenced retention, including assessments of internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha and the retention of scales demonstrating acceptable reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.75$). This process yielded composite scales identifying educator preparation and mentor support as key contributors to retention. Items related to school- and district-level leadership were combined into an administrative and district support category, while items reflecting racial battle fatigue were grouped within a broader DEI construct. Descriptive statistics were then used to compare mean scores across the four drivers, educator preparation, mentor support, administrative and district support, and DEI, among participants categorized as Leavers, Movers, and Stayers. These comparisons illuminated the systemic conditions most closely associated with teacher satisfaction and decisions to remain in or exit the profession.

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FORGE AHEAD! BY EXAMINING CURRENT TRANSITION-RELATED REQUIREMENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PREPARATION AND LICENSURE POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract

The preparation and licensure of special education teachers serving transition-aged students in the United States varies. As a field, developing consistent expectations in preparation and licensure may help to improve outcomes for special education students. A systematic review of teacher preparation programs and licensing requirements across the United States was conducted by examining special education policies regarding preparation and licensure. The purpose of this study was to investigate the current requirements for teacher preparation and licensure, and to compare the results with previous studies. The study determined that transition-related coursework requirements for teacher preparation programs, and state-based transition-related licensure, certification, or endorsement options have increased since 2003. The Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) National Certification in Transition Services may provide recruitment opportunities for studies examining the experiences of transition professionals and outcomes for the youth they serve.

Background/Rationale

The preparation and licensure of special education teachers serving transition-aged students in the United States varies dramatically (Sindelar et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to investigate the current requirements for teacher preparation and licensure across all 50 states, and to compare the results with previous studies conducted by Kleinhammer-Trammill et al. (2003) and Simonsen et al. (2018), to provide the field with updated information and look for trends in the data. There are historically poor postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). As a field, developing consistent expectations in preparation and licensure may help to improve those outcomes.

Key Session Takeaways

Transition-related coursework requirements for teacher preparation programs have increased since 2003 when only 14 states were found to have specific coursework about transition required for program participants. The study determined that 36 states now have required coursework related to transition in 2025. South Dakota is the only state to maintain transition-related coursework requirements consistently since 2003.

There has been minimal increase in state-based transition-related licensure, certification, or endorsement options for special education teachers since 2003. There were seven states offering a license, certificate or professional endorsement for educators focused on secondary transition in special education in 2003, eight states in 2018, and nine states in 2025. Georgia, Illinois, Nebraska, and Ohio are the only states to consistently maintain a license, certificate, or professional endorsement focused on secondary transition in special education since 2003.

Further research on transition-related preparation requirements and licensure options for special education professionals is needed. It is important that future research include exploration of factors that impact special education teachers' or districts' progress in meeting the needs of students in transition-related domains.

The Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) is now offering a National Certification in Transition Services for individuals who have successfully completed a DCDT approved transition specialist preparation program. This could provide researchers with access to special education teachers who have extensive preparation and experience working with transition-age youth, which may result in opportunities for studies examining the experiences of special education teachers and outcomes for the youth served by licensed educators with and without the certification.

Additional Resources

- [National Certification in Transition Services](#)

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This work was supported by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, under Grant #H325D220020. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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STRONGER TOGETHER: BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNITY THROUGH ECSE COHORT-BASED LEARNING

Abstract

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teachers engage in some of the most relationally rich and emotionally demanding work in education, balancing individualized instruction, family partnerships, and regulatory responsibilities while supporting young children’s social–emotional development. These demands contribute to elevated levels of burnout and attrition, threatening instructional and relational stability for children with disabilities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Jeon et al., 2022). This study examined the extent to which participation in a year-long, cohort-based professional learning model influenced ECSE teachers’ instructional confidence, perceived professional support, and intentions to remain in the field. Fifteen ECSE teachers from a large western school district participated in monthly classroom-embedded cohort meetings that emphasized collaborative observation, IEP alignment, data collection, differentiation, and reflective dialogue. Using a quantitative pre–post survey design, results indicated increased confidence across instructional domains, universal gains in perceived support, and a strong influence on teachers’ intentions to remain in ECSE.

Background/Rationale

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) classrooms are environments where learning, care, and connection occur simultaneously, yet the demands placed on ECSE teachers are substantial and ongoing. Teachers are expected to embed Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals into play-based routines, monitor progress across developmental domains, collaborate closely with families, and comply with extensive documentation requirements. These layered responsibilities contribute to elevated stress, burnout, and attrition among ECSE teachers, particularly in early childhood contexts (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Jeon et al., 2022).

Special education teacher attrition is a systemic issue driven by workload intensity, emotional labor, and insufficient professional support (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In early childhood settings, workplace stress has been shown to negatively impact teacher–child relationship quality and classroom functioning (Whitaker et al., 2015). Despite evidence that mentoring and collaborative learning can strengthen teacher confidence, many ECSE teachers remain professionally isolated and underprepared for the realities of practice (Chang et al., 2005). These conditions highlight the need for cohort-based professional learning models that provide sustained, practice-embedded support and collegial connection.

Key Session Takeaways

Participation in the ECSE professional learning cohort was associated with meaningful shifts in teachers' instructional confidence, perceived professional support, and intentions to remain in the field. At the outset, nearly all participants (94%) reported limited or developing knowledge across core instructional domains, and only 6% described themselves as confident. By the end of the cohort year, this pattern had shifted substantially: 52% of teachers reported feeling confident across instructional areas, and an additional 33% reported feeling very confident. Only 15% of participants reported still developing their skills, indicating notable growth in instructional capacity over time.

These changes occurred within a professional learning model intentionally embedded in everyday ECSE practice. Monthly cohort meetings were held in rotating ECSE classrooms, allowing teachers to observe daily routines, engage in collaborative problem-solving, and directly align curriculum, Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and instructional decisions. Rather than relying on prescriptive professional development, the cohort emphasized applied learning through observation, reflection, and dialogue, an approach consistent with research highlighting the value of practice-based professional learning for special educators (Chang et al., 2005; Division for Early Childhood, 2020).

Instructional growth was evident across all domains assessed, including IEP goal writing, data collection, progress monitoring, differentiation, instructional alignment with Pre-K standards, social-emotional learning routines, collaboration, and daily instructional planning. These domains closely mirror preparation gaps previously identified in early childhood special education, emphasizing the importance of sustained, practice-embedded professional learning opportunities (Chang et al., 2005).

In addition to instructional gains, relational outcomes were particularly pronounced. All participants (100%) reported increased perceived professional support, and 87% said cohort participation positively influenced their decision to remain in ECSE. Teachers consistently described the cohort as a space of community, psychological safety, and shared purpose. Open-ended responses further illuminated these outcomes, with participants noting reduced professional isolation, increased confidence in asking questions, and greater ease in navigating the emotional demands of ECSE teaching.

Taken together, these findings reinforce existing evidence that collaborative professional support strengthens teacher confidence, commitment, and retention (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Given research demonstrating that workplace stress can undermine teacher-child relationships in early childhood settings (Whitaker et al., 2015), the cohort model highlights how practice-embedded professional learning can nurture both educator well-being and instructional quality, reminding us that when teachers are supported in community, they are far more likely to stay, grow, and create classrooms where children truly thrive.

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This work was supported by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, under Grant #H325D220020. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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UNITED IN STRENGTH! INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS TO PROVIDE MICRO STUDY ABROAD OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES

Abstract

The development and implementation of a short-term study abroad opportunity for teacher candidates in a small teacher preparation program was shared. The potential of these experiences to foster culturally responsive teaching, a broader understanding of disability as a global phenomenon, and personal adaptability was highlighted. Practical strategies for teacher educators to enhance their programs and better prepare teacher candidates to serve diverse student populations with disabilities. It directly addressed the gap in global awareness among many pre-service teachers, especially those with limited travel experience, providing a framework for transformative learning. The insights gained can inform the development of innovative and impactful study abroad programs, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for both teacher candidates and the students they will serve. Data and qualitative feedback from teacher candidates was also provided.

Background/Rationale

While participation in study abroad experiences is increasingly common in undergraduate programs (Institute of International Education, 2020), teacher candidates are often excluded from these opportunities due to the required sequence of courses required for certification, particularly in small programs with limited course offerings. Often, the choice to study abroad in a traditional, full semester program results in a disruption of the teacher candidates' sequence of courses, adding an additional semester or year to their four-year program (Callahan, 2024). In addition to time, the high costs of traditional study abroad programs are an additional barrier for many students.

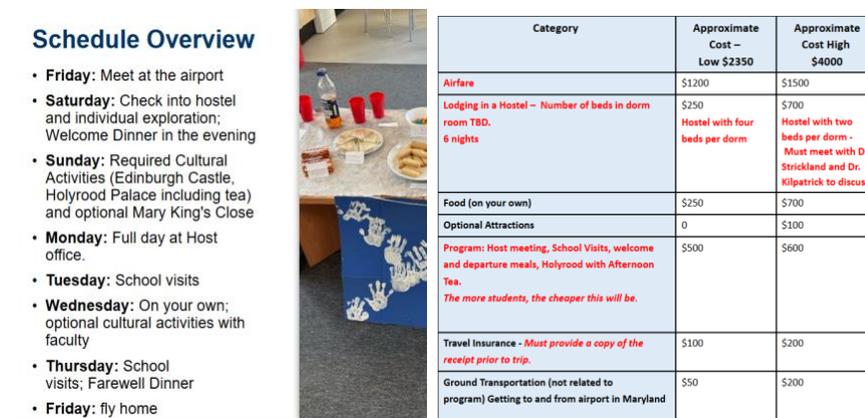
By observing special education services in a different cultural context, teacher candidates gain invaluable insights into alternative pedagogical methods, diverse family engagement practices, and varying levels of resource availability (Aggarwal & Wu, 2023). The potential of these experiences is highlighted to foster culturally responsive teaching, adaptability, and a broader understanding of disability as a global phenomenon.

Key Session Takeaways

Our program was created to respond to increased expectations for globally minded teachers alongside persistent barriers that prevent many candidates from participating in traditional semester-long study abroad, including rigid course sequences, high cost, and limited time. Grounded in a commitment to integrating global perspectives into teacher preparation, the project asked whether a short-term, highly structured international experience could expand candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to serving students with disabilities while remaining affordable and logistically feasible.

During spring break 2025, six teacher candidates from Hood College participated in a week-long micro study abroad in Edinburgh, Scotland titled "Is There Another IDEA? Investigating Different Service Models for Students with Disabilities in Scotland." The program goals were to provide meaningful learning opportunities in a compressed timeframe, facilitate direct interaction with teachers, administrators, and agency personnel, and prompt candidates to reconsider assumptions about the provision of services for students with disabilities. Careful scheduling and budgeting were central to program design. We followed a tightly sequenced schedule that maximized limited time while incorporating both required and optional cultural experiences. A transparent budget model was developed that outlined low and high total-cost scenarios. We chose to plan logistics independently rather than contracting with a travel company, which reduced costs sufficiently to make the trip feasible with a small cohort of six students.

Figure 1. *Schedule and Budget*



Additional Resources

- Sample student reflection prompts: [Reflection Prompts PDF.pdf](#)
- Budget planning worksheet: [Budget Planning Worksheet PDF.pdf](#)
- Program planning tool: [Basic Planning Tool PDF.pdf](#)

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THE ‘WONDER ‘OF AN INCLUSIVE BOOK CLUB TO MOVE US FORWARD TOGETHER: UNITED IN STRENGTH AND COMMUNITY

Abstract

Attracting and preparing students to work in special education is the focus of current initiatives to address the teacher shortage. Authentic learning opportunities and field experiences are essential in teacher preparation programs. This presentation shares experiences of an inclusive book club for secondary and postsecondary students with and without disabilities.

Background/Rationale

One of the current issues in the field of education is the shortage of teachers. This is particularly critical in the field of special education. According to the U.S. Department of Education data (U.S. Department of Education, 2024), 39 states, territories, and the District of Columbia report teacher shortages in special education across all disabilities categories and grade levels for the 2024-2025 school year. Shortages of special educators have been a consistent challenge for decades. In recent years, 70% of public schools reported vacancies for special education teachers as being one of the most prevalent and the most difficult positions to fill (NCES, 2023). The need for special educators nationwide has prompted many initiatives focusing on preparing individuals to enter into the field of special education. Therefore, many states have a renewed commitment to addressing this critical shortage to ensure future special educators have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2024).

In Pennsylvania (PA), there has been a shortage of special education teachers for the past decade (Gilmour et al., 2024). Education at all levels from public school classrooms to universities have been affected by the decreasing numbers of special educators (PDE Bureau of Special Education, n.d.). Impacts include students with disabilities receiving limited or no access to individualized instruction and services, high attrition rates of special educators, and declining numbers of individuals graduating from special education teacher preparation programs (Harper et al., 2023). To address the shortage of special education teachers, PA has implemented various strategies and programs focusing on recruitment and retention of special educators and special education personnel (Gilmour et al., 2025).

The 2024-2026 Developing Future Special Educators Grant is an example of an initiative from the PA Department of Education Bureau of Special Education to attract, prepare, and retain professionals in the special education workforce in the state of PA. The purpose of the grant is to

develop experiential learning opportunities to engage secondary and/or postsecondary students to learn about supporting individuals with disabilities and ultimately recruit special educators (PDE Bureau of Special Education, 2024). Experiential learning opportunities in categories of career exploration, instructional, and social are developed and implemented by the grantees.

A professor at a PA university and a PA high school life skills teacher were awarded grant funding to develop a dual enrollment course, Introduction to Exceptionalities. This course enrolled high school students who express in interest in special education and university students who are non-special education majors (i.e., students majoring in psychology, sociology, etc), that wanted to explore the field of special education. One activity embedded into the course was a book club exploring the book Wonder by R. J. Palacio (2012). Coupled with the book club was a field experience in a high school life skills classroom. Initially, the co-instructors (the two grantees) planned assignments and book club discussions focusing on targeted chapters in Wonder. Following a visit to the high school life skills classroom, the book club was reimagined by the professors and the students from the Introduction to Exceptionalities course. Students in this course proposed including the high school life skills students in our monthly book club discussions and activities.

This study explores the development of the inclusive book club and students' perceptions of the unique learning experiences that originated both organically and purposefully. This authentic experience challenged students in the Introduction to Exceptionalities course to plan differentiated book club activities accessible to a variety of learners and provide engaging opportunities to support inclusion and community.

Key Session Takeaways

Providing teacher candidates with meaningful activities and authentic field experiences to apply the skills and concepts learned in university coursework is a key component in teacher preparation programs. Knowledge gained from this study contributes to the research on teacher preparation as well as university and school partnerships moving forward together by creating meaningful and innovative experiences to attract future special educators. Secondary and postsecondary students can benefit from increased and inventive opportunities to engage with students with disabilities, as well as plan and implement instruction. Lessons learned from this study benefit teacher educators as we share how flexibility in the development of a course project (e.g., a book club) evolved into a more meaningful learning experience when the roles of instructor and student shifted. The perceptions of all students in this inclusive book club were impactful and have implications for practice.

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USING A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH IN SPECIAL EDUCATION COURSES TO ENGAGE TEACHER CANDIDATES

Abstract

Student engagement in special education teacher preparation coursework is paramount to teacher effectiveness. This paper reviews research on learner-centered teaching (LCT) theory and examines the relationship between LCT and self-determination theory (SDT). Lastly, this paper highlights the C.H.O.I.C.E. project as one application of LCT and SDT in special education courses.

Background/Rationale

In traditional college classrooms, most learning activities are carried out by the instructor (i.e., choosing and organizing the content, interpreting and applying the concepts, and evaluating student learning), while students generally focus on recording the information (Wright, 2011). Research has found, however, that the least preferred teaching methods are teacher-centered (Murphy et al., 2021). Instead, university students prefer a mix of teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches.

Learner Centered Teaching (LCT) has been researched since 1978 (Shah, 2020) and feedback about this method from both students and faculty has generally been positive (Bremner et al. 2022; Li & Ding, 2023; Shah, 2020; Wohlfarth et al., 2008;). Specifically, research has found that LCT increases students' personal competencies (e.g., curiosity, interest, initiative, persistence, attention, creativity, motivation, and learning attitude) and social competencies (e.g., cohesiveness, self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, team spirit, and adaptability; see Li & Ding, 2023 for a meta-analysis). Based on research by Wohlfarth et al., 2008, students have generally appreciated learner-centered experiences in the classroom. One student wrote, "I have truly enjoyed this class, and the way it was designed as a learner-centered experience. I feel that it was the first time I was treated as a competent and intelligent person who could be trusted with her learning experience." Another student said, "Generally, I believe the learner-centered style of teaching is more helpful to me than traditional lecture-style instruction... the most important and useful learning comes from being pushed to critically think about the information. This simply does not occur in lecture focused classrooms." In short, LCT is "a more active, engaging, collaborative style of teaching" than traditional methods (Wohlfarth et al., 2008, p. 68).

Research has found that engagement strongly predicts learning outcomes for teacher candidates during training (Saucier et al., 2022); unfortunately, pre-service teachers often show low engagement in learning activities, thereby demonstrating an area of teacher education in need of improvement (Kim & Corcoran, 2017). To most effectively train future teachers, university faculty must model active learning and collaboration for future educators to emulate (Vaughan, 2014; Weimer, 2013; Wright, 2011).

Key Session Takeaways

Although much literature on learner-centered approaches has been published in K-12 education (Bremner et al., 2022; Klimaitis & Mullen, 2021; Woods & Copur-Gencturk, 2024; Cheng & Ding, 2021), less is known about the outcomes associated with this teaching approach in higher education, let alone special education teacher preparation (Massey et al., 2022). As such, the session take-aways focus on: 1) the relationship between LCT and self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and 2) applying learning centered principles in special education coursework.

LCT principles (Wohlfarth et al., 2008; Weimer, 2013) and SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013) are critical to engagement and flourishing in the classroom. Specifically, the principles of LCT maintain the following: 1) students are capable learners who grow in egalitarian classrooms; 2) content helps students to critically think about the big questions in the field; 3) the role of teacher is as a fellow traveler in search of knowledge; 4) students are responsible for learning and need to understand their strengths and weaknesses and professor's role is to move them towards self-directed knowledge; and 5) assessments are tools to promote learning. Similarly, SDT asserts that *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness* are necessary components to motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Taken together, students gain competence when a professor views students as capable, encourages critical thinking, and helps them towards further or additional understanding. Moreover, by creating egalitarian classrooms and searching for knowledge *with* students, the professor is demonstrating the SDT domain of relatedness. Lastly, a professor promotes autonomy by encouraging self-directed learning and using various forms of assessment to facilitate learning.

Applying learner-centered principles in teacher preparation programs has been touted as a method to promote student motivation and learning for decades (Pierce & Kalkman, 2003) and current research suggests that modeling practices in courses encourages implementation of those practices in classrooms (Carini & Kuh, 2003; Vaughan, 2014). There are several ways that faculty can apply learner-centered principles in their special education courses. The presenter discussed seven assignments from their class that model these LCT principles, the most innovative of which is called the "CHOICE Project." The CHOICE acronym stands for *Cultivating Habits of Inquiry, Curiosity, and Empowerment* (Larson, 2025). In this project, teacher candidates select a topic and format that aligns with their interests and professional goals and design a project that demonstrates their learning about that topic. The project provides the opportunity for teacher candidates to explore something meaningful and reflect on their growth as a learner. With this project as an example, the presenter highlighted the importance of choice/autonomy and facilitating student competence by "doing the work of people in the field," thereby aligning with LCT and SDT.

In her concluding remarks about using a flipped classroom model in introductory teaching courses, Vaughan (2014) writes, "It is critical that the courses [new teachers] take be aligned with the job they will do in schools and the students they will need to serve" (p. 39). Given that learner-centered approaches positively impact student outcomes in K-12 education (Bremner et

al., 2022; Klimaitis & Mullen, 2021; Woods & Copur-Gencturk, 2024; Cheng & Ding, 2021), modeling such practices in special education teacher preparation courses is imperative.

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UNIFYING THOUGHTS: CONCEPT MAPPING AS A MEASURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS

Abstract

The evaluation of preservice teacher knowledge can sometimes feel elusive. Traditional forms of assessment consist of a test (i.e., multiple-choice) which can lack context regarding growth for the individual. A growing field of study examines the data from concept maps to obtain a more comprehensive measure of teacher candidate progress. A recent study asked students to create pre-post concept maps and reflective narratives related to their knowledge of characteristics and needs of students with disabilities and special education services. The investigation offered an opportunity to examine patterns of growth in knowledge from the first day of class to the last. Implications for practice and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

Background/Rationale

Concept maps are an alternative to traditional tests and have been used since the 1960s to assess student learning (Novak & Gowin, 1984). Concept maps are an illustration of how a student represents his or her understanding of a concept (De Ries et al., 2022; Nesbit & Adesope, 2006). The method uses nodes and lines to show interconnectedness of concepts, course content and knowledge. A node constitutes an important term (concept) used in the content. Lines comprise associations or links between a set of concepts (nodes).

Concept maps have been proposed for use in public (P-12) and higher education to assess preservice teachers (Lopuch & O'Brien, 2024; Sellmann et al., 2015). Miller et al. (2009) used pretest and posttest concept maps to assess both quantitative and qualitative knowledge from a course on children with emotional disorders and related interventions. Results indicated a significant difference in concept and links from pretest to posttest except for general education respondents. These data suggest concept maps, as an assessment tool, may assume a helpful role in determining student improvement.

Key Session Takeaways

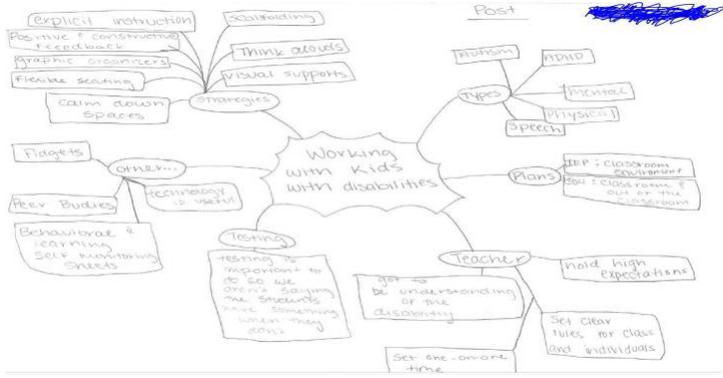
The use of a rubric and narratives to supplement traditional map scoring (counting individual ideas/nodes), provided the authors with a holistic perspective on the learner's mastery of the concepts specific to the course. Through the challenging process of creating the rubric, the authors developed a unique understanding of the main ideas and details of the course. Lastly, narratives constructed through review and reflection of pre-post maps provided helpful context. In other words, the reflective narratives acted as a proxy of a think-aloud, allowing reviewers to read about the conceptual change candidates underwent (as opposed to assuming growth through counting ideas). Most candidates emphasized course vocabulary and school field experiences to exemplify their progress which may not be apparent to the reader if the only information is discrete ideas. This is important to consider when assessing candidate thinking that goes beyond just counting ideas; instead looks for important descriptions of scope and background to support notions of change.

Table 1 provides an example of a rubric created for an introductory special education course. Figure 1 shows an example of a strong candidate concept map.

0	Few technical words/terms; lacks logical organization/linking of nodes
1	Logically organized linking of nodes representing minimal understanding of the topic; layperson knowledge
2	Some terms and logical organization; difference between 1 and 2 is the breadth of concepts on three or more of the major components to reach level 2 Breadth major components: -Educational psychology foundations -Labeling/Eligibility -Legislation/policy -History/Civil Rights/Philosophy of Inclusion -Context of disability in schools -Characteristics of disabilities on school performance -Specially Designed Instruction
3	Demonstrate some professional/technical terminology with three or more major components
4	Difference between 2 and 3 is terminology in level 4 should be a great deal of development evidenced through terminology, major concepts, and organization.
5	The concepts should be developed relative to cases used in course; conceptual match.

*Adapted from Miller et al., 2009

Figure 1



Additional Resources

Teacher Education and Special Education article on the step-by-step procedures to construct and evaluate concept maps: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406409346149>

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EXPLORING THE DIFFERENCES IN LITERATURE BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE AND TRADITIONALLY CERTIFIED TEACHERS

Abstract

This study examined how mentor certification routes shape preservice special educators' learning experiences through a systematic literature review. Findings illuminate key factors influencing mentoring quality and preservice teacher development, highlighting important considerations for program design and future research on special education teacher preparation.

Background/Rationale

The rapid expansion of alternative certification (AC) pathways has substantially altered the special education teacher workforce, particularly in high-need and rural contexts. While AC routes have been promoted as a strategy to address persistent teacher shortages, concerns remain regarding variability in preparation, mentoring, and instructional support for both AC teachers and the preservice teachers (PSTs) they mentor during clinical placements. Mentoring quality is a critical component of effective teacher preparation, influencing PSTs' perceived preparedness, instructional practices, classroom management skills, and professional socialization.

Existing research on mentor teachers has largely focused on general education settings or has examined certification routes without distinguishing mentor roles in special education contexts. Moreover, findings related to PST outcomes across certification pathways are inconsistent, and few studies systematically compare placements with alternatively versus traditionally certified special education mentors. Given the unique pedagogical, behavioral, and legal demands of special education, it is essential to understand how mentor certification routes shape PST experiences and outcomes.

This review addresses this gap by synthesizing empirical literature that explicitly compares PST placements with alternatively and traditionally certified special education mentor teachers, with attention to mentoring quality, preparedness, and instructional practice adoption.

Key Session Takeaways

A **systematic literature review** was conducted using a PICOS-aligned framework across major education and psychology databases (ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science). Peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2000 and 2025 were included if they examined PST experiences in special education settings and explicitly distinguished mentor certification route. Eighteen studies met inclusion criteria, representing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs.

Resulting Themes

Analysis of the literature and interview data yielded five central themes briefly described with original sources included here:

1. **Mentoring quality as the primary differentiator.** Across studies, mentoring quality—rather than certification route alone—most strongly shaped PST experiences and outcomes. PSTs reported stronger support when mentors provided consistent feedback, modeling, and supervision (Casey et al., 2013).
2. **Mixed findings on perceived preparedness.** Some studies reported no significant differences in PST preparedness across certification routes, while others identified gaps in specialized pedagogy, behavior supports, and disability-specific knowledge when PSTs were mentored by alternatively certified teachers (Cercione, 2018; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005).
3. **Program heterogeneity within alternative certification.** Outcomes varied widely depending on the type of alternative certification program. Structured, field-based programs with sustained mentoring produced PST outcomes comparable to traditional routes, whereas emergency or fast-track pathways showed weaker mentoring supports (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2007).
4. **Classroom management and behavior support as recurring challenges.** Differences between mentor groups were most evident in practical classroom management, PBIS implementation, and behavioral intervention modeling. Studies indicate that alternatively certified special education teachers often report lower levels of preparation in behavior management and evidence-based behavioral practices, which can limit opportunities for preservice teachers to observe and practice these strategies during field placements (Nougaret et al., 2005; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005).
5. **Contextual influences on mentoring.** High-need and rural placements frequently associated with alternative certification shaped PST experiences and moderated mentoring quality (Feistritzer, 2003).

Implications and Future Research

Findings suggest variation rather than a uniform advantage for either certification route. Future research should examine mentor preparation practices across pathways, employ longitudinal designs tracking PSTs into early career teaching, and investigate contextual supports that enhance mentoring effectiveness regardless of certification route.

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PRESERVICE TEACHER COLLABORATION FOR RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING

Abstract

The skills associated with collaboration, especially in uncommon spaces like science and special education, need to be taught and practiced. Opportunities to connect with colleagues is reported by teachers as essential for longevity in education (Richards, Hemphill & Templin, 2018). Being a part of a larger professional community is associated with reduced stress (Jones, Youngs & Frank, 2013) when teachers find support from their colleagues. Teacher wellbeing is important in the resilience process, as a state of more positive wellbeing will influence how teachers interpret and respond to challenges (Mansfield et al., 2016). Collaborative opportunities for preservice teachers in special education and science teachers to collaborate and form professional learning communities can have a lasting impact. Structured, applied, collaborative experiences provide the opportunity for preservice special education and science teachers to develop skills that can be directly applied to school settings. By learning effective collaborative skills at the preservice level, novice teachers will be better equipped to engage in collaborative teaching experiences and increase wellbeing.

Background/Rationale

Teacher stress and burnout have a detrimental effect on the stability of the teaching workforce. Teachers who are stressed or experience burnout are more likely to leave school, leading to an unstable teaching workforce, which negatively impacts student learning.

Teacher burnout is a chronic phenomenon that continues to be a main cause of teacher exodus from the classroom and acts as a precursor to teacher attrition (Lavian, 2012). Burnout is a process with many contributing factors. Teachers who fail to handle burnout effectively are likely to experience poor quality student interaction, counterproductive instruction, increased absenteeism, which eventually leads to teacher attrition (Wong et al., 2017). Teacher mental health has a role in student learning, therefore, interventions to reduce teacher stress and burnout should be prioritized when developing plans to increase teaching quality and student engagement (Wong et al., 2017). Teachers with higher wellbeing enjoy more harmonious teacher-student relationships (Spilt et al., 2011), and have students who experience higher wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019). Both wellbeing and resilience constructs have been shown to have positive outcomes for teachers, including teaching and learning quality, teacher self-efficacy, commitment, and job satisfaction (Day & Gu, 2014). It can also be seen that teacher wellbeing is important in the resilience process, as a state of more positive wellbeing will influence how teachers interpret and respond to challenges, as well as being an important outcome of the resilience process (Mansfield et al. 2015).

Key Session Takeaways

The development of new and innovative coursework for preservice teachers is essential to the field. A focus on resilience and wellbeing best prepares preservice teachers with direction, purpose, and support within learning communities. Using a model of PLC with an emphasis on collaboration between teachers of different disciplines, specifically special education and science, we created a preservice professional learning community framework. The model is an overlapping framework to support collaboration among preservice teachers with structured, meaningful assignments, leveled supports, measurable and meaningful outcomes, and most importantly forming a community of practice to facilitate positive wellbeing. Figure 1 highlights the overarching concepts that outline the development of a preservice professional learning community intended to model and support practices in collaboration to reduce new teacher burnout.

Figure 1: Model of Preservice Teacher Collaboration for Resilience and Wellbeing



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MODIFY THIS! A NEW PROFESSOR'S JOURNEY TOWARDS AUTHENTIC APPLICATIONS OF LEARNING WITH A BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION ASSIGNMENT

Abstract

When college professors provide innovative authentic assignments and assessments, they help preservice teachers to step more firmly into educators' shoes, translating educational knowledge into effective classroom practice. This project was carried out in the form of an intervention, in which each student selected a target behavior, collected baseline data, developed an intervention grounded in educational theories, and implemented it, collecting data on observable behaviors along the way. The culmination of the assignment included the analysis and reflection. This assignment has the potential to empower students by helping them develop a better sense of the intervention cycle, exposing them to various intricacies of intervention implementation. In the context of a behavior modification assignment, a college professor was a continuous source of support as students chose their target behavior, designed an intervention plan, collected, recorded and analyzed data, and reflected on the project.

Background/Rationale

Planning interventions is an essential skill set for special educators. Students in educator preparation programs benefit from authentic opportunities to collect and analyze data, set goals, design and implement interventions, analyze results, and adjust their teaching accordingly. To this extent, authentic assignments in teacher preparation programs provide numerous benefits, which include but are not limited to a) deeper learning; b) transfer of learning from theory to practice; c) learning to collaborate with stakeholders and seek feedback; and d) increased use and understanding of professional tools (Chang et al., 2024; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Messier, 2022).

In this Behavior Modification Assignment (BMA) project, which evolved over three semesters, students planned an intervention around their own area of need. The students drew ideas from behavioral sciences and social-emotional learning (SEL), utilizing themselves as their own 'control', and relying on other principles of single-case research methodology. The presentation aimed to give education faculty additional ideas and tools to design assignments that would help their pre-service teachers apply their knowledge of behavioral and social-emotional interventions to a real-life scenario.

Key Session Takeaways

Class participants designed interventions for various target behaviors, including daily reading, health-related goals, targeted music practice, designated bedtime/wake-up time, organizing financial paperwork, and controlling electronic distractions. The proposed assignment sequence is presented below:

Part I: Planning

- Identify the target behavior and its significance.
- Determine your goal and what will count as evidence of behavior change.
- Develop a data collection plan that is realistic and systematic (e.g., event recording, duration, latency).
- Collect and record baseline data.

Part II: Intervention Steps

- Develop an intervention plan to help you achieve your goal. The intervention plan should include concrete steps and rely on behavioral principles, techniques from cognitive-behavioral therapy, ideas from SEL programs, recent findings about learning and the brain, or a combination thereof.
- Provide at least 3 reputable sources to support your intervention.
- Implement your intervention, recording data regularly.
- Present your data in a visual format (including baseline data from Part I).

Part III: Analysis and Reflection

- Discuss whether your intervention was effective through visual analysis and/or additional methods.
- Reflect on the intervention: What would you change now that you have done it once?

Students' feedback was overwhelmingly positive: many students shared that it was a useful, interesting, and insightful assignment. One of the challenges for students was to ground the chosen intervention in at least two theories from the fields of education or psychology. At the graduate level, a seven-week timeline presented a challenge, as well.

Helpful ideas:

- Explaining single-case research design options and their applications in education
- Sharing several example papers
- Providing a hand-out with potential applications of key theories
- One-on-one conferencing
- Creating a 'bank' of SEL resources, supports, and sample interventions
- Creating a list of graphing tools

Additional Resources

- A Wakelet link with additional resources, sample graphs and a sample paper supporting this presentation: https://wakelet.com/wake/3bg3_wZQ3srE3i4p0ioP9
- An instructor's guide on using authentic assignments in a college classroom: <https://teaching.uic.edu/cate-teaching-guides/assessment-grading-practices/authentic-assessments/>
- IRIS Center's wraparound resources for measuring behaviors: <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/mcontent/case-study-wacm-parent/measuring-behavior/>
- An open-access article that provides a strong overview of single-case intervention designs, highly suitable for non-psychology majors <https://www.jmir.org/2013/2/e22/>
- YouTube channel with videos focusing on the basics of ABA tools, suitable for non-ABA majors: <https://www.youtube.com/@HowtoABA>

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CULTIVATING GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS: COLLABORATIVE PREPARATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN BRAZIL AND THE UNITED STATES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Abstract

In an increasingly global community, it is essential to cultivate global research and teaching partnerships to advance inclusive educational practices for students with disabilities. In this presentation, we discussed how we utilized collaborative global online learning exchanges between universities in the USA and Brazil to prepare graduate students in special education teacher preparation programs to develop intercultural competencies and effective special education practices to support students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings. We also shared perspectives and reflections from the educators participating in the global exchange.

Background/Rationale

In Brazil and in the United States, special education teachers work to identify student needs, eliminate educational barriers, collaborate with general education teachers, and build an inclusive and effective classroom environment that enables students with disabilities to engage and learn (Silva et al., 2022). Thus, a collaborative global approach to teacher training may be an effective way to support pre-service and in-service educators' development of evidence-based practices and intercultural competencies. Providing global experiences to students has always been a part of higher education through semester-long study abroad programs or short-term study abroad trips. In general, global experiences can help teachers develop intercultural competencies, communication skills, self-awareness, and confidence (Haines et al., 2021). However, such programs may not be accessible to all students as they can be time or cost-prohibitive. To provide more equitable, widely accessible global experiences and perspectives for students in higher education, collaborative online international learning (COIL) programs were developed. In such programs, students and their professors develop and complete a collaborative project embedded within their degree coursework with colleagues and peers from a university in a different country (SUNY COIL, n.d.). Embedding global perspectives and learning in special education teacher preparation can enhance inclusive and equitable education worldwide for students with disabilities (Brandon et al., 2021). Additionally, there is increasing support for

global partnerships and internationalization of teaching in higher education worldwide, as global learning is now considered a high-impact practice (AAC&U, n.d.).

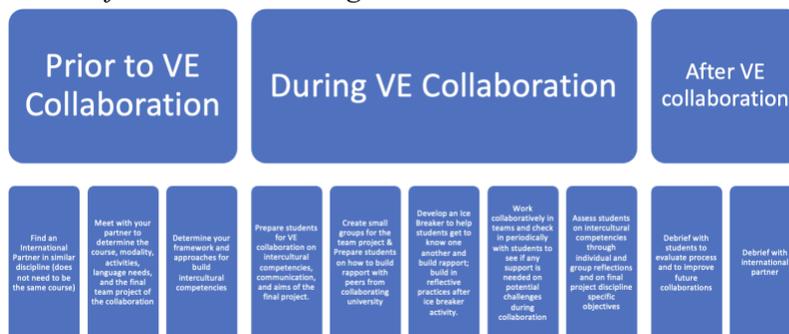
We developed three distinct global online learning exchanges between Brazil and the USA and present preliminary qualitative outcomes from our process and students' experiences. Figure 1 below provides an overview of the virtual exchange methodology and best practices for implementing it within educator preparation. We utilized an American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Values rubric (AAC&U, n.d) and cultural humility framework (Wright, 2019) to guide our project in educator preparation in applied behavior analysis and the FBA/BIP process, as well as our collaboration during teacher practicum experiences. These intercultural and global frameworks can assist in and guide the development of global partnerships and virtual exchange collaborations, support reflective practices, and help assess student intercultural competencies. Through thematic analysis, the following themes emerged from our students' experiences: (1) power of language and communication, (2) positive impact on practice in the field, (3) major differences and values in working style, and (4) positive impact on intercultural competencies. The ability for information to spread digitally has uniquely positioned educators to consider how to embed diverse global perspectives throughout their work. We end with a call to action to consider implementing global exchange strategies to help build educators' intercultural competencies and develop more effective special educators in the field, thereby enhancing inclusive classroom settings for students with disabilities.

Key Session Takeaways

- International Virtual Exchange can be an effective and engaging way to teach our pre-service educators' intercultural competencies and cultural responsiveness
- Pre-service educators can learn both evidence-based practices and how to address the needs of students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Virtual Exchange increases student engagement in the course work through real-life applied projects
- Promote Virtual exchanges that lead to research and practice collaborations to advance equity and inclusion of individuals with disabilities globally

Figure 1.

Process for Virtual Exchange Collaboration



Additional Resources

- SUNY COIL Center is a leading center for VE in the United States with many great resources and a global network to help find international partners: <https://coil.suny.edu/>
- *The Stevens Initiative* is an organization that champions virtual exchange initiatives and provides many resources for those trying to get started with VE: <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/virtual-exchange/>
- *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle Reflection Toolkit* can help you create better intercultural reflections: <https://reflection.ed.ac.uk/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/gibbs-reflective-cycle>
- AAC&U Institute on Virtual Exchange/COIL provides modules to learn more about VE: <https://sites.google.com/aacuvecoil.net/hub/home/faculty-instructors>
- VALUE Rubrics—Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Rubric by AAC&U. <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/value-rubrics-intercultural-knowledge-and-competence>
- Access UNICollaboration to learn more about virtual exchange and cross-disciplinary learning: <https://unicollaboration.org/>
- *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* provided peer-reviewed research on intercultural communication skills: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjic20>

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UNITING EDUCATION: NEPANTLERAS STRENGTHENING THE IN-BETWEEN

Abstract

Conceptually leaning on Gloria Anzaldúa's work, this paper names a reality that many educators already live: the "in-between." We argue that educators who navigate the spaces between cultures, languages, modalities, and systems inhabit *Nepantla*, a space of tension and possibility. By reframing these educators as *Nepantleras*, or bridges, teacher education programs can move beyond superficial inclusion. This paper highlights how the *Nepantlera* position is an essential resource for justice-centered education, offering a framework to recognize the intellectual, emotional, and relational labor required to connect disparate worlds in special and general education.

Background/Rationale

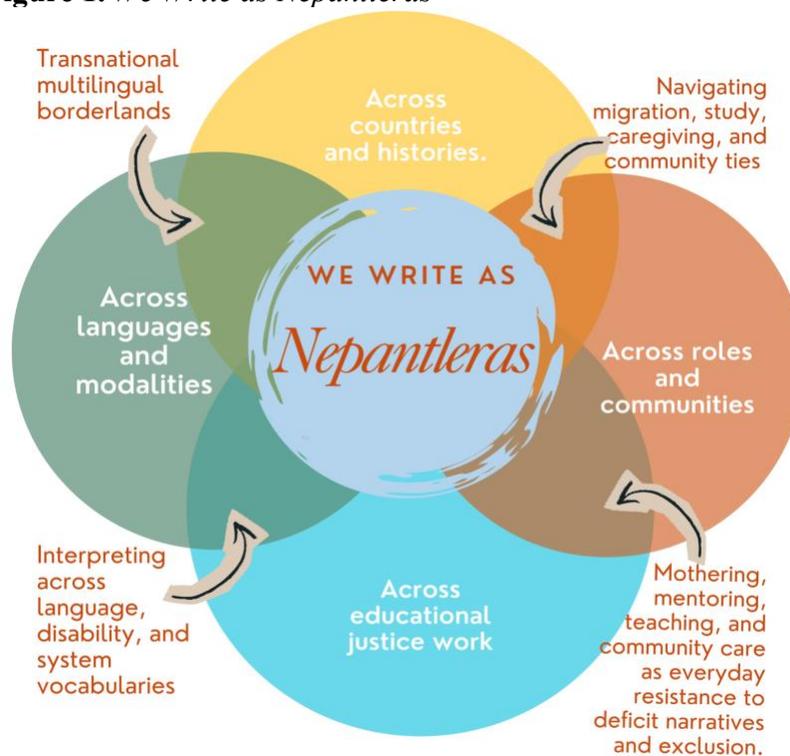
Teacher education frequently speaks the language of diversity and inclusion yet often continues to center dominant identities as the norm. Current research on culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, funds of knowledge, and intersectionality highlights this persistent gap (González et al., 2005; Paris & Alim, 2017). Within this context, educators who live "in between" cultures, languages, abilities, nations, and roles are frequently framed through deficit narratives. They are often viewed as fragmented or "at risk," rather than as holders of specialized knowledge.

Despite this framing, these educators perform significant unpaid "bridging" work. They interpret across language barriers, navigate distinct disability and system vocabularies, and mediate between community histories and institutional requirements. Rarely, however, is this labor recognized as expertise that should shape programs and institutions. This paper proposes a theoretical shift: using Anzaldúa's concepts to reframe "in-betweenness" not as a deficit, but as a resource for solidarity and justice. By recognizing these educators as *Nepantleras*, the field can begin to honor the complex skills required to navigate and unite divided educational spaces.

Key Session Takeaways

A central takeaway is the value of naming *Nepantla* and *Nepantleras* as a framework for understanding educators who inhabit multiple cultural, linguistic, and institutional realities. *Nepantla* is not simply a transition phase. It is an in-between space where tension and uncertainty can create new ways of seeing, being, and acting (Anzaldúa, 1987). A *Nepantlera* is someone who lives within this space and acts as a *puente*, building connection across communities, knowledge systems, and power structures. For teacher educators, this language provides a way to recognize the positionality of students, colleagues, and community partners who navigate transnational identities, multilingual classrooms, or the complex boundaries between special and general education.

Figure 1. *We Write as Nepantleras*



This figure illustrates *Nepantleras* as educators and scholars working across languages and modalities, countries and histories, roles and communities, and educational justice work.

Nepantleras' "bridging" work is specialized intellectual and emotional labor, not informal helping. They actively connect worlds by translating language, mediating different assumptions, and navigating cultural and institutional systems in ways that support resilience and collective healing (Anzaldúa, 2015). Recognizing this expertise has important implications for teacher education, requiring programs to center *Nepantleras* as leaders and knowledge-holders through mentoring, collaboration, and decision-making roles, while future work can document these experiences through collaborative autoethnography and arts-based inquiry.

Additional Resources

- Gloria E. Anzaldúa Literary Trust (Official Website): Resources related to Anzaldúa's life, scholarship, and legacy, including publications and community initiatives connected to Nepantla and borderlands scholarship. <https://gloriaeanzaldua.com>
- Forum Nepantla: A digital forum and community space for dialogue, reflection, and creative contributions grounded in Nepantla as a site of transformation. <https://forum-nepantla.org/>

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R.I.S.E. ABOVE: SUPPORTING TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH AUTISM THROUGH SPECIALIZED COACHING

Abstract

This case study examines the R.I.S.E. coaching program supporting two preservice special education teachers with autism. Through personalized interventions, structured feedback, and relationship-based mentorship, Taylor and Avery successfully navigated their teaching practicums despite challenges with emotional regulation, social awareness, and professional boundaries.

Background/Rationale

Institutions of higher education are experiencing a growing population of students with disabilities, including individuals with ASD, entering teacher preparation programs (Anderson et al., 2018; Kuder & Accardo, 2018). While these candidates often demonstrate strong content knowledge, attention to detail, and commitment to inclusive practice, they may encounter challenges related to communication, executive functioning, emotional regulation, and navigating professional norms within educator preparation programs (Macleod & Cebula, 2009; Wood & Happé, 2021). Research suggests that without intentional and proactive supports, teacher candidates with ASD are at greater risk for negative field experiences, disciplinary actions, and attrition (Zhang et al., 2020).

The RISE Above model was developed to address these gaps by providing structured, relationship-based coaching aligned with principles of Universal Design for Learning and neurodiversity-affirming practice (Oliver, 2025). Rather than relying solely on traditional evaluation frameworks that emphasize neurotypical expressions of professionalism, RISE Above centers individualized supports that allow candidates to meet program expectations while leveraging their unique strengths (Morris et al., 2021).

Key Session Takeaways

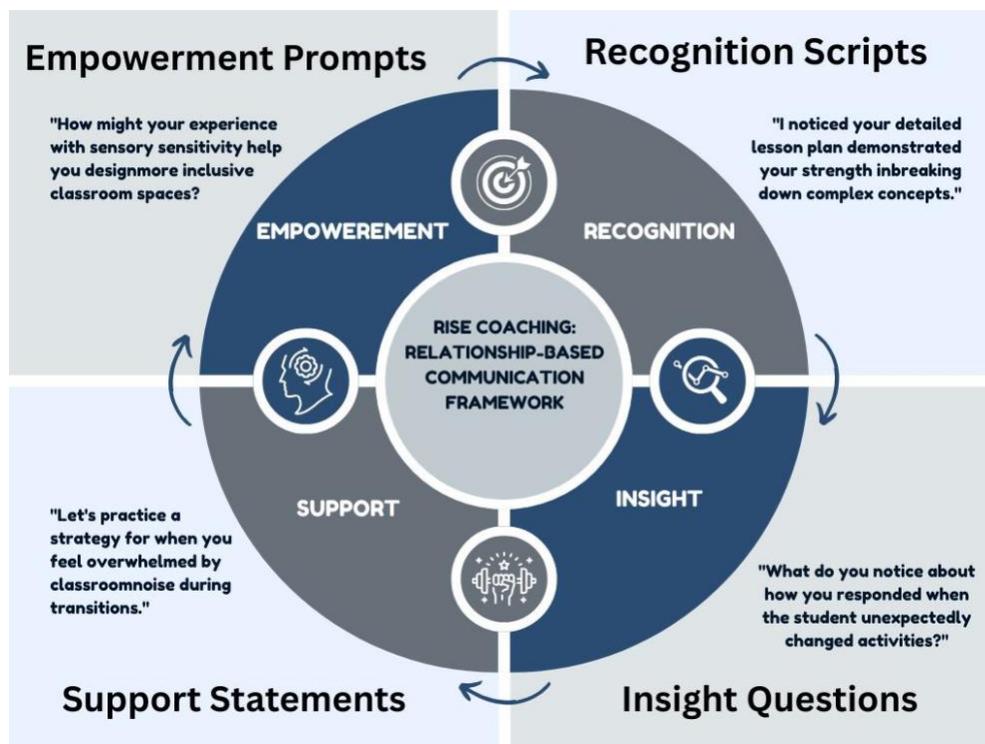
The RISE Above framework (Oliver, 2025) centers relationship-based coaching as a foundational mechanism for supporting teacher candidates with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in educator preparation programs. RISE addresses common barriers created by implicit professional expectations and neurotypical norms by making expectations explicit, strengths visible, and reflection actionable. Understanding the core components of RISE is essential for faculty, supervisors, and program leaders seeking to provide equitable, rigorous, and defensible supports for neurodivergent teacher candidates. The RISE Coaching framework is organized around four interconnected communication components:

1. **Empowerment** – prompts that affirm identity and connect candidate strengths to professional practice
2. **Recognition** – explicit scripts that name effective practice and reinforce competence
3. **Insight** – reflective questions that support self-awareness and decision-making
4. **Support** – structured statements that normalize challenge and provide concrete strategies

Figure 1 reimagines relationship-based coaching as an integrated system in which Empowerment, Recognition, Insight, and Support function as interconnected components that collectively promote psychological safety, professional growth, and licensure readiness.

Figure 1.

RISE Coaching: Relationship-based Communication Framework



Additional Resources

- YouTube video on how schools and universities can support neurodivergent preservice teachers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICPk0cWYbD4&feature=youtu.be>
- *Journal of Case Learning & Exceptional Learners* case study on supporting neurodivergent individuals in teacher education programs through specialized coaching: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/jclel/vol10/iss1/7/>
- *Journal of Case Learning & Exceptional Learners* case study on supporting neurodivergent individuals in teacher education programs: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/jclel/vol10/iss1/5/>
- YouTube video on supporting neurodivergent teachers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCBv2QQh95k&feature=youtu.be>

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COPING STRATEGIES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Abstract

This study examines coping strategies and academic success in pre-service teachers using the Brief COPE survey. Most participants relied on emotion-focused coping during high-stress periods. Findings highlight the importance of structured support systems in teacher preparation programs to foster resilience, improve well-being, and promote academic success.

Background/Rationale

Grounded in transactional stress and coping theory (Lazarus, 1966; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985), this study examines whether pre-service teachers' use of problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping strategies is associated with differences in academic performance, measured by grade point average (GPA). Using self-reported coping data from candidates balancing coursework with clinical responsibilities, the study addresses three questions: (1) which coping strategies are most common, (2) how specific strategies relate to academic performance, and (3) how candidates perceive the connection between coping and academic outcomes. Findings identify distinct coping patterns, including active and disengagement strategies (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003), and their associations with academic success, extending prior research on coping and academic functioning in higher education (Carver, 1997). These findings have important implications for the design of more responsive and equitable teacher preparation programs. Prior research suggests that coping strategies are shaped by contextual, cultural, and situational factors and may function differently across diverse populations (Lazarus, 1966; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Carver, 1997). Results indicate that coping strategies may differentially support academic success among candidates from varied backgrounds, including those preparing to teach students with disabilities. By linking coping processes to academic performance, this TED session contributes to a more holistic approach to teacher preparation and offers evidence-based guidance for integrating resilience-building supports, reflective practices, and wellness-oriented instruction into teacher education programs.

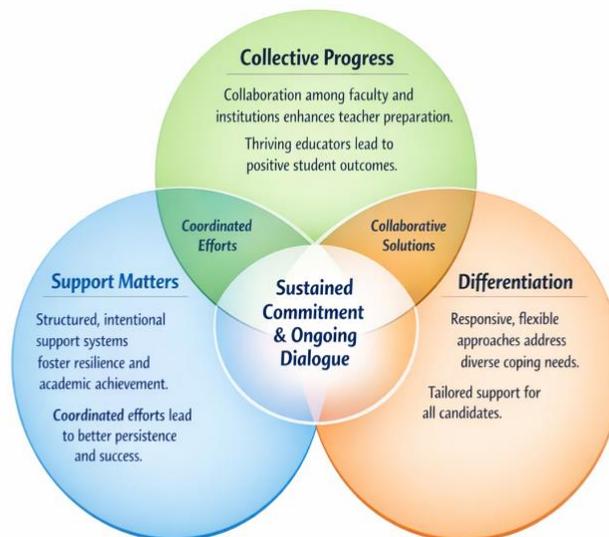
Key Session Takeaways

Discussion during the session revealed strong alignment between the presentation content and participants' experiences in teacher preparation programs. Through facilitated dialogue, participants shared common concerns related to student stress, emotional well-being, and the increasing complexity of balancing academic rigor with flexibility and care. Many participants noted that the coping challenges described in the study, such as reliance on emotional coping through disengagement (Skinner et al., 2003), mirrored those they observe among pre-service teachers in their own programs.

Participants also emphasized a shared need for additional institutional and faculty-level support to address these challenges effectively. Discussion highlighted that while faculty are deeply committed to supporting student success, they often lack coordinated structures, time, or resources to intentionally address coping and resilience within existing coursework and clinical expectations. Attendees reported that the session validated these experiences and provided a common language for discussing student coping and well-being across programs.

Overall, participants indicated that the integration of study findings with open discussion created space for meaningful reflection and peer learning. The opportunity to exchange strategies and challenges with colleagues from different institutions was described as particularly valuable, and participants noted that the session helped them identify areas where small, intentional instructional shifts and broader programmatic support could strengthen both student well-being and academic outcomes (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. *Key Takeaways*



Note. Figure created with assistance from ChatGPT (OpenAI's DALL·E).

Additional Resources

- Brief COPE Survey link to background, implementation, and survey items:
<https://www.psy.miami.edu/faculty/ccarver/brief-cope.html>

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CHALLENGING ABLEISM: RETHINKING ACCESSIBILITY AND DISABILITY INCLUSION IN SOCIETY

Abstract

Ableism—the systemic privileging of able-bodied and neurotypical norms—continues to shape social institutions, policies, and everyday interactions in ways that marginalize individuals with disabilities. This TED presentation examines ableism as a deeply embedded social construct and invites participants to critically rethink accessibility and disability inclusion beyond compliance-based frameworks. Drawing on disability studies, inclusive design, and lived experiences of disabled individuals, the session reframes accessibility as a shared societal responsibility rather than an individual accommodation. Through conceptual models and real-world examples, this presentation highlights how reimagining accessibility through principles of universal design, equity, and dignity can foster more inclusive communities across educational, professional, and public contexts.

Background / Rationale

Despite decades of disability rights legislation, individuals with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers to participation, belonging, and opportunity. Research in disability studies emphasizes that disability is not solely an individual condition, but a social phenomenon shaped by environmental, attitudinal, and structural factors (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2014). Ableism manifests in physical inaccessibility, deficit-oriented language, exclusionary policies, and assumptions about competence and productivity, reinforcing inequities across education, employment, healthcare, and civic life.

While accessibility is often framed as a legal or technical requirement, this narrow approach limits meaningful inclusion. Compliance-driven models frequently overlook the lived experiences of disabled individuals and fail to address attitudinal barriers that perpetuate exclusion. Emerging scholarship on universal design and inclusive practices argues for a paradigm shift—one that centers dignity, agency, and participation as core elements of accessibility (Hamraie, 2017).

This TED session responds to the need for broader public and professional discourse on ableism by offering a critical, reflective framework for understanding disability inclusion as a societal responsibility. By challenging deficit-based narratives and highlighting inclusive design principles, the presentation aims to expand how accessibility is conceptualized, implemented, and sustained.

Key Session Takeaways

This session advances three central ideas for challenging ableism and advancing disability inclusion:

1. **Reframing Disability Through a Social Lens**
Disability is shaped by social, cultural, and environmental barriers rather than individual deficits. Recognizing ableism as a systemic issue shifts responsibility from individuals to institutions and communities.
2. **Accessibility as Proactive and Universal**
Accessibility should be designed into environments, systems, and practices from the outset. Universal Design principles support equitable access while benefiting all members of society—not only those with identified disabilities.
3. **Centering Lived Experience and Dignity**
Meaningful inclusion requires listening to and valuing the voices of disabled individuals. Policies and practices grounded in lived experience promote autonomy, respect, and authentic participation.

Figure 1 conceptualizes accessibility as an interconnected system in which attitudes, design, and policy interact to either reinforce or dismantle ableism.

Figure 1. Framework for Rethinking Accessibility and Disability Inclusion.



Figure 2. Embedding Universal Design Framework



Additional Resources

- Center for Disability Studies: <https://disabilitystudies.org>
- National Center on Universal Design for Learning: <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>
- Disability Visibility Project: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com>
- World Health Organization – Disability and Health: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability>
- Accessible Design in Practice (A11Y Project): <https://www.a11yproject.com>

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CULTIVATING COMPASSIONATE CLASSROOMS: CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Abstract

Teacher education programs are increasingly challenged to prepare preservice teachers not only with pedagogical competence, but also with the emotional resilience, reflective capacity, and relational skills necessary to thrive in inclusive and diverse classroom contexts. This TED presentation examines contemplative pedagogy as a framework for cultivating compassionate, reflective, and inclusive classroom practices in teacher preparation programs. Drawing on research in mindfulness, self-efficacy, and inclusive pedagogy, the session highlights how contemplative practices—such as reflective journaling, mindfulness exercises, and intentional community-building—can be systematically embedded within teacher education coursework. Practical instructional strategies and course-embedded activities are shared to support faculty in fostering teacher well-being, professional identity development, and inclusive instructional practice among preservice educators.

Background / Rationale

Teacher attrition and burnout remain persistent concerns in the field of education, particularly among educators working in inclusive and special education settings. Research consistently indicates that stress, emotional exhaustion, and lack of preparation for the social-emotional demands of teaching contribute significantly to early career attrition (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Roeser et al., 2013). Teacher education programs, therefore, bear responsibility not only for developing instructional competence, but also for supporting preservice teachers' social-emotional development and professional sustainability.

Contemplative pedagogy offers a promising approach to addressing these challenges. Rooted in mindfulness, reflective practice, and compassionate awareness, contemplative pedagogy emphasizes intentional attention, self-regulation, and meaning-making within teaching and learning contexts. When embedded within teacher education, contemplative practices have been shown to enhance teacher self-efficacy, reflective capacity, emotional regulation, and culturally responsive practice (Roeser & Pinela, 2014).

Despite growing interest in mindfulness and well-being initiatives, contemplative pedagogy is often implemented inconsistently or as an add-on rather than as a coherent instructional framework. This TED session responds to this gap by presenting a structured, course-embedded approach to contemplative pedagogy that aligns with inclusive education principles and teacher preparation standards.

Key Session Takeaways

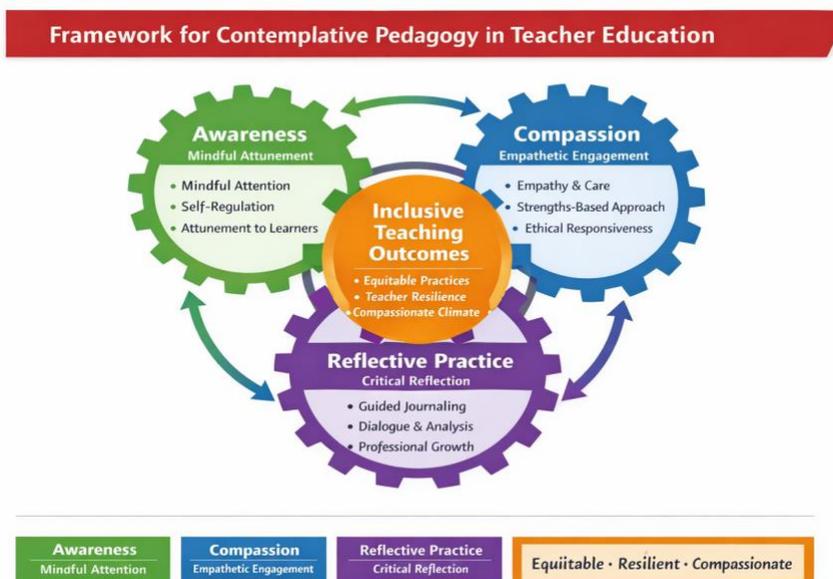
This session emphasized three core dimensions of contemplative pedagogy in teacher education:

1. **Cultivating Awareness and Reflection**
Preservice teachers benefit from structured opportunities to reflect on their beliefs, biases, and emotional responses to teaching and learning. Reflective journaling, guided mindfulness practices, and dialogic reflection activities support deeper self-awareness and professional identity formation.
2. **Fostering Compassionate and Inclusive Practice**
Contemplative pedagogy promotes empathy, perspective-taking, and relational trust—critical competencies for inclusive and special education contexts. Intentional classroom practices model inclusive excellence and reinforce Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.
3. **Strengthening Teacher Self-Efficacy and Well-Being**
Mindfulness-based practices embedded within coursework support stress regulation, resilience, and confidence, enabling preservice teachers to engage more effectively with challenging instructional and behavioral demands.

Figure 1 illustrates contemplative pedagogy as an interconnected framework in which awareness, compassion, and reflective practice function synergistically to support inclusive teaching.

Figure 1

Framework for Contemplative Pedagogy in Teacher Education



Additional Resources

- Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*.
- Roeser, R. W., Skinner, E., Beers, J., & Jennings, P. A. (2012). Mindfulness training and teachers' professional development. *Mindfulness*.
- Roeser, R. W., & Pinela, C. (2014). Mindfulness and compassion training in adolescence. *New Directions for Youth Development*.
- Center for Contemplative Mind in Society: <https://www.contemplativemind.org>
- Greater Good Science Center – Mindfulness in Education: <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu>

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AN UPDATED SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW: USING COACHING TO IMPROVE FIDELITY OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

Abstract

This intention of this systematic review of the research (2010-2024) was to update the literature from Kretlow and Bartholomew's (2010) review on educational coaching. Frequently cited in the literature, it informed research and practice in teacher education and professional development. Our findings indicate that coaching continues to enhance implementation fidelity of evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices.

Background/Rationale

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) in education have been directly connected to improvement in student achievement. Implementation fidelity, the degree to which something is delivered as intended, is the key to ensuring effectiveness of EBPs, and coaching is vital to this process. Coaching helps to bridge the gap between EBPs in theory and their application in the classroom for in-service and preservice teachers by supporting implementation fidelity.

Despite the wide range of practices observed in K-12 classrooms, not all common practices have evidence of efficacy established through rigorous, high-quality research to meet the criteria of being evidence-based. EBPs are gold standard practices, yet the standards that establish EBPs vary across disciplines and between research methodologies (Randolph & Brady, 2018). This includes identifying EBPs for the professional development (PD) and preparation of teachers. For a practice to be deemed evidence-based, it must meet rigorous research and publication standards in high-quality peer-reviewed journals (Cook & Cook, 2011). A practice can be determined as an EBP through two or more group design studies (by at least two separate researchers or groups), five or more single-case design studies (by at least three separate researchers or groups, with more than 20 participants total), or a combination of at least three single-case studies and one group design study (by at least two separate researchers or groups; Steinbrenner et al., 2020).

This systematic literature review revisits and expands upon the widely cited Kretlow and Bartholomew (2010) literature review, offering a timely and necessary update on the evolving role of educational coaching from 2010—2024. In a field where implementation fidelity is critical to the success of instructional and behavioral EBPs, coaching continues to emerge as a

unifying and empowering force. By examining both traditional and technology-enabled coaching models, this session highlights innovations that foster inclusive, high-quality teaching for all students—especially those with disabilities and from historically marginalized communities. The purpose of this review of the literature was to (a) identify and describe coaching studies focused on pre-service and in-service teachers’ fidelity implementation of evidence-based behavioral practices and to (b) identify the advances in technology as they relate to educational coaching. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021) systematic review guidelines were utilized to provide guidance on the methodology and structure of reporting the results.

Key Session Takeaways

EBPs can stand alone or be paired with other EBPs to support student learning. Several EBPs identified in the review of literature are often paired with PD to provide a wraparound approach to intervention, where a packaged intervention tends to have an impact on teacher and student behavior (e.g., Randolph et al., 2024). When multiple EBPs in an intervention show an impact on the desired (i.e., target) behavior, it is impossible to parse out the most effective component of the intervention. Most of the coaching studies included in the review of the literature could be considered a packaged intervention, which typically included a PD focused on targeted teacher behaviors (e.g., BSP, OTR) that was provided as the first part of the intervention. The second part of the coaching package consisted of some type of live feedback, immediate feedback, or feedback provided within a certain time frame focused on the targeted teacher behavior, with coaching focused on implementation fidelity of the targeted teacher behavior.

The team identified two themes of teacher behaviors and multiple categories within each of those themes, instructional and behavioral practices. Regardless of the teacher behavior selected for implementation support, studies in the review have several common characteristics. Most of the studies included PD or training in the intervention prior to coaching and involved elements of feedback, modeling, reflection, or guided practice. Additionally, student measures identified in studies varied between academic and behavioral measures. Student measures can be correlated to changes in teacher behavior, can be connected to teacher buy-in for coaching, and drive instruction and behavioral teaching decisions. Only one study used coaching to support data-based instruction (McMaster et al., 2020) with coaching, which indicates a need in the field. Finally, teacher feedback is important in the coaching process. While most studies provided a measure of social validity, teacher feedback and impressions of coaching need to be in all studies. Like student measures, social validity measures drive teacher buy-in for coaching.

Future coaching research should incorporate coaching to implement skills, strategies, and practices learned in PD to ensure participants, regardless of their status (preservice or in-service) are successful. Like the previous review (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010), this review supports the notion that PD alone will not ensure that changes in instructional or behavioral practices are sustained without implementation support. Given the advancement in technology in the past 15 years, coaching can be unobtrusive, easily implemented in multiple settings, promotes accessibility for schools who may not have access to a coach on-site, and removes geographic limitations.

Additional Resources

Additional information on studies identified for inclusion in the review of the literature can be found at: <https://tinyurl.com/BxLitReview>. The literature review has evolved over time and is more focused on evidence-based behavioral interventions, which are noted in the references. Note: Resources marked with a star (*) were included in final review.

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IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER CANDIDATES' TECHNOLOGICAL PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: FROM LEARNING TO APPLICATION – LESSONS FROM TWO SUMMERS IN LUXEMBOURG

Abstract

Teacher education programs aim to support teacher candidates (TCs) in moving from learning instructional practices to independently and accurately applying them in classroom settings; however, this progression is not consistently achieved. This study examined the impact of a four-week international special education field placement with two cohorts of TCs across two consecutive summers. Participants were enrolled in two aligned special education methods courses, received in-class instructional support, and documented their movement from learning to application through reflective journal entries (10 submissions) and repeated survey administrations (3 time points). Results indicated that TCs perceived improvements in their movement from learning to application across the four-week experience. However, consistent and independent application of technology within lesson implementation—one of the stated course goals—was not observed.

Background/Rationale

Teacher education programs are designed to support teacher candidates (TCs) in progressing from learning successful teaching practices to independent application within authentic classroom contexts (Brownell et al., 2019; Leko et al., 2012). As teacher educators, we support TCs—and increase the likelihood that this progression will occur within our programs and across classes—by being intentional about our program design and offering scaffolded levels of support across classes. Our goal is to move TCs across learning experiences that begin with the development of their background knowledge to the successful and independent application of these practices within inclusive teaching contexts. Despite this goal, moving TCs from learning to independent application remains a persistent challenge across teacher education (Day et al., 2024). At the same time, the structure of teacher preparation programs is evolving, and increasing numbers of alternative and accelerated pathways aimed at preparing special educators more quickly and efficiently are emerging, including nontraditional and streamlined routes with varied field experience requirements (Day et al., 2024).

As alternative and accelerated pathways continue to expand in special education teacher preparation, it becomes increasingly important to examine how key instructional supports are maintained within more intensive formats (Rodriguez et al., 2024). Prior research indicates that three strategies remain central to supporting teacher candidates' application of instructional

practices: developing background knowledge, engaging in classroom-based application, and participating in ongoing reflection (Brownell et al., 2019; Leko et al., 2012). Background knowledge must be developed and revisited as TCs encounter new learners and instructional contexts, allowing them to refine their understanding of instructional practices over time (Brownell et al., 2019). Classroom-based experiences that occur alongside coursework allow TCs to apply instructional practices, observe student responses, and adjust instruction rather than relying on abstract understanding alone (Leko et al., 2012). Ongoing reflection further supports this work by prompting TCs to examine instructional decisions and consider the extent to which they are applying what they are learning across experiences (Brownell et al.; Leko et al., 2012). While these strategies are well established, they have largely been examined within traditional semester-based preparation models (Day et al., 2024).

The four-week international special education program described in this study was intentionally structured to examine how background knowledge development, classroom-based application, and ongoing reflection support TCs' progression from learning to application within an intensive format. Two aligned special education methods courses were delivered concurrently, with TCs completing approximately 60 hours of classroom-based teaching and all related coursework embedded within the experience. This structure provided repeated opportunities for TCs to revisit course content, apply instructional practices in authentic classroom settings, and reflect on their use of those practices across time. To support ongoing reflection and maintain attention to application, TCs completed multiple administrations of a Global Competence survey and engaged in structured journal writing throughout the four weeks. Findings indicated that TCs progressed from observing instructional practices to applying them in classroom settings; however, this progression was not observed across all instructional areas. Notably, technology integration—one of the stated foci of the methods courses—was not evident in TCs' instructional practice. Prior research suggests that effective technology integration requires explicit opportunities for planning, enactment, and reflection, as well as support for integrating technological knowledge with pedagogical decision-making (Akyuz, 2023; Fabian et al., 2024). These findings point to the need for future studies to more intentionally examine how technology-focused instructional supports can be integrated within intensive preparation experiences.

Key Session Takeaways

1. Explain how an intensive four-week international special education field experience supported teacher candidates' progression from learning instructional practices to applying them in classroom settings.
2. Discuss study findings, including instructional areas where teacher candidates demonstrated application and areas—such as technology integration—where application was limited or not observed.
3. Apply insights from this work to generate ideas for strengthening traditional and alternative teacher education programs' ability to support candidates' application of instructional practices, including technology-supported instruction, in complex teaching contexts.

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ERASED: TRACKING THE RAPID DISAPPEARANCE OF DISABILITY FROM EDUCATION DISCOURSE AND PUBLIC POLICY

Abstract

Examine the current systemic erasure of disability-specific language from education discourse and related policy. As state and federal agencies rapidly dismantle systems, disability-related terms are vanishing or reverting to outdated language. Through rhetorical analysis, participants will assess the impact of these regressive shifts and explore strategies to resist their exclusion.

Background/Rationale

Disability is foundational to U.S. civil rights law and to the legislative origins of accessibility and nondiscrimination frameworks later grouped under Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA); however, recent federal administrative actions and oversight shifts have contributed to conditions that place disability rights and special education infrastructure at increased risk. Executive actions, agency realignments, and efficiency-driven restructuring have coincided with weakened disability-specific enforcement and access to federally guaranteed supports (Exec. Order 14151, 2025; American Association of People with Disabilities et al. v. Social Security Administration, 2025).

These developments align with broader policy trends that prioritize consolidation and neutrality over civil-rights accountability (Burchardt et al., 2015). Within this context, the removal or dilution of disability-specific language functions as a key mechanism through which legal obligations are obscured and accountability is weakened. Rhetorical changes weaken enforcement, reduce data visibility, and destabilize systems designed to uphold FAPE and LRE, particularly within teacher preparation programs.

Across K–12 and higher education, institutions have eliminated or rebranded DEI structures, merged ADA and Section 504 oversight into generalized compliance or “student success” units, and removed explicit disability language from policy, training, and institutional communications. Research consistently demonstrates that such rhetorical shifts obscure IDEA and ADA obligations, reduce oversight and data visibility, and destabilize systems designed to uphold FAPE and LRE (Bacon & Pomponio, 2023; Liasidou, 2008; Mueller & Beneke, 2023). These patterns are especially consequential for teacher preparation programs, where disability-justice frameworks and inclusive pedagogies are increasingly minimized despite stated commitments to disability civil rights (CEC, 2025; Ko et al., 2023; Leach & Helf, 2016).

Key Session Takeaways

Recent federal administrative actions and oversight decisions have contributed to conditions in which disability-specific language is increasingly diminished within education policy and discourse. The January 20, 2025, Executive Order, Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing, directs the termination of all federal DEI and DEIA mandates “under whatever name they appear,” explicitly naming accessibility alongside diversity, equity, and inclusion as a preference or ideological framework. By collapsing accessibility into a category framed as discriminatory or optional, the Order repositions disability access as a politicized and expendable function rather than a civil-rights obligation grounded in federal law. This reframing creates downstream pressure across K–12 and higher education systems to retreat from disability-specific commitments, weaken enforcement and oversight capacity, and reduce institutional accountability for access, while maintaining formal neutrality and equal treatment.

Rhetorical analysis is a useful methodological tool for countering this erasure. By examining omissions, euphemisms, and rebranding strategies in executive orders, policy guidance, and institutional communications, educators and policymakers can trace how federal action legitimizes institutional retreat from disability-specific commitments and legal obligations. As guidance and funding signals shift, disability-specific language is replaced with euphemisms such as “student success,” “belonging,” or “neutral compliance,” detaching disability from IDEA and ADA protections while maintaining the appearance of disability inclusion. Language loss precedes structural loss—blurring compliance and obscuring legal accountability.

Universities and K–12 systems have responded through rhetorical rebranding and organizational restructuring, including the elimination or renaming of DEI and accessibility offices, reductions in disability-related staffing, cancellation of inclusion-linked funding, and the absorption of ADA and Section 504 oversight into generalized units, with references to disability, IDEA, and ADA disappearing from public-facing materials even as legal obligations remain unchanged. As disability-justice frameworks and IDEA-specific content are minimized, future educators are less prepared to implement FAPE and LRE due to lost legal and instructional clarity.

As disability language is removed from institutional discourse, systems of data collection, accommodation oversight, accessibility planning, and disproportionality monitoring are weakened or eliminated, contributing to reduced staffing capacity, loss of disability resource centers, and diminished access to wraparound supports. In contrast to the removal of disability-specific language, explicit references to disability, access, inclusion, accommodations, IDEA, and ADA preserve legal clarity, sustain data tracking—including disproportionality checks—and support enforcement. When disability-related language disappears from discourse, it disappears from funding, accountability, and access—underscoring the urgency of reclaiming disability language to sustain adherence to civil rights and education law.

Additional Resources

- [Chronicle of Higher Education DEI Legislation Tracker](#)
- [The Words Are Disappearing](#): New York Times flagged words documentation
- [Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights: Disability Justice Framework](#)
- [Inclusive Educational Practices Guidance](#) (2025)
- [Policy and Practice Implications of Disability Erasure Under Anti-DEI Frameworks](#)
- [Practical Implementation Strategies in Teacher Preparation](#)

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UNITED IN STRENGTH THROUGH STORY AND STRATEGY: USING INSTRUCTIONAL AVATARS TO PREPARE PRESERVICE TEACHERS FOR LICENSURE SUCCESS

Abstract

This session highlights development of instructional avatar videos designed to prepare preservice teachers for constructed response items on the science of reading (SOR) licensure exam. The project demonstrates how AI technology employed at multiple intervals for scripting, design, and delivery in combination with the "TAGS LMR" writing framework advances licensure readiness.

Background/Rationale

Recent scholarship indicates AI-supported personalized learning improves preservice special education teachers' preparation through adaptive practice, feedback, and increased engagement when programs ensure customization, accessibility, and alignment with professional standards (Holman et al., 2024). Ongoing misalignment among licensure assessments, coursework, and clinical experiences continues to constrain preparation, necessitating targeted instructional and assessment supports grounded in evidence-based instruction (Solari et al., 2022; Stotsky, 2009). Preservice teachers' effective use of reading pedagogy depends on access to applied practice, motivation, and instructional knowledge, conditions supported through coordinated field experiences and structured learning designs (Leko & Brownell, 2011; Wallace & Georgina, 2014). Emerging technologies, reinforced through strategic partnerships and professional development, strengthen digital readiness, while theory-driven multimedia instruction yields superior outcomes for preparing candidates to instruct students with disabilities (Howorth et al., 2024; Zepp et al., 2024).

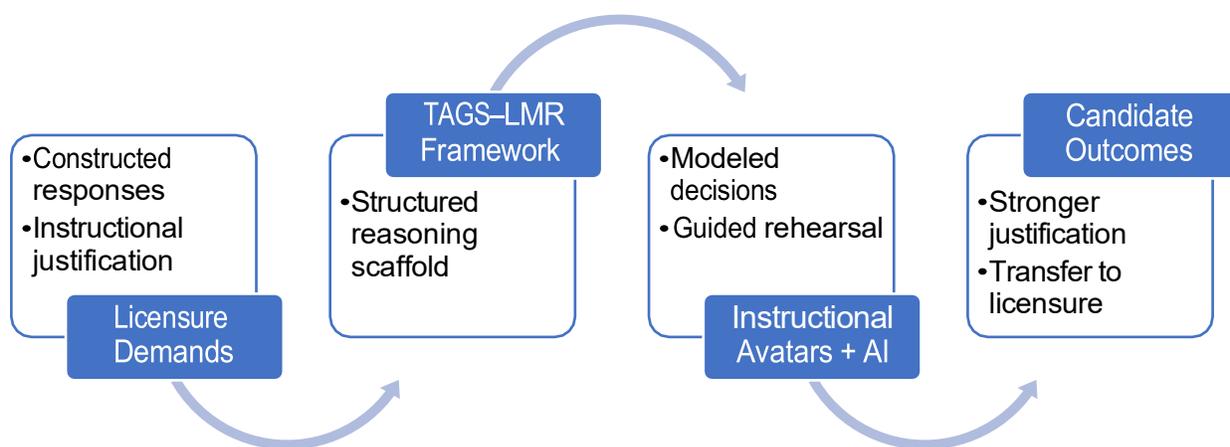
Research supports avatar-based instruction as an effective approach in teacher preparation. Avatars increase preservice teachers' self-efficacy in classroom management, instructional practice, and student engagement while strengthening rule-based, didactic, and relational competencies through virtual simulations that provide authentic practice without risk to real students (Bosch & Ellis, 2021; Lindberg & Jönsson, 2023; Muir et al., 2013). Perspective-taking through avatar use further deepens instructional reasoning (Wasmuth, 2016). Although technical constraints persist, existing evidence indicates avatar-based training improves learning outcomes and warrants further experimental investigation (Bosch & Ellis, 2021).

Key Session Takeaways

Instructional avatars function as a scalable, course-embedded mechanism for strengthening preservice teacher science of reading (SOR) licensure preparation, particularly for constructed-response assessments requiring structured literacy reasoning. Licensure performance hinges on candidates' ability to justify instructional decisions using discipline-specific academic language rather than content recall, underscoring the need for explicit writing frameworks within teacher preparation programs.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model for Avatar-Based Licensure Preparation in Special Education Teacher Preparation



Note. The pipeline in which AI-enabled tools deployed across an iterative process.

The avatar-based instructional model supports preservice teacher preparation by modeling expert instructional reasoning, strengthening candidate confidence, and promoting consistent learning experiences across courses and delivery formats. As seen in Figure 1 the session provided an example of structured planning tools to enable systematic and scalable implementation across teacher preparation contexts. The use of AI supported tools enhance efficiency in script development, scenario design, and feedback processes while preserving faculty control and alignment with SOR principles. The TAGS-LMR framework provides a systematic acronym structure for aligning SOR coursework with licensure assessment criteria by guiding candidates through task analysis, instructional action, learner identification, contextual reasoning, and evidence-based justification. Additionally, integration of avatar-based reasoning tasks within existing coursework provides a sustainable, program-coherent alternative to stand-alone licensure test preparation. Avatar-supported instruction advances equity by reducing cognitive load, ensuring consistent access to high-quality instructional modeling, and supporting diverse candidate populations.

Additional Resources

- [Avatar-Based Structured Planning Template](#)
- [Instructional Avatar Video Analysis](#)
- [Synthesia: SOR TAGS LMR Video](#)

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MARCHING FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE JOSEP SPECIAL ISSUE ON POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Abstract

This panel, moderated by Kait Brennan, brought together authors from the Journal of Special Education Preparation's (JOSEP) special issue on policy to critically reflect on their published work in light of emerging challenges in the field of special education. Drawing from their contributions to the special issue, panelists revisited key policy themes and examined how shifting political, economic, and legislative contexts are reshaping implications for practice, preparation, and advocacy.

Background/Rationale

In the field of teacher preparation, understanding and engaging in policy and advocacy is no longer optional—it is essential. This session responded directly to that need by highlighting work published in a special issue of *The Journal of Special Education Preparation* (JOSEP) focused on policy and advocacy and developed by members of the Teacher Education Division (TED) Policy Committee. The issue addresses policy engagement across the educator pipeline, from foundational learning experiences for teacher candidates to more advanced applications for doctoral students and teacher educators. The moderated panel brought the authors together to emphasize practical, replicable approaches for integrating policy and advocacy into teacher education coursework, supervision, research, and service.

The session was particularly timely given ongoing debates related to inclusive practices, equitable funding, and student rights. Panelists intentionally connected policy knowledge to real-world advocacy efforts, highlighting how educators can use policy to address systemic barriers

related to race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and disability. Aligned with the session outcomes, the interactive structure supported participants in reflecting on their current engagement with policy and identifying concrete next steps for advocacy within their professional roles. Ultimately, the session aimed to support educators at multiple career stages in moving from policy awareness to advocacy in action, reinforcing broader goals of inclusive teacher education and advancing equity for students with disabilities and other historically underserved populations.

Key Session Takeaways

Policy And Advocacy Must Be Grounded in Lived Experiences

The panelists and moderator emphasized how essential it is to bring policy to life through experiences. Sharing the stories of students in schools who are being taught, the stories of candidates we are teaching in higher education, and personal narrative. Policy makers don't always know the ins and outs of what we do every day. Find the "in-road" and connect it to children.

Meaningful Advocacy Is Possible Now Through Accessible and Sustained Actions

Advocating for students with disabilities and our programs doesn't have to include a trip to Washington DC. A phone call, a letter, a tweet, an Instagram post - all of these are small ways that build to big action. The Council for Exceptional Children and the Teacher Education Division provide ways to engage with our members of Congress through the Legislative Action Center.

Preparation Programs Play a Critical Role in Developing Educators as Policy Advocates

Purposely embedding policy and advocacy into our pre-service teacher programs will prepare them for their role when they leave the confines of the university. It's essential to prepare teacher candidates for these roles and help them to understand that advocacy isn't just DC but it's what is happening every day in the classroom. Advocating for student needs, ensuring that teachers have the tools to be effective in the classroom, and advocating for parents are all a part of what a teacher does every day. By ensuring that teacher candidates understand that there are multiple levels of policy and each effect another will provide better services for students with disabilities.

Remember Where We Started

It's important to remember where special education began and what the education world was like pre-IDEA. As IDEA is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, now is the time to help our communities understand how essential the work is.

Additional Resources

TED Advocacy Portal - <https://tedcec.org/policy-and-advocacy-portal>
 Instagram - [cec_ted_policy](#)
 Bluesky - [cec-ted-policy.bsky.social](#)
 Linktree - linktr.ee/cec_ted_policy
 JOSEP Special Issue - <https://openjournals.bsu.edu/JOSEP/issue/view/381>
 CEC Legislative Action Center - <https://exceptionalchildren.org/policy-and-advocacy>

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MOVING THE NEEDLE FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES: THE TEACHER CANDIDATE SUPPORT NETWORK UNITING TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR MENTORSHIP

Abstract

The Teacher Candidate Support Network (TCSN) offers resources, mentorship, and community for pre-service educators. This session highlights the network's development, provides examples of syllabi embedding TCSN into coursework, and shares strategies to leverage its tools in support of teacher candidates, advancing our shared goal of unity and progress in educator preparation.

Background/Rationale

The Teacher Candidate Support Network (TCSN), developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), was created to support pre-service teachers entering the field of special education. The network provides access to mentorship, professional resources, and a national community of peers and experts, with a specific focus on helping teacher candidates navigate the complexities of special education while building skills to advocate for students with disabilities. The TCSN emerged from the CEC Board of Directors' recognition of a need for additional support for teacher candidates in their final year of preparation. The Board identified continuous coaching as a key area of need (Capizzi et al., 2010; Day et al., 2024; O'Brien et al., 2024) and approved a workgroup, chaired by Dr. Owiny, to design targeted coaching and resources for teacher candidates transitioning into the profession.

Formed in Fall 2023, the workgroup brought together faculty from across the country to develop resources and create a CEC Community for connection and support. The pilot program initially ran for one semester and later expanded to a full year, adding CEC membership, weekly resources and emails, and liability insurance. While live webinars were discontinued due to low participation, ongoing engagement through weekly community prompts continues, with future goals focused on strengthening partnerships, increasing awareness of CEC resources, and sustaining teacher candidate involvement.

Key Takeaways

Require TC's to Become Members of CEC and Participate in the Network.

As part of the field placement course, TC's are required to become members of CEC. This allows the TC's to see the benefits of CEC firsthand. Additionally, TC's are then provided with their liability insurance needed for candidacy. The faculty could potentially utilize the weekly resources as course material allowing TC's open access resources and reducing cost.

Requiring Students to Attend Webinars Hosted by CEC and Then Reflecting on Material.

As a course requirement, TC's are tasked with attending a minimum of one CEC webinar a semester. The TC select a topic of interest and write key notes and takeaways from the webinar. The TC are required to implement the new strategies in their field placement. Lastly, the TC is required to summarize and reflect on the effectiveness of the strategy or skill they implemented.

Discussion Boards Where Students Are Given Scenarios and Challenged with Finding Resources on the CEC Website to See the Benefit of the Organization

As part of a teaching methods course, TC's are given a mock case study of a "student" who is struggling in the class. After being given data on the "student", the TC's are then tasked with going into the CEC website and finding 2 resources that would benefit them in instructing the student. These resources could be articles from Teaching Exceptional Children, Webinars, CEC Community resources, information from the Exceptional Teacher Resource Repository, or any other information they can find on the website. The TC's then share their resources in a discussion post in the course and respond to classmates. Through this, TC's are able to see the multiple benefits of CEC and the use when they become teachers.

Additional Resources

Teacher Candidate Support Network - <https://exceptionalchildren.org/membership/student-membership/pre-service-student-membership/teacher-candidate-support>

Presentation Materials - https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1P_MVx0iHeuaH3Oa-TFJA5vmmGLPWG4Em?usp=sharing

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UNITED IN STRENGTH! RESEARCHING THE IMPACT OF TEACHING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS TO MANAGE A SPECIAL EDUCATION CASELOAD

Abstract

A comprehensive case management project with real-life application was conducted with pre-service special education teachers to increase their awareness and confidence levels of the various skills required to be a case manager, including paperwork, progress monitoring, Individualized Education Program (IEP) team member collaboration, IEP meetings, addressing electronic or face-to-face concerns, prioritizing and responding to unexpected events during the school day, and handling in-the-moment challenges. The results of a pretest-posttest study design including 27 pre-service special education teachers completing an 18-item survey with quantitative and qualitative data were discussed to review the implications the case management project had on the participants' perceived levels of preparedness.

Background/Rationale

Teacher attrition is plaguing the country with casualties in special education more than other groups (US Department of Education, 2022). Younger, less experienced teachers exhibit higher rates of burnout and turnover (Brunsting, et al., 2014). Increased workloads of special education teachers, including roles as case managers, are positively associated with burnout levels (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Caballero, 2024). This requires a focus on how teacher preparation programs review the responsibilities of case management. Mehrenberg (2013) interviewed 18 SETs from around the United States to discover most participants felt their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them for the multi-tasking requirements of being a caseload manager. Previous scholars have explored and provided recommendations for how specific, isolated components, of case management can be improved in coursework including practicing parent communication skills (Mulholland & Blecker, 2008; Strassfeld, 2018), discussion of time management strategies (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017), and simulated Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings (Mason, 2023; Toledo, 2023; Werts et al., 2002). However, no studies have required pre-service SETs to engage in all the tasks required to come to an IEP meeting prepared or how to handle unexpected situations that arise during the school day as a SET. This session reviewed the pretest and posttest results of how prepared pre-service teachers felt to complete each aspect of caseload management after completing a variety of real-life teaching assignments within face-to-face undergraduate courses.

Key Takeaways

All 27 pre-service special education teachers found the various case manager activities they completed throughout the semester to have a significant impact on their level of preparedness to become a soon-to-be case manager. Dependent t-tests (Table 1) were conducted on the 16-item Likert-scale questions to identify specific activities that had a greater impact on levels of preparedness. These activities included creating a calendar to manage paperwork due dates, practicing how to respond and prioritize unexpected events or challenges during their school day, maintaining a parent communication log, and practicing how to collect data to be most effective. Teaching activities that were effective but had greater room and continued practice included initiating contact with parents regarding student concerns, planning for how and when to collect data, and initiating contact with fellow IEP team members to discuss student concerns.

Table 1. *Dependent Samples t-test Results*

Survey Item	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Organizing time to complete paperwork requirements	9.99	< .00001
Responding to parents' concerns or questions during meetings	9.09	< .00001
Organizing compliance due dates (e.g., RRs and IEPs)	8.58	< .00001
Prioritizing daily tasks as a case manager	7.93	< .00001
Ensuring accommodations are correctly implemented	7.24	< .00001
Responding to parents' concerns (e.g., email, phone)	7.21	< .00001
Documenting parent communication	6.44	< .00001
Requesting data from teachers or related service providers	6.38	< .00001
Analyzing and reporting student data for progress monitoring	5.85	< .00001
Handling unexpected situations	5.85	< .00001
Contacting parents with concerns	5.00	.00003
Planning when and how to collect data for parent updates	4.93	.00004
Contacting teachers to discuss student concerns	3.76	.00086

**p*<.01

The results of this study highlight the importance of teacher educators to revise and revamp their teaching pedagogies to include real-life activities connected to caseload management to help close the research to practice gap. Pre-service special education teachers having hands-on practice with case manager responsibilities can reduce the burnout many novice special education teachers are facing due to caseload management.

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SUPPORTING NEW SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER TRANSITION INTO THE CLASSROOM

Abstract

EC-12 special education teachers are two times more likely than general education teachers to leave the profession within the first 5 years of entering the classroom. Mentor programs for new teachers have been around for 50 years, with approximately 90% of teachers participating in a mentor program during their first year, yet beginning teachers leave the profession at a higher rate than all teachers, with a reported 40% to 50% leaving within the first five years of entering the profession. Developing a university-based teacher mentor/coaching program to bridge the transition from university to the classroom may help reduce attrition by providing additional support to the beginning teacher.

Background/Rationale

The number of special education teachers in Texas has not kept pace with the growing demand for services. Over the past five years, the number of students receiving support under IDEA has increased by 45.7%, while the number of special education teachers has only risen by 25.5% (Texas Education Agency, Special Education Reports, Public Education Information Management System, 2025). This widening gap in staffing relative to student needs is likely to affect the quality of academic and behavior support and hinder progress for students receiving special education services.

EC-12 special education teachers are two times more likely than general education teachers to leave the profession (Sullivan et al., 2017) due to stresses related to classroom management, school culture, and lack of intentional support (Mosley, Wetzel, Taylor, & Vlach, 2017). A review of reported reasons for special education teacher attrition between 2002 and 2023 indicates little change over time, with educators citing low pay, poor school climate, and unmanageable workloads as primary factors. Studies also indicate that special education teachers reported feeling marginalized in their roles, experiencing a lack of belonging, and facing significant emotional demands from both students and parents. A report published by The University of Texas at Austin highlighted significant trends in Texas teacher turnover. In 2000, 31% of general education teachers and 35% of special education teachers left the classroom within their first three years of teaching. By 2019, these figures had improved slightly for general education teachers, with 22% leaving within their first three years, while the rate for special education teachers increased to 39% (DeMatthews, Reyes, Shin, & Hart, 2025).

Key Session Takeaways

A university-based mentor program bridging the transition from university to the classroom may help reduce attrition by providing additional support to the beginning EC-12 special education teacher. Two recently published studies examined the effectiveness of a university-based mentor program (Maloch et al., 2022). While both studies utilized different frameworks for their university-based mentor program, both focused on developing socio-emotional awareness, building and maintaining relationships, and building a strong classroom community. With the university-based mentor taking a more supportive role, conversations were deeper due to an established trusting relationship. This helped the beginning teachers to navigate the challenges of finding effective resources, managing stress, and problem-solving situations with the administration, their grade level team, and families. Additionally, the university-based mentor program helped to develop a long-term relationship with the partner school districts.

To address the shortage of EC-12 special education teachers in Texas, which has been further exacerbated by high teacher turnover, the University of North Texas at Dallas' (UNT) *Bridges Program*, funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Personnel Development Program, has developed a comprehensive mentoring model for all participating EC-12 special education teacher alumni. This model involves both mentorship from a designated mentor within the partnering Local Education Agency (LEA) and university-based support through the UNT School of Education. The *Bridges Program's* dedicated university-based mentor collaborates with the LEA school-based mentor for UNT graduating EC-12 special education teacher alumni to provide instructional driven, job-imbedded, social, emotional, and academic support throughout their first three years to ensure a successful transition from the university to the classroom. This includes the LEA and UNT SOE coordination to monitor and evaluate activities. These activities include:

- Helping the alumni teachers navigate the challenges of finding appropriate and effective resources, managing stress, and problem-solving situations with the administration, their grade level team, students, and families
- Communicating weekly through in-person classroom visits, virtual meetings, and/or emails to answer questions, collaborate, and engage in good-faith problem-solving with the participating school district to help special education teacher alumni develop the skills and dispositions needed to become effective classroom teachers.
- Monthly sessions are held with topics based on the needs of the alumna teacher. The informal sessions include typical topics of discussion (i.e., analyzing student work/progress, behavior management, communication with administration and/or co-workers, required paperwork, etc.).
- Collaborate with the school-based mentor to ensure EC-12 special education alumni teachers receive effective and appropriate support within the classroom.

Currently, the Bridges Program is supporting seven UNT alumni; one in their second year, and six in their first year in the classroom.

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UNITING EFFORTS TO USE PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Abstract

Membership in the Council for Exceptional Children was used during multiple semesters with undergraduate students taking an Introduction to Special Education course at a private university in the Midwest. The first goal of using membership was to stop using an expensive textbook. The second goal was to use membership to expose students to the resources, networking opportunities, journals, webinars, and online communities available to CEC members. The process of and candidate feedback will be shared, indicating a positive response.

Background/Rationale

Interest in the teaching profession among high school students and college freshmen has fallen 38% since 2020, reaching the lowest level in the last 50 years (Hilton, 2020; Kraft & Lyon, 2024). In the last five years alone, there has been over a 35% decline in enrollment among teacher preparation programs, foreshadowing an even larger shortage to come (AFT, 2022; Kraft & Lyon, 2024). The pipeline of new teachers continues to be limited, while the current climate in P-12 education is simultaneously challenging (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). In addition to a decrease in teacher candidates, a recent American Federation of Teachers study found that almost 40% of member teachers would leave the profession in the next two years (AFT, 2022).

While the state of the teaching profession is a significant concern, the cost of teacher preparation for a young adult is as well. In addition to college tuition, textbooks are typically very expensive. Less costly alternatives include open-access materials or less costly e-books (Jhangiani, et al., 2018; Walton, 2019). To study the impact of using professional membership with undergraduate students as a cost-saving measure and exposure to the benefits of membership was the purpose of this ongoing study.

Membership in a professional organization has numerous benefits, but these benefits are often unknown at the undergraduate and even the graduate level (Walton, 2019). Requiring students to join CEC during the preparation phase gives them exposure and experience that they can carry into their early careers. Additionally, with rising expenses and money conscious budgets, the cost of CEC membership is less than the price of most textbooks. Student membership for \$40/year is a low-cost option that allows candidates from all backgrounds and abilities an accessible “text” in a new format while exposing them to CEC at the same time.

Key Session Takeaways

Feedback from pre- and post-surveys from three semesters of using CEC membership indicate a positive impact. Further use of CEC membership will continue at this university.

Candidate Feedback

What did you learn from your CEC membership?

- How many different types of interventions and programs there are for people with disabilities.
- I learned there are many different divisions that specialize in their own categories of disabilities.
- My CEC membership helped me learn a lot more about the specific ways that different disabilities or impairments can affect students and how to best accommodate these things as a teacher.
- The CEC membership taught me lots of categories that fall under IDEA. It helped me learn what division each disability fell under. It also included articles and examples for each disability to further my knowledge.

Would you recommend that this course follow a textbook instead of CEC membership? Why or why not?

- No, I feel that the CEC membership helps give us a real look to people in real life, not a book they made years ago.
- I don't think so because sometimes textbooks can be outdated or not cover all of the right things, but using the CEC membership makes it so that everything is recent and applicable to the actual classroom.
- I really liked following CEC because it felt more focused on in class learning than reading a textbook and hearing a lecture. It also allowed for a cool opportunity to be a part of a cool organization.
- No, I feel that having a text book for this class is unnecessary.
- No, I liked not following a textbook, it was less stressful, and truthfully most people don't read them anyway.



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INDIVIDUALIZED HIGH QUALITY TRANSITION PLANS IN TEACHER PREPARATION

Abstract

It is of critical importance that teacher educators include targeted instruction in quality transition planning in special education teacher education programs. To explore strengths and needs in these areas, this project focused on special educators' perspectives on Individualized Transition Plans (ITPs). A survey aligned with IDEA transition components and Indicator 13 was distributed to special education teachers and transition coordinators serving students ages 14–21, the results of which indicate strong compliance with required transition components and consistent use of assessment data to inform planning. Educators emphasized student-centered intentions; however, findings revealed limited student participation in assessment and planning, minimal family engagement, and wide variability in assessment practices, often relying on teacher-made tools. These results highlight a gap between procedural compliance and meaningful individualization. Implications underscore the critical role of teacher educators in modeling high-quality transition planning, strengthening student and family engagement, and embedding applied, reflective transition practices into pre-service teacher preparation programs to improve postsecondary outcomes.

Background/Rationale

Transition planning is a critical component of special education, designed to prepare students with disabilities (SwD) for successful post-school life. The transition from high school to post-school life can be especially challenging for SwD, and their post-secondary outcomes are often less favorable, as SwD are more likely to experience lower rates of employment, reduced income, and lower levels of independent living skills than students without disabilities. Teacher educators who work with current and pre-service special education teachers need to have specific knowledge and skill sets related to the post-secondary transition of SwD. Teacher educators must be knowledgeable about key transition quality indicators (Wehman, 2011), and be able to provide the necessary guidance for their students to effectively design and implement them in their own teaching practices. This project addresses key components of quality ITPs, presents data collected from current transition practitioners in the field, and provides specific strategies teacher educators can use to teach others how to create high-quality, collaborative ITPs.

Key Session Takeaways

A comprehensive survey of current special educators who work with transition-aged youth (ages 14-21) with disabilities was developed to provide insights into current practices in transition planning, to gain a better understanding of educator perspectives, and to identify areas for improvement. Survey data provided a valuable look into what the implementation of federally mandated transition planning requirements look like in the real-world. The surveys were designed based on the ITP components in IDEA and Indicator 13 items. A combination of Likert scale and open-ended questions gave respondents opportunities to share insights about their demographics and school characteristics, transition assessment practices and tools used, their collaboration and planning processes, and the development of postsecondary outcomes. Key themes reported by participants and implications are discussed below.

Compliance, Individualization, and Assessment

Participants noted that compliance with state and federal ITP requirements are necessary but insufficient to meaningfully meet students' needs. While educators consistently reported meeting IDEA transition requirements, legal compliance alone does not guarantee high-quality, individualized transition planning (Martin & Marshall, 2023). Quality transition planning depends strongly on collaboration and meaningful individualization, be grounded in assessment data, and aligned with students' strengths, preferences, and postsecondary goals, not merely completed templates and checked boxes (Yell et al., 2022). However, assessment practices reported lacked consistency and relied heavily on teacher-made tools. These variable assessment approaches may reduce reliability, objectivity, and coherence in transition planning. This gap between intent and practice suggests that many ITPs prioritize completion over personalization.

Student Voice and Family Engagement

Survey responses indicated that student voice is underutilized, and family engagement is minimal and underdeveloped. Even with a stated focus on student-centered philosophy, transition assessment and planning are still mostly led by teachers, which limits opportunities for students to take ownership and exercise self-determination. What's more, limited family participation represents a missed opportunity to strengthen transition outcomes through collaboration and shared decision-making (Baker et al., in press). Responses in these areas indicated that the transition planning processes remain largely teacher-driven, with limited opportunities for meaningful student voice and minimal family engagement.

Teacher Educators As Change Agents

Collectively, these findings highlight the critical role of teacher educators in preparing pre-service teachers to move beyond simple legal compliance. Preparing pre-service teachers to move beyond compliance toward high-quality, collaborative, and reflective transition planning is essential for improving postsecondary outcomes. This can be achieved by modeling high-quality transition planning, highlighting the value in strengthening student and family partnerships, and by embedding reflective, collaborative, and evidence-based practices into special education teacher preparation curriculum and practicum experiences.

Additional Resources

- National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C) <https://transitionta.org/>
- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition <https://www.ncset.org/>
- The IRIS Center: *Secondary transition: Helping students with disabilities plan for postsecondary settings* <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/tran/>

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