ACRES
American Council on Rural Special Education

# 2017 Conference Proceedings

## *City Meets Country: Educators Working to Solve the Challenges of Special Education*

**March 8-11, 2017**
**Asheville, NC**

***Proceedings Editor:***
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# EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: PRE-SERVICE TEACHER BELIEFS AND INFLUENTIAL DIVERSITY COURSE CONTENT

## Abstract

This study includes an in-depth examination of nine preservice students' weekly reflections and reactions to a hybrid (synchronous and asynchronous) course focused on diversity and equity topics in early childhood. Through online learning modules and readings organized into six units and 14 lessons, students covered a variety of topics including race, culture, gender roles, and students with disabilities. Embedded videos and activities as well as synchronous guest speakers supported connections to material. Students displayed individual growth, positive emotions, and negative emotions across all units with weekly writing and self-reflection being instrumental in processing their reactions. Implications for developing impactful online courses focused on anti-bias, equity, and social justice topics and preparing educators to become aware of their own biases are discussed.

## Critical Components in Planning and Implementation

It is important to consider coursework and practical experiences that can begin to respond to the call for improving preparation of early childhood teachers as they grapple with meeting the needs of their varied student population. The goal of preparing pre-service teachers to value diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice is not simply to prepare teachers to acknowledge the presence of diverse groups of children in their classrooms; rather, the goal is to provide them with the competencies to actively involve and include each and every child, family, and culture in the learning process.

Diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice – all aspects of the concept of anti-bias – have become critical components of many collegiate education courses. Such topics require thoughtful planning and implementation to ensure all students develop a clearer understanding of who they are as individuals as well as their own responsive practices. Brown (1998) suggested a four-phase approach consisting of: (a) self-examination; (b) cross-cultural inquiry; (c) ethical reflection; and (d) multicultural classroom strategies, all of which are imperative to the development of culturally responsive practices. The importance of having students critically self-reflect cannot be understated (Kyles & Olafson, 2008). This process provides a mechanism by which students can provide candid and real time responses as they begin to look within themselves to determine which of their own practices may or may not be culturally or ethically responsive. Only when preservice teachers understand themselves can they begin to understand and reflect on their own practices. Many studies have demonstrated the need to select reading materials, relevant guest speakers, and reflective journal assignments carefully to help guide students on their journey (Akiba, 2011; Brown, 1998; Morales, 2000).

As a part of thoughtful planning, it is important to consider how preservice teachers' attitudes toward diversity and inclusion develop. One conceptualization of this is as a hierarchy of self-reflection and growth (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010). By analyzing preservice teachers' auto-ethnographic reflections, Mills and Ballantyne (2010) determined that preservice teachers first experience the "self-awareness/self-reflectiveness" stage, where they reflect on and seek to understand their own attitudes. Then they move on to an "openness" stage, characterized by a "receptiveness to others' ideas or arguments, as well as receptiveness to diversity" (p. 451). Finally, they enter a "commitment to social justice" stage in which they commit to acting for equity for all people. The course serving as the focal point for this paper targeted students *after* student teaching in their final semester, thus one of its goals was to help students move toward this final stage of commitment to social justice and equity.

**Online Delivery Methods**

Virtual early childhood and early childhood special education course delivery is increasingly valued for its versatility to reach many different types of students in varied locations. Early childhood teachers are being asked to fully consider diversity topics to adequately support learning and development of all children in their classrooms and to educate children about diversity (Winkler, 2009). Concurrently, teacher education programs are being called to better support students' professional growth and teaching identity so they can in turn be more effective teachers once they graduate. Therefore, it is important to consider practices and courses that can begin to respond to the call for improving preparation of early childhood and early childhood special education teachers as they grapple with meeting the needs of their varied student population.

Online course delivery continues to increase among colleges and universities nationwide (Allen & Seamen, 2013), offering a unique challenge to supporting preservice teachers' learning about cultural responsiveness and anti-bias concepts. This is in part because of the limited instructor to student contact that is often needed to process and dissect material that can be difficult to understand and internalize for self-improvement. Research has examined many components of online course delivery and their efficacy (deNoyelles, Zydney, & Chen, 2014; Elison-Bowers, Sand, Barlow, & Wing, 2011; Lynch, Kearsley, & Thompson, 2011). The use of email, discussion board forums, chat rooms and/or virtual classrooms have been identified as key typical components. Berry (2009) stressed the importance of online instructors implementing a more student-centered approach to learning. In this manner, students are required to become active learners and engage in course material. Providing a variety of synchronous and asynchronous mediums can allow different student learning styles to be addressed (Elison-Bowers et al., 2011).

Reflective learning, especially in online courses, has been touted as an important tool in supporting preservice teachers' understanding of diversity and inclusion, and their movement from basic understanding to a commitment to ethics and inclusion in early childhood settings (Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013). Reflective learning, according to Bentley-Williams and Morgan (2013), focuses on the learner's individual interpretation of content and how it applies to his or her role and responsibilities in the classroom. In their study, preservice teachers enrolled in

an online diversity course wrote reflective journals about reading course material and connected these readings to personal and professional experiences. During this process, preservice teachers expressed both positive and negative emotional reactions as they examined their roles as educators and perceptions of their own and society's prejudices. Research can further examine strategies that are most effective for virtual courses to prepare pre-service teachers to address and incorporate diversity.

Educational institutions must examine their curriculum in order to ensure meaningful and purposeful learning opportunities regarding diversity (Tatum, 1992). These learning opportunities are especially vital for pre-service teachers, as these students are preparing to enter early childhood and early childhood special education classrooms and must therefore be prepared to celebrate diversity within their classrooms. The current study seeks to provide a foundation from which future research can further examine strategies that are most effective for virtual courses to prepare pre-service teachers to address and incorporate diversity.

## The Current Study

The course involved in this study was developed as part of a program re-visioning process in response to new state teaching standards. Faculty felt that although topics of diversity and inclusion were embedded throughout the curriculum, students would benefit from a dedicated course at the end of their program that would allow for more depth and reflection. Thus, it was designated as a required course during the students' last semester, after they had completed student teaching. The shift of student teaching from students' last semester to their penultimate semester was also part of the re-visioning of the curriculum. In post-graduation surveys, former students shared that student teaching often raised new questions and highlighted areas where they needed additional support. The diversity and inclusion course (along with a leadership course) was added to the curriculum to meet this need and provide a way to follow up on student teaching experiences. As stated in the course syllabus, the goal of this course was " . . . *to engage prospective early childhood teachers in critical examination of diversity issues, the cultural foundations of identity and development, and the negative consequences of bias, stereotyping and prejudice.*"

The course was designed for online delivery because roughly half of the students enrolled in the department's two early childhood degree concentrations were in the online degree completion program, having transferred to the university after receiving an Associate's degree from their local community college. The course was developed in 2012 through a collaborative process involving an early childhood faculty member from Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS), an early childhood faculty member from Specialized Education Services (SES), and the Division of Continual Learning (DCL) at the university. Given their expertise with online course development, DCL staff helped create an interactive "learning area" that serves as a core component of the course. The learning area is divided into six units, each containing two to three "lessons". Each lesson contained online content including text, pictures, interactive activities, case studies/scenarios, video clips, and reflective questions. A description of the lesson topics within each unit theme appears in Table 1.

Table 1

*Unit and Lesson topics*

| Unit | Session | Topic Covered |
|---|---|---|
| Unit 1 | Lesson 1 | - Course overview<br>- Defining culture and recognizing diversity in inclusive ECE settings |
| | Lesson 2 | - Culture, development, and identity formation<br>- Self-awareness and the impact of culture on teaching |
| | Lesson 3 | - Culturally-based views of early development, care and education<br>- Culturally responsive pedagogy and practice in ECE settings |
| Unit 2 | Lesson 4 | - Sources and consequences of bias and exclusion<br>- Media effects on adult and child perceptions of diversity |
| | Lesson 5 | - Rights and responsibilities related to serving young children and their families in the context of diversity |
| | Lesson 6 | - Strategies for understanding and incorporating diverse perspectives |
| Unit 3 | Lesson 7 | - Development of gender roles and identity<br>- Reducing gender bias and promoting equity in ECE settings |
| | Lesson 8 | - Diversity in family structure and organization<br>- Supporting young children in LGBT families |
| Unit 4 | Lesson 9 | - Socioeconomic diversity<br>- Supporting young children in low-income families |
| | Lesson 10 | - Young children in immigrant and refugee families |
| Unit 5 | Lesson 11 | - Supporting young dual language learners |
| | Lesson 12 | - Cultural perspectives on exceptional needs and inclusive ECE<br>- Intersections of cultural, language, & ability diversity |
| Unit 6 | Lesson 13 | - Practices that promote inclusive learning environments<br>- Promoting classroom community and fostering social justice |
| | Lesson 14 | - Issues of diversity in K-12 system, school readiness & transition |

Students were expected to progress through one lesson per week. After completing a lesson, students were asked to post a brief journal entry (1-2 paragraphs) about their reactions and/or questions related to the lesson. Weekly journals were graded based on completion rather than content, and students were encouraged to use the journal to reflect on and process course content and relevant personal or professional experiences. Students also submitted more formal unit reflection papers every few weeks in which they were asked to summarize key points, identify content that was surprising or challenging to them, and describe two ways content could be incorporated into their own teaching practice. Students' weekly journals and unit reflection papers provided the central data for this study. Additional activities and assignments in the course included online discussion boards, a children's literature review project, a media analysis, six synchronous online class sessions that allowed for live discussion and guest speakers, and an

in-depth inquiry project during which students conducted a family case study and related research literature review, culminating in an 8-10 page integrative paper.

During the semester in which the data for this study were collected, two of the authors worked as co-instructors for the course (one from HDFS and one from SES) and three of the other authors either assisted with the course to fulfill a graduate program teaching practicum experience requirement or participated as co-instructors during different semesters.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were ten degree-seeking early childhood undergraduates in their last semester enrolled in a diversity-oriented course during the spring of 2014. All enrolled students were invited to participate in the study by allowing access to their course assignments and reflection papers at the end of the semester. Ten out of 22 students (45% response rate) responded to the email request for participation, with nine providing consent and one declining to participate.

### Procedure

Data were compiled into charts using Microsoft Word and organized by participant ID and unit (1-6). The process of developing codes for potential themes was fluid and on-going, to ensure that all codes were identified. Initially, five of the authors read over Unit 1 and documented initial thoughts and potential themes. Then, during team meetings, the authors compiled and reviewed codes to develop an initial coding scheme. Next, all authors coded data for one participant across all six units and discussed the function and use of existing codes as well as any new codes to be created. Finally, the first two authors read through the remaining five units using the latest iteration of codes to evaluate whether key themes were fully represented, making modifications and additions as needed.

The above process yielded an exhaustive list of codes and sub-codes that were explicitly defined by all group members. The codes and sub-codes were entered into NVivo (version 10) for formal coding. Four of the authors split into pairs. One pair coded Units 1, 3, and 5 and the second pair coded units 2, 4, and 6. Each pair first coded one unit, and percent agreement was assessed to insure inter-rater reliability. Multiple coder pairs were used to support triangulation and ensure the accuracy of coding (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 1990). Each pair had over 90% agreement across all the codes. Any individual code that had less than 80% agreement was discussed and a code was agreed upon. Then each pair coded the subsequent units and another percent agreement analysis was conducted to ensure acceptable inter-rater reliability (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Patton, 1990). Once the coding was complete, the first two authors reviewed the coding across all units to ensure consistency.

## Results

As described previously, each of the six units included two to three lessons focused on various aspects of diversity, equity, young children, and families. Students created weekly

reflective journals based on each lesson and also one for the whole unit. Analysis were organized by unit or lesson (learning area) and topic. Based on all course content provided, students most often mentioned learning area content, then media (videos and documentaries) in their weekly journals. References to the learning area included comments regarding specific lessons, though many students referenced certain content that was prominent for them.

Within weekly and unit reflection papers, students shared their reactions to content. Examples of student reactions included statements that elicited some type of emotion or referenced change in thought processes or what they learned and will use in the future. The most common reactions included individual growth or change statements followed by positive feedback on content (see Table 3). Individual student excerpts often included a reference to course content and a reaction statement. All excerpts were labeled with every code or sub-code that was relevant; therefore, the same excerpt could be coded from both a content reference and a reaction reference. Results highlighted the course content students' referenced and their reactions by unit (Table 2).

Table 2

*Unit Student Reactions*

| Unit | Agree n/% | Areas of tension | Questions/ wondering | Critique/ Disagree | Individual growth/chg | Neg emotion | Other emotions | Positive / liked | Similar react | Total reactions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 9<br>69% | 2<br>9% | 0 | 1<br>6% | 34<br>41% | 3<br>13% | 7<br>14% | 13<br>18% | 7<br>35% | 76 |
| 2 | 2<br>15% | 3<br>14% | 3<br>21% | 3<br>19% | 6<br>7% | 4<br>17% | 8<br>16% | 15<br>21% | 5<br>25% | 49 |
| 3 | 1<br>8% | 10<br>45% | 4<br>29% | 3<br>19% | 12<br>14% | 2<br>9% | 7<br>14% | 11<br>15% | 0 | 50 |
| 4 | 1<br>8% | 1<br>5% | 2<br>14% | 4<br>25% | 6<br>7% | 4<br>17% | 13<br>27% | 8<br>11% | 2<br>10% | 41 |
| 5 | 0 | 4<br>18% | 4<br>29% | 1<br>6% | 23<br>28% | 8<br>35% | 11<br>22% | 15<br>21% | 5<br>25% | 71 |
| 6 | 0 | 2<br>9% | 1<br>7% | 4<br>25% | 2<br>2% | 2<br>9% | 3<br>6% | 9<br>13% | 1<br>5% | 24 |
| **Total** | **13** | **22** | **14** | **16** | **83** | **23** | **49** | **71** | **20** | **311** |

## Discussion

Addressing diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice in the early childhood education classroom is a multi-faceted and complex endeavor. Incorporating this type of curriculum in an online course adds an additional layer of complexity. Yet, both of these represent areas of increased focus and demand in the field. The current study described the dissemination of course content to preservice early childhood educators enrolled in an online diversity and inclusion course, and analyzed students' reactions to course material to contribute to the ongoing conversation of how best to support early childhood educators in developing competencies. Our findings were interesting given the methods of content delivery as well as students' reactions to content; therefore, both will be further discussed.

**Dissemination of Content**

Preservice teachers' reflections were often centered on the content they read in their online lessons, termed "learning area content." This content was prepared and disseminated in the online course delivery platform, and was arguably the bulk of the content that would be covered in a traditional face-to-face lecture course. This content included a range of topics from describing definitions to explaining nuances in concepts, family diversity, policies and educational systems. It is interesting and important that students had an opportunity to reflect on this type of delivery method, as this method of reading lesson area content relies on self-directed learning on the part of the students. In a traditional face-to-face course this type of content may be delivered via class lecture or other method of face-to-face engagement; however, in the case of an online course, students' engagement in learning area content requires a high degree of self-directed learning. Online course instructors must therefore consider how to promote self-directedness in their students, either by utilizing learning areas or via other strategies. In this course, assistance from DCL enabled instructors to promote self-directed learning through the creation of interactive learning areas, which included video clips and other exercises for students to engage in and reflect upon while learning the material. Ensuring learning areas are user-friendly and well-organized is crucial in encouraging self-directedness.

**Implications**

The results and processes involved in the current study have implications for both pre-service teacher development and in-service teacher support. First, arguably the most important implication of this study is the need to have these courses offered within teacher preparation programs, and this type of content integrated throughout the teacher preparation program curricula. The discussion of diversity, inclusion, and equity, and the push for social justice in the inclusive early childhood education classroom is not something that can be completed in one single course over one single semester of a program. These ideas must be integrated into every course about early childhood, and programs should provide great depth on these topics.

For both preservice and in-service teachers, the need for self-reflection cannot be understated. The beliefs held in our society that perpetuate inequity are rooted in our sociohistorical context, and cannot be easily dismantled without hard work, self-knowledge and self-evaluation. Teachers must first understand themselves and their own biases before they can begin to understand and celebrate diversity within their classrooms. The journey to gain such competencies is ongoing, and one that all early childhood professionals should be ready to take.

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# RURAL MEETS URBAN: ADVANCED PLACEMENT RURAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SUPPORTING URBAN DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

## Abstract

High School Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish students from a rural school district in Upstate New York translated picture books for second grade students at Urban Primary[1], where Spanish is primarily spoken at home. Each child received books that were translated and, intended to be read in English and Spanish. This gave the students and their parents opportunities to read in both languages. The purpose of the project was to facilitate language development for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are learning both Spanish and English in their homes. Children who come from low-income homes are at risk to enter Kindergarten performing below their middle-class peers. Children who are simultaneously learning two languages are at risk for language and literacy deficits in both languages.

## Project Overview

The project was conducted in one of the poorest school districts in Upstate New York, and the poorest urban district across the state, with more people living at less than half the poverty level than any other similarly sized United States (US) city, and the most extreme poverty (family of four with income less than $11,925) in the nation. Concentrated poverty levels in the district are getting worse, rising from 31.0% to 32.9% over the last year, with statistics being high for all racial and ethnic groups. It is the only US city where over half the children live in poverty, and has the highest rate of extreme poverty at 16.2% (citation).

Urban Primary school was chosen as a target school due to their large population of Spanish speaking students, and because the mission of the school focuses on "embracing and supporting Spanish speaking students by building an appreciation for both languages." While Urban Primary is considered a bilingual school, the principal reports that, realistically, the population is monolingual Spanish, with parents learning English at the same time as their children.

The school serves children PK-grade 6. Student test passing rates for ELA at Grade 6 are significantly behind the overall scores for the school district, which are significantly behind the state scores. The passing rates for students enrolled in Urban Primary is 8%, which is well below the district average of 22% and state passing average of 58%. In 2015, EngageNY reported that on a 4-point measurement system: (a) well below proficient, (b) partially proficient, (c) proficient, and (d) excels, the number of students at Urban Primary who received a rate of 3 or

[1] pseudonym

higher was 4.7%. The number of students who received a score of 2 was 19.6%, with the remaining 75.7% scoring at the well below proficient level 1.

Additionally, there is an "immigrant disadvantage" according to Glick, Bates, and Yabiku (2009), who assert the outcomes for children of parents where English was not their primary language are poorer than for those children born in the United States who learned English as a primary language. Both factors have a negative effect on school readiness for primary students.

Early language and literacy development is a strong predictor of later academic achievement and lack of progress in content knowledge in later school years is often related to gaps in language development. This is a common problem for English Language Learners (Winsler et al., 2014) Therefore, it is equally important to provide meaningful learning in both primary and secondary languages. Glick et al. (2009) found parenting practices and cognitive stimulation at home mediated cognitive and language skill deficits. Parent engagement through purposeful reading in both Spanish and English provided an opportunity for active learning.

Rural High School[2] was selected as a convenience sample. As project developer, quick turn-around time was required because the project was funded by a faculty development grant. Knowledge of the district and proximity provided opportunity to discuss the grant with the Spanish department teachers and gain approval from the district for the project in a timely manner.

**Project Implementation**

The initial intention was to have one class of participants from the Rural High School class of AP Spanish students involved in the project. When word of the project got out at the school, a class of third year Spanish students and their teacher also joined the effort. This worked out well as the number of Urban Primary student participants was congruent to the number of combined participants from both Rural High School Spanish classes.

Initially, the students were hesitant; unsure if they would be able to translate the story appropriately (use grammar conjugations and vocabulary appropriate for the story). After consultation with the high school Spanish teachers, the best course of action seemed to be to scan the books, so each page could be projected on the classroom Smartboards. Each class worked on a different book. The teachers stood at the Smart Boards, and acted as facilitators of class discussions and as scribes. The students were allowed to use Word Reference (an on-line dictionary) on their phones, or a hard copy. Hard copy English/Spanish dictionaries were provided to each class as part of the grant. The students became quickly engaged, frequently asking to work on the project. One of the teachers reported,

> I watched their confidence soar and soar after each page they translated . . . When the class ended, they all were ecstatic as they realized they had barely used their dictionaries and were impressed by how much they knew.

[2] pseudonym

As students became more confident, the teachers asked if anyone else would like to be the facilitator/scribe. The teachers report the students took charge. They worked collaboratively to choose the most appropriate vocabulary and talk through verb conjugations. The teachers also incorporated small group work/peer editing. One of the teachers broke her class into small groups charged with translating 2-3 pages. Then she collected the materials and gave them to another group to proofread. This gave the students the opportunity to critically think about what tenses were being used, and whether they agreed with the usage of grammar and vocabulary. The pages were returned to the original groups with the notes from the peer editors, and then each group developed their final copy. In a review of the final products, the teacher reported "aside from a couple of vocabulary mistakes, the grammar was accurate and vocabulary too." The teacher approved final paper copies before the students translated the books. Using markers, the students wrote on translation tape to add Spanish text to the page.

## Project Impact

### Urban Primary

Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to own books. The students from Urban Primary and their parents were provided literary media to keep, gaining exposure to both languages. Research demonstrates that for every $1 spent on a young child, there is statistically an $8 return on the investment (Adams & Tapia, 2013; Schweinhart et al., 2004; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). The ultimate goal for Urban Primary was to positively affect the ELA passing scores and rates, with a longer-term goal of positively affecting educational performance.

Glick et al. (2009) found parenting practices and cognitive stimulation at home mediated cognitive and language skill deficits. Parent engagement through purposeful reading in both Spanish and English provided an opportunity for active learning. Parents filled out a feedback sheet for data collection after reading the book. They had the option to fill out the feedback forms in either Spanish or English. The second-grade bilingual inclusive education teacher interpreted forms that were returned in Spanish.

### Rural High School

The project helped the high school Spanish students develop communication skills via writing. The Spanish teachers reported that it was a hard concept for students to embrace not translating word for word from their native language (English) to the desired language (Spanish). Word for word translation often leads to choppy sentences that ultimately have a slightly different meaning and do not follow the syntax of the Spanish language. The project helped take all the elements of grammar and vocabulary the students learned in their Spanish studies into account. Culturally, translating helps students to realize that the idiomatic expressions we have in English are not the same as other languages. Students learned cultural nuances for expressing ideas in Spanish.

Yang (2015) investigated combining theory and practice of translation through social constructivism. He found, through translating organized project-based learning activities, that

students improved their intercultural awareness. This type of student engagement resulted in the student translators achieving a more meaningful level of communication and benefiting from in-context teaching, while at the same time learning skills.

The interpersonal aspect is a key factor contained in project based translation activities (Kiraly, 2015). The student translators interact with each other, their Spanish teachers, and the Urban Primary students, parents, and teachers while learning to translate, and learn about the bilingual Spanish community.

Additionally, based on 2014 census statistics, Rural High School is located in a relatively mono-ethnic rural town (99% Caucasian). The Work Group for Community Health and Development (2016) at the University of Kansas states that an appreciation of cultural diversity is the first step in creating a "just and equitable society" (n. p.). They further assert that to ascertain change, we must understand the strengths and perspectives of cultures different than our own, and to work together for the benefit for the larger community. Understanding a culture unlike their own can help Rural High School Spanish students overcome and prevent racial and ethnic divisions that result from misunderstandings, asserts the Work Group for Community Health (2016).

Since adolescents tend to have preferences for same-ethnic social relations, it is important to build in positive exposure beyond the microcosm of their mono-ethnic school and neighborhood. Kruse, Smith, van Tubergen, and Maas (2016) posit that interethnic exposure alone does not lead to less prejudice or more positive attitudes, as often these exposures are superficial. To provide a more meaningful experience, direct contact between both populations helped to build positive interethnic experiences. The project plan included a workshop about cultural diversity for the Rural High Spanish students. Further, at the end of the school year, as a culminating project activity, there are plans for Rural High students to read to Urban Primary students.

**Summary**

Researchers have called for increased attention on children being raised in the context of two languages and their early educational needs, as they are at increased risk for difficulties during their later educational careers (Winsler et al., 2014). However, research on children who are being raised in the context of two languages (dual language learners) is very limited. This project summary adds to the literature base as it focused on language development in both native Spanish and English through facilitated parent interaction.

The project, funded by a St. John Fisher College Faculty Development Grant, provided Rural High School students awareness of diversity beyond their own immediate community and allowed them to make a difference in the larger upstate New York community, while simultaneously gaining essential conceptual skills. The teachers report "this was a wonderful opportunity for the students to enrich their understanding of Spanish language in a realistic setting."

The cross context between rural and urban environments makes this program unique. The program was a collaborative effort between St. John Fisher College, Rural High School and Urban Primary. There are many dedicated faculty from both schools, working to support the second-grade students in the inclusion class and their families. The high school students were excited to support children in the greater community of Upstate New York.

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# DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION – INTEGRATING AN ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY CURRICULUM INTO TEACHER PREPERATON IN A RURAL INSTITUTION

## Abstract

A teacher preparation program that explicitly embeds assistive technology (AT) into its candidates' program of study will produce future teachers with a stronger foundation and better command of AT in the classroom. This program description outlines a model which addresses AT curriculum (covering AT awareness, knowledge, and skills) through a series of integrated professional development (PD) sessions embedded in course offerings in a special education program of study. Specifically this program description addresses the following: (a) the process of integrating AT curriculum into a program of study; (b) a description of the program's design to ensure equity of access between on-campus and distance education courses; (c) an overview of the current PD sessions; and (d) challenges and solutions.

## Background/Literature Review

Today's classrooms demand that all teacher candidates be prepared to effectively serve diverse populations of students. This demand is made most pressing with the progressive movement toward inclusive education. Inclusive education is the philosophical and pedagogical education practice that focuses on educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom with peers without disabilities. Inclusive teaching is supported by the principles and provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) that requires students with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. For inclusive education to be effective, all teacher candidates need to have the knowledge and skills to be confident about working with students with disabilities. AT is one such educational tool that educators and professionals must be familiar with and appropriately versed in the application of in order to provide the most effective education program for students with disabilities. Additionally, IDEA mandates that AT be considered for all students who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and integrated whenever needed.

Even though AT is seen as a valuable tool in meeting students' needs and supporting inclusive practices that are mandated by law, there are challenges of integrating AT. Research identifies two consistent challenges: (a) lack of teacher training for appropriate implementation and (b) appropriate processes for when the selection of a device is not the best fit for the student with disabilities (Coleman, Cady, & Rider, 2015). Successful implementation of AT can be compromised by teachers who lack the understanding of how the devices work and/or how to appropriately integrate them with curriculum (Connor & Beard, 2015). Training on AT evaluation processes and devices is important to ensure that teachers have the confidence to

serve students who use AT (Lourenco, Goncalves, & Elias, 2015). However, the training cannot be a one-time/one size fits all type of a model due to the complexity of the AT process and facilitation of the use of the device, whether hardware or software (Clifford & Reed, 2004; Edyburn, 2004). Typically states and districts have AT specialists and/or teams to help with AT evaluations, as well as the procurement and training of the AT device for teachers, students, and families. The availability of AT teams/specialists will vary greatly from state to state and district to district (Bryant & Bryant, 2013; Coleman, 2011). A typical district level AT team is comprised of an occupational therapist, physical therapist, and speech language pathologist. In addition, the general education teacher and/or special education teacher, student, and parent of the student who is being evaluated for the AT all becomes a part of the AT team for that particular student. Therefore, it is important for all classroom teachers (general education and special education) to have a basic familiarity with what AT is, a rudimentary foundation of AT products in order to be able to research/identify different types of AT that are available for specific disability populations and/or characteristics, and understand and implement their role in assistive technology evaluations, integration, and ongoing progress monitoring.

The goal of AT as an educational tool is for all professionals working with students with disabilities to be competent AT team members who can successfully navigate the challenges and ensure the best application of AT underscores of the need and responsibility of institutions of higher education to embed AT into their education (general and special) and related service professionals preparation programs. Benefits for embedded professional development on AT include better prepared teachers, both in special education and general education (Baush & Ault, 2012).

**“Disruptive Innovation” as a Grounding Theory for Program Change Model**

For small businesses to remain successful, they must consider future clients, technologies, and processes to meet the coming demands and prepare accordingly. In small business models, this preparation is termed ‘disruptive innovation’ and refers to the process where established practices are successfully challenged (Christensen, Raynor, & McDonald, 2015). We apply the term here to educational changes made in a teacher preparation program designed to bring about needed systems change. Specifically, a system change that embraces the integration of a professional development model within a traditional course delivery system. Our ‘disruptive innovation’ was a novel way of approaching a need (i.e. integrating AT curriculum throughout a course of study) – *innovation* – that created some challenges – *disruption* – which in turn required novel solutions applied thoughtfully to address challenges and alleviate concerns. Education as a field continues to strive towards inclusive models while under examination for fiscally responsible models with embedded assessment for accountability. In an effort to better prepare all teachers for the diversity that they will encounter among their students in K-12 settings, including but not limited to students with disabilities, the special education program applied this ‘disruptive innovation’ process to their course of study by strategically embedded AT professional development modules throughout the course of study of all special education majors, as well as in the special education and instructional technology courses that are required for all teacher education candidates.

## Model Description

The process began with a review of assistive technology standards by the special education faculty to identify the main topics typically found across an AT curriculum (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015). Once identified, these topics were then reviewed in relation to how they would align with the existing special education course of study, as well as identifying professional core courses for all college of education majors that may benefit from the professional development modules. The desire was to ensure that all special education majors completed all of the professional development modules, and other education majors completed the introductory module, plus one or two of the more specialized modules as they related to their academic discipline area.

Once the scope of the AT curriculum was identified, faculty then developed a series of AT professional development modules. The sequence was designed so that special education candidates would begin with the introductory module in their freshman year and complete the whole series by the end of their junior year in advance of a year-long senior internship. In addition, planning was strategic in placing specific modules in education courses for all majors (instructional technology and special education/inclusion) so that the majority of education majors outside of special education would complete approximately four of the professional development sessions: the introductory session as well as specific and/or elective sessions that aligned well with their discipline. The professional development modules were designed to be implemented in both on-campus and distance education formats to ensure equity of access for all students.

## Overview and Alignment of Sessions

The following table shows the alignment of the special education course of study with the current AT professional development modules. In addition, it shows the session alignment with education courses and other engaged disciplines.

| Course | Focus | IHAT PD Session/Description |
|---|---|---|
| *Special Education Course of Study Sequence* | | |
| 2000 | Special Education/Inclusion | Introduction to AT and UDL |
| 2123 | Early Experiences | SMART Notebook software |
| 2100/2200 | Survey – General and Adapted | Boardmaker software |
| 3001 | Assessment | AT Assessments and Evaluations |
| 3004 | Behavior Management | AT for Behavior |
| 3005 | Instructional Programming | AT for Literacy |
| 3006 | Communication | Augmentative Alternative Communication |
| 3100/3200 | Methods | Making Adapted Books |
| 4000 | SPED Technology | - culmination project - |
| *Service and other courses* | | |
| 2000 | Special Education/Inclusion | Intro to AT and UDL |
| EDTC 4001 | Instructional Technology | Alternate Access |
| CSDI 2100 | Communication | Augmentative Alternative Communication |
| OCCT | Occupational Therapy | - variety - |

Campus based sessions take place in the AT lab on campus and are designed to integrate/model UDL principles, provide hands on interaction with the AT products and software, and have an assessment that integrates components for knowledge, application, and skills evaluation. Distance education sessions are facilitated asynchronously through the Blackboard instructional platform and integrate UDL principles as well.

**Challenges and Solutions**

The design and implementation of this initiative offered several challenges. First, embedding sessions into courses meant finding the time to teach to this volume of students, typically 350-400 students taking on-campus sessions and another 350-400 students taking distance education sessions. Due to space and software license restrictions, whole classes were not able to come together at one time to the AT lab and complete a session. Sessions needed to be limited to 15 participants to allow for all students to have access to the products and software. The solution was to offer a calendar of options for students to register for sessions that were outside of their class time. This allowed the professor to not lose teaching time with their students and the 1.5-2 hour sessions were within the expectation of homework time outside of class.

Another challenge was the difficulty of providing hands-on experiences with the devices, hardware and software, to distance education students. Through the development and use of a virtual desktop platform and the use of an AT lending library, DE students are able to access the software remotely, check out AT, and have it mailed to them. This enables us to ensure equity of access to the professional development to all teacher education candidates whether they are campus based or distance education students.

Finally, logistical challenges in training staff to teach on-campus sessions led to a change in the number of sessions that were available both on campus and online. By moving more sessions online, the difficulty of scheduling enough sessions to meet demand was also alleviated. The online model is the one that is most replicable in other institutions, especially those that may lack on-campus resources.

As is with educational technology, AT is a rapidly changing field with new products and applications continually being developed. Through exposure to current devices and processes within the professional development sessions, teacher candidates will be better prepared during their first years of teaching, even as they encounter newer products. Once in schools, teachers may receive specialized training through the vendor of a specific device or product. Anecdotal feedback from students, faculty, and even principals and other district personnel who hire our graduates has been hugely positive as they meet teacher candidates who are knowledgeable about AT and UDL, and can demonstrate practical skills that will likely translate to better and more confident engagement with their students.

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# ENACTING RURAL CHILDHOOD: REFRAMING DISABILITY AND PROMOTING FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH RECREATIONAL GOALS

## Abstract

The families in this study embraced their rural location to provide their child with what they believed to be the most typical rural childhood experience possible. Engaging with nature and community was a salient component in each of their lives. In special education, this can be incorporated into IEP goals, work, and in connecting with families beyond state mandated curriculum. Listening to families' stories encourages dialogue between parents and service providers thus promoting the development of goals that respect the families' appreciation of the outdoors and fosters the community feel of rural areas.

## Introduction

Reiterating the oft-heard ideal of a rural childhood, families in this qualitative research study spoke of the importance of nature and community. According to my informants, their children love to be outside. The families employed outdoor time to illustrate conformance to what they believed to be "normal" rural childhood behavior. When I started this study, I was grateful to conduct research relatively close to my new home in a small New England state. Location proved not only beneficial to my ability to conduct interviews, it also manifested as a salient feature in family life. Families felt that the natural surroundings and small town benefited their children. The one family that I interviewed who were new to the area also appreciated the benefits of living in a small rural town. In our virtual forum, Diane commented:

> *My daughter loves the outdoors. She loves the flora and fauna and the huge amount of open space in [our state]. I do not believe that she would be happy in an urban concrete laden world. She loves the serenity where we live. She likes to hike and skip stones. This relaxed environment is very beneficial for her. I believe that it is also beneficial for my son, as he does not feel the pressure of a more populated state. He enjoys the peace and quiet that he has in our neighborhood . . . Additionally, because [our state] is more relaxed, it is not as competitive as some of the bigger states. This is good for both of my children. They are accepted just as they are and appreciated as the children that they are.*

The families in this study recounted similar experiences as Diane. Each family embraced the warmth of community and nature that living in their rural towns provided. Contrary to scholars' arguments that exaggerated conceptions of rural life contribute to the "rural myth" (Flora & Flora, 2013) or the "rural mystique" (Brown & Schaft, 2010) the families in this study reclaim these rural myths to re-frame what disability means in their childrens's lives. Adhering

to mythical properties of rural childhood proves that their child is indeed experiencing a "normal" childhood. The families in this rural area believe that their natural surroundings benefit their children since hiking, snow activities, and acres of land occupy their children from day until night. Even the children who are currently too sick to partake in outdoor activities were at one time encouraged to spend many hours outside.

Additionally, the families spoke highly of the strong community of family and/or friends that they have created in their towns. As Diane reveals above, the area provides an atmosphere of acceptance and appreciation for who they are. According to Howley and Howley (2014), these relationships stem from the community's focus on the "common good." They explain, "the social priority in community is interdependence whereas the social priority in society is unilateral independence" (p. 36). Although self-reliance may be a prized goal in rural communities, community members are willing to support each other as they work toward that shared goal. Families in this study have benefited tremendously from the sharing and generosity of community members who care. The values and sense of community upon which the families believe rural areas are built evidenced itself throughout the stories as families negotiated their role in a world governed by specific norms of childhood and family life.

I argue that service providers can genuinely care for families through enabling them to enact recreational time together, thus building stronger partnerships. Like the scholars studying students who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD), I find that it is important to listen to each family's perception of disability (Conroy, 2012). The families' stories align with the work of rural scholars like Flora and Flora (2013), Schaft and Jackson (2010), Moctovish and Salomon (2003), and Mallory (1995) who posit that rural people are multi-dimensional encompassing varied identities. Understanding their multifaceted identities will allow medical professionals, teachers, social workers, and related service providers to embrace the "unique personhood" of the family member with disabilities as a way to enhance empathy (Larson, 1998). Therefore, the story of families and the portrayal of their everyday lives provide a guideline for ways in which practitioners can help families. Furthermore, Jackson, Traub, and Turnbull (2008) argue that families' personal stories result in practitioners developing educational interventions specific to their family of focus. Landsman (2009) quoting Wayman, Lynch, and Hanson (1990, p. 68), asserts that "understanding a family's response to their child's disability is important because it affects the kinds of support and services that can be offered" (p.13). Respecting the family's conceptualization of an acceptable childhood will enable practitioners to develop goals that meet the needs of the family unit. The following provides a glimpse into the lives of families as they negotiate life with a child with significant disabilities in their rural community. I conclude with suggestions to meet the needs of the families through educational goals.

**Setting and Story**

Through qualitative in-depth interviewing, I was introduced to children and young adults with complex medical, cognitive, and behavioral needs. I heard stories that stressed the strength, fun, and individuality of each member of the family and the extraordinary character of their child. I was introduced to family life as it is influenced by disability and by the rural communities in which the families lived. Sitting at kitchen tables, following guardians

throughout their hectic day, and engaging with children in school and in extracurricular activities, I saw a different side of family life; one that I often overlooked as an educator. Most importantly, I learned that the families are more than their child's special education. Life, for them, extends well beyond the classroom. Even though the family members with whom I interacted knew this project focused on special education, they rarely discussed school or their involvement with school without being explicitly questioned. Time and again, the families highlighted the "normal" lives that they lived. The families recounted their "typical" everyday interactions influenced by their rural surroundings. For example, Richie's father, Carl, asserted his beliefs in childhood activities saying:

> *Any kid shouldn't be (pause) any healthy kid shouldn't be sitting in front of the TV all day long. They should be outdoors being active and so forth. That's the way I was brought up. It's painful to see Richie unable to enjoy it more.*

Carl not only revealed the influence of his memories of family life, his rural community also played a significant role in defining what childhood was for him. During our interview, Carl discussed the joys of teenage parties in the woods, hiding from the police down by the quarry, playing outside until dark, and the importance of outside playtime for children. We laughed at the fun he described and as we laughed we both turned our attention to Richie who sat three feet away from us. The laughter quickly turned to uneasiness. I sat pursing my lips wanting desperately to take a deep breath but fearful that it would convey my discomfort. Dispirited, his gaze suddenly turned from me to the floor, Carl mentioned how Richie, at one time, also enjoyed playing outside. Richie, lying almost flat on his recliner staring at a cartoon through his thick glasses, did not acknowledge his father's lament that children shouldn't watch television all day. At that moment, I cursed this rural area where we lived, angry that people could run around in the same woods, while Richie, at eight years old, was relegated to cartoons, a feeding tube, and a recliner. Yet, this lifestyle that I condemned in this meeting was the same one I embraced for other children whose guardians were convinced that their children needed the outdoor space to expend the limitless energy that their autism provides.

For instance, Javon's grandmother, Patty, employs outdoor time to illustrate conformance to rural childhood behavior. Patty highlighted Javon's appreciation of outdoor activities, "He loves to go hiking; he loves to go for walks." Javon's thirteen year old aunt, Gilly added to the description of Javon's outdoor play seeing it as a time where she can play with Javon and her friends:

> *We teach him how to play basketball and run around but most of the time we go outside with him and we go on four wheeler rides . . . It's really fun and in the winter we went sliding with him. It was fun.*

Again, influenced by their rural location, outside play manifested itself as a way through which families convey that their child engages in the childhood that families believe one should have. From ice fishing to hiking, Javon's family loves to be outdoors and Patty explained that Javon also enjoys participating in these activities. Gilly, too, believed that the outdoor activities are representative of what children should be doing. She discussed the opportunities that her family provides for Javon hoping that these opportunities result in a better childhood, a "normal"

childhood. Gilly explained,

> *Whenever I work with him, I treat him like a regular kid because I don't want him to think he's different. I want him to think that he's like everyone else . . . so I just gave him opportunities to be a normal kid.*

Gilly's desire for Javon and the hard work that she puts into helping him are consistent with McLaughlin and Goodley's (2008) findings. The authors describe one of their parent participants: "Her choices about how much to shape Jack's behavior against the norms of society are guided by social recognition of the costs of difference" (p. 324). As mentioned above, Gilly is quite aware of the social stigma associated with disability and seeks to transform Javon's behavior through hard work and through multiple opportunities that she believes "normal" children in their rural area have.

I observed Javon running from one outdoor activity to the next, his endless flow of energy pouring out around the big yard that surrounded the family's home. He ran along the tree-lined trail behind their home, or bounced for extended periods of time on their trampoline. I saw him enjoying what his rural surroundings offered, his family happy that he was not hitting or throwing a tantrum, but rather running outside, as they believe children should. Similarly, when I observed Patrick, a young boy with autism, I felt firsthand what Javon's family must feel; the contrast between outside and inside was dramatic. Dori met me outside stating that her son really wanted to wander around. While we talked, we followed Patrick, around the yard, running between trees, hiding in a wooded area, and at one point, losing his shoe to the creek. He was happy. His mom was watchful but appeared relaxed. The moment we entered the home, the situation changed from freedom to confinement, and Patrick's mom seemed unable to please him. She would ask him repeatedly what he wanted. He would play a video game on the iPad, take her phone, get up, wander around, and look for food. We spoke very little as we tried to find an activity that would bring contentment for Patrick. We eventually returned outside where Patrick continued his exploration and Dori and I finished our conversation. Nature is integral to experiencing family life for Dori and Patrick. Running around outside, enjoying the rural idyllic childhood was not a myth for Javon and Patrick's families, it was how they enacted "normal."

The families' definitions of family life and childhood result not only from their past and their surroundings, their child's worthiness is also predicated on their acceptance within the community. While obeying rural conceptions of childhood, the family can therefore be recognized as valued members of the community. Community also played a significant role in the ways in which family members created the quintessential rural childhood. To counter the stigma associated with their family members' disability, my informants stressed the many activities in which their child was successful and appreciated by the community. For example, Bethany's Nana described BINGO night at the local church where everyone "loves" Bethany. Similarly, Connor's mom, Hillary, felt the kindness from children in Connor's school. She happily detailed an outing with her son in which they encountered his classmates, "All the kids love him! I'll go for runs with him in his [wheel] chair and a kid will be like 'I know him! He goes to my school.' I'm like, 'aww ok.'" The families revealed their appreciation of community members who embrace their child and their family. By engaging in activities that are symbolic of what the family member believes to be a normal childhood, they can define their family

interactions as worthy and acceptable thus re-framing how disability influences their child's lives. The families in this study, although they sometimes sacrificed quality services adhered to the mythical properties of childhood in rural areas, even if their own children were excluded from rural opportunities. The families went to great lengths to prove that their child transcended their disability by engaging in what they believed to be a typical rural childhood.

**Recommendations**

By acknowledging how families construct meaningful family life, practitioners can provide services and interventions to promote the family's activities not the activities that the practitioner feels are important. By understanding the families' daily activities, service providers can better serve the families with whom they work. Furthermore, such an understanding of families will find practitioners embracing the unique family constellation rather than trying to fit them into a preconceived ideal of what family is and how they should function. In the above cases, for example, families would benefit from recreational goals that emphasized outdoor time and community engagement. These rural activities provide enjoyable family time and allow family members to re-frame disability in their lives. The families also recommended ways in which service providers could better meet their needs. For example, Diane recommended more recreational opportunities for her two children. Diane lamented, "There aren't the supports for my kids to have the same fun as other kids." Javon's Aunt Gilly also advocated for Javon's recreational experiences; she wanted to provide him with "opportunities to be a normal kid." Acknowledging the dearth of social interactions, families recommended organized social opportunities, like a buddy system to pair students for lunch or academic activities, a sleep over for children who aren't regularly invited to sleepovers, or a local Special Olympics' cheerleading team.

Furthermore, Leila's mom and Javon's grandfather both questioned what it means to be "handicapped" accessible. Heidi complained about the playgrounds that may purport to be accessible, but really aren't. Families advocated for a more nuanced application of accessibility. Every family stressed that accessible varies according to the person: Javon really dislikes the noise of hand driers in public restrooms while Leila has poor head control and would need head support on a playground swing. By knowing families' stories we can begin to accommodate their daily needs thus making all family activities more accessible and allowing them to re-frame the role of disability in their lives. By looking beyond special education, service providers can assist families in engaging in enjoyable rural activities that affirm that their children are indeed enjoying a "good" childhood.

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# IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES USING A PATTERN OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES APPROACH: CORE-SELECTIVE EVALUATION PROCEDURES

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe a third method approach to identifying specific learning disabilities, the Core-Selective Evaluation Process (C-SEP). The C-SEP method is designed to comprehensively and efficiently identify specific learning disabilities (SLD) and is compatible with all federal and state regulations.

## Introduction

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) and the subsequent U.S. Department of Education Final Regulations of IDEA (34 CFR Parts 300 and 301) has allowed states to adopt "third methods approaches" to identify specific learning disabilities (SLD). The past decade has seen the development of various third method models, specifically models that identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) indicative of SLD. The purpose of this paper is to describe an emerging PSW-SLD identification method and the procedures to be used with the model. The C-SEP method is designed to comprehensively and efficiently identify SLD and is compatible with all federal and state regulations. It is a psychoeducational approach with particular emphasis on using norm-referenced tests in a manner that fully exploits the data collected beyond standard scores leading to more specificity in the SLD identification (Schultz & Stephens, 2015; Shrank, Stephens-Pisecco, & Schultz, 2017).

## Definition and Distinguishing Features

The C-SEP approach to identify SLD is an efficient, data-driven professional judgment process (Schultz & Stephens, 2009) rooted in contemporary Cattell-Horn-Carroll (CHC) theory (Evans, Floyd, McGrew, & Leforgee, 2010; Keith & Reynolds, 2010; McGrew & Wendling, 2010). With the improvements in cognitive and academic assessments, pertinent information about a student's strengths and weaknesses can be collected in a more efficient manner, with less tests. Specifically, using a core battery of tests from a cognitive achievement and oral language assessment, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Fourth Edition (WISC-IV), the Woodcock-Johnson-Fourth Edition (WJ-IV), or the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Third Edition (KTEA-3) as a foundation of the evaluation, integrated with a variety of other data sources, the most salient features of SLD are assessed in order to comprehensively and efficiently describe an individual's unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses (Schultz & Stephens, 2015; Shrank et al., 2017).

According to Schultz and Stephens-Pisecco (in press), several features of C-SEP distinguish this method from other PSW methods beginning with the most salient features constructed of SLD as defined by IDEA are evaluated. While most PSW models measure "basic psychological processes" and academic achievement areas of concern, C-SEP procedures address more thoroughly and explicitly the language aspects of SLD as well as the abilities to "listen, speak, and think". The evaluation data transcends the identification aspects into a better understanding of the learner and the development of meaningful interventions. Another distinguishing feature is how norm-referenced testing data is considered. Norm-referenced testing informs decision-making and professional judgment instead of being the primary vehicle of the eligibility decision. Multiple sources of data along with integrated data analysis, including pattern seeking techniques (McMillan & Schumaker, 2010), are used to make eligibility decisions. These distinguishing features will be evident in the procedures which are detailed next.

**Specific Learning Disability**

The C-SEP approach, besides assessing academic concerns, comprehensively assesses all of the components of the federal definition of SLD (see bold). This allows interpretations that limit overestimating cognitive explanations (Flanagan & Schneider, 2016). In addition, the impact of the disability on teaching and learning can also be assessed and inform interventions (Schultz & Stephens, 2017). This is a distinguishing characteristic of C-SEP from other "third method" approaches.

> The IDEA provides that "specific learning disability" means a ***DISORDER*** in one or more basic psychological processes, involved in understanding or in using ***LANGUAGE***, either written or **spoken**, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to **listen, think, speak,** read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. (p. 30)

The following are steps and procedures in enacting the C-SEP approach.

Step 1: Measure Psychological Processes

> . . . <u>means a ***DISORDER*** in one or more basic psychological processes, involved in understanding . . .</u>

Administer WJ-IV Cognitive Core 7 Tests:

| WJ-IV Cognitive Core 7 Tests | Score | Average (Yes/No) |
|---|---|---|
| Test 1: Oral Vocabulary (Gc) | | |
| Test 2: Number Series (Gf) | | |
| Test 3: Verbal Attention (Gwm) | | |
| Test 4: Letter-Pattern Matching (Gs) | | |
| Test 5: Phonological Processing (Ga) | | |
| Test 6: Story Recall (Glr) | | |
| Test 7: Visualization (Gv) | | |

**Average Cognitive Test Scores? (~>85 SS)**

**YES**

If all core 7 scores are average, it is indicative of intact psychological processing; integrate and interpret.

Move onto Step 2: Measure Language

WJ-IV Oral Language Core 4

**NO**

If one or more core 7 scores are < average, additional cognitive testing is needed determine if a disorder in psychological processes is evident.

Administer additional WJ-IV Cognitive test(s) in areas of weakness(es); integrate and interpret.

Step 2: Measure Language

> . . . or in using ***LANGUAGE***, either *written* **or *SPOKEN***, and which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak . . .

Administer WJ-IV Oral Language Core 4 Tests:

| **WJ-IV Oral Language Core 4 Tests** | **Score** | **Average (Yes/No)** |
|---|---|---|
| Test 1: Picture Vocabulary (Gc) | | |
| Test 2: Oral Comprehension (Gc) | | |
| Test 3: Segmentation (Ga) | | |
| Test 4: Rapid Picture Naming (Gs) | | |

**Average Oral Language Test Scores?**

**YES**

If all core 4 scores are average, it is indicative of intact language skills, integrate and interpret.

Move onto Step 3: Measure Academics*

WJ-IV Achievement Core 6

**NO**

If one or more core 4 scores are < average, additional language testing is needed to identify if a disorder in psychological processes involved in using language is evident.

Administer additional WJ-IV language test(s) in areas of weakness(es); integrate and interpret.

Step 3: Measure Academics

. . . read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations . . .

| WJ-IV Achievement Core 6 Tests | Score | Average (Yes/No) |
|---|---|---|
| Test 1: Letter-Word Identification | | |
| Test 2: Applied Problems | | |
| Test 3: Spelling | | |
| Test 4: Passage Comprehension | | |
| Test 5: Calculation | | |
| Test 6: Writing Samples | | |

*NOTE: The Core 6 Achievement Tests can be utilized for districts that require all academic areas be assessed for an initial referral (not required by state policy, this is a local decision). Other districts may choose to administer only those tests that assess the area of concern (this is the preferred option as we have multiple options to assess academics).

Step 4: Use Integrated Data Analysis Procedures to identify PSWs

Integrated data analysis is the analysis of multiple data sets (e.g., norm-referenced test results, response to intervention (RTI) data, criterion-referenced test, etc.) that have been pooled into one. It involves examination of a chain of evidence by determining the trustworthiness (weight, accuracy) of data collected, organization, triangulation, and logical cross-validation analysis (Schultz, Simpson, & Lynch, 2012).

**Consider and Rule out Exclusionary Factors**

> . . . The child exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, State-approved grade-level standards, or intellectual development, that is determined by the group to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments, consistent with §§ 300.304 and 300.305; and (3) The group determines that its findings under paragraphs (a)(1) and (2) are not primarily the result of:
>
> > (i) A visual, hearing, or motor disability;
> > (ii) Mental retardation;
> > (iii) Emotional disturbance;
> > (iv) Cultural factors;
> > (v) Environmental or economic disadvantage; or
> > (vi) Limited English proficiency.
>
> (b) To ensure that underachievement in a child suspected of having a specific learning disability is not due to lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math, the group must consider, as part of the evaluation described in §§ 300.304 through 300.306—(Stephens, Dykes, Proctor, Moon, Gardner, & Pethick, 2012, p. XX)

**SLD Determination**

SLD determination is multifaceted and the C-SEP approach will help assessment teams integrate information obtained from norm-referenced tests with all other information related to the referral question. The C-SEP approach is driven by professional judgment and does not use rigid cut-off points or a statistical formula as a determinate of SLD. It instead informs decision-making and provides statistical support to consider when making the determinations. As with any model of SLD identification, it is critical that all data collected (i.e., state tests, RTI data, work samples, teacher reports, etc.) is integrated with norm-referenced test data, provided appropriate instruction, and applied according to local and state policies.

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# MEETING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE ALL STUDENTS

The idea of preparing special-education school leaders to serve all children has been an important topic in many of the reports to Congress which discuss the need of personnel to serve students with disabilities. There are many challenges facing school districts and universities to provide assurance of high quality, fully certified school leaders to serve students with disabilities. While Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) consistently emphasized the importance of high-quality teachers as well as high-quality school leaders, the range and complexity of issues facing urban school leaders are particularly daunting (Martin, Gourwitz, Hall, 2016). Upon reflection, we realize that the need for a strong knowledge base facing urban school leaders to serve all students is often the same need facing school leaders in rural settings. We rarely provide the necessary time for professional development that allows our principals to better lead the schools they serve. While we know that all school leaders play a role in serving students with disabilities, we only recently have begun to recognize the critical role that special education administrators play in the success of service delivery to students with disabilities and their families. Yet many school districts and universities still question the best format for delivering a professional development program that will produce highly effective, knowledgeable, and collaborative personnel to meet the needs of administrators in serving all students. Special education knowledge, skills, and dispositions are key elements in achieving this success (Martin, 2012).

Voltz & Colins (2010) state:

> Special education administrators play a critical role in the implementation of successful inclusion in diverse, standards-based environments. They provide the vision and leadership necessary to guide educators in both general and special education as they deliver instructional programs to meet the needs of diverse students with disabilities. (p. 70)

While we now have a clearer vision of the knowledge, skills, and expertise essential for today's K-12 students of all abilities, we need to recognize the importance of having all administrators with the competence to lead in the schools and programs that will enable all students to obtain these 21st century skills. Effective leaders must recognize and define challenges and opportunities continuously. They must be able to collaborate with a broad array of stakeholders to develop appropriate strategies to ameliorate the weaknesses and build upon the strengths of our existing programs, policies, and practices (Fullan, 2001). Staff development can no longer be thought of as workshops, courses, or presentations by 'experts', whereas, it must be results-driven, standards-based, job-embedded, and include teachers, principals, support staff, district administrators as well as board of education members (Hirsh, 2001).

There is a critical need for school district and school leaders to have full access to the best available research and practical wisdom and to receive strong support in transforming that knowledge into high-quality performance and continuous improvement for themselves and for those they lead (Bai & Martin, 2013).

The difference between knowing what knowledge needs to be delivered and how to deliver it is vast. A tremendous need for knowledge and skills is required of school leaders as they work to include all children in the public school settings. Schools today are confronted with issues of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and diversity. When children spend more than 50% of their life in poverty, over 30% of them do not graduate from high school (Hernandez, 2011). The facts for school districts are evident. School leaders need more opportunities to increase their knowledge on special education and special education services. But how do we gain that knowledge while working at warp speed 24 hours a day?

The unique needs and talents of students with disabilities are difficult to assess appropriately and address adequately. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004) mandates that students with disabilities receive their education with non-disabled students to the maximum extent possible (Bai & Martin, 2013). The challenge for school leaders serving students with disabilities is to have the opportunity to discover what they need to know and then, how to obtain the knowledge they need.

**Purpose of the Project**

The question of "how do you know what you don't know" resonates with many. When discussing the topic of what principals need to know, the school district leaders in special education and two professors of education decided to systematically study the issue. The purpose of this study was to assess the knowledge needs of principals who serve students with disabilities in their schools. Two faculty members from the University of Central Florida, College of Education and Human Performance partnered with the associate superintendent of exceptional education and a director of special education in the Orange County Public School system in Orlando, Florida to assess the knowledge needs concerning students with disabilities of the principals in the school district. The intent was, that upon completion of the needs assessment, modules of study including the knowledge needs found in the assessment would be prepared and distributed online as an exceptional student education administrator professional development package. The survey instrument, *Needs Assessment on Knowledge and Skills for Teaching*

*Children with Disabilities* (NAKSTCD; Bai & Martin, 2015), was created by the researchers based on the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Standards for Special Education Administrators (2009). The leadership standards of the CEC special education administrators addressed the knowledge needed for educators to develop their skills to effectively serve students with disabilities; therefore, the researchers used the CEC standards for special education administrators for students with disabilities as a guide while developing the survey instrument. The accessible population chosen for the study consisted of 486 district administrators, principals and assistant principals from the school district and the surveys were distributed by the Area Superintendents to that group. Approval from Internal Review Board (IRB) from the authors' university and school district were received. The 289 district administrators, principals and assistant principals volunteered to participate in the study. The results for gender and age found 92% of the respondents were female and 8% of the respondents were under 29 with the majority of respondents, (72%) being between the ages of 30 and 59. This proportion reflects the population composition of the principals of public schools in the Central Florida area.

## Findings

The work resulting from the partnership between a large public university and large public school district has led to learning opportunities about students with disabilities and their families for all the instructional administrators in the school district. The collaborative work made it possible for the researchers to be able to successfully create and distribute the needs assessment and therefore to learn exactly what knowledge principals need to know in order to efficiently and effectively serve students who have disabilities. Due to the use of the ADKB questionnaire we were able to determine the content areas needed to assist principals in providing services in their schools for children with disabilities. Five major areas of study emerged from the questionnaire. The content areas are as follows: (a) IDEA and legal requirements; (b) providing specialized instruction and related services; (c) monitoring academic achievement; (d) transition from elementary through post-secondary; and (e) Meeting the needs of student with disabilities and their families. As the partnership discussions continued, new modules were created across time. Based on these findings, the associate superintendent of exceptional education worked with the school district's professional development personnel in preparing modules of study in these five areas.

## The Modules

A series of online, web-based professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators, staff, and parents related to various aspects of ESE were built using a combination of PowerPoint presentations, visual effects, video profiles and scenarios, tutorials, and quizzes. The online modules included information, activities, and resources accessible for all participants. The modules were reviewed and edited by various members of the district ESE department. Parents of students with disabilities in the district also previewed and commented on suggested changes in the modules providing valuable feedback informing the district team from a parent's perspective. The module titles and their main ideas included a variety of topics gleaned from the needs assessment in areas ranging from compliance to instruction and family involvement. Each module contained an online survey to be completed at the end of the course in order to receive their certificate of completion (Martin, Bai, Diaz & Steinke, 2017).

| Sample Exceptional Student Education Professional Development Learning Modules | |
|---|---|
| Module Title | Sample Learning Goals |
| IDEA and Legal Requirements | 1. IDEA Legislation and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973<br>2. Maintaining Exceptional Student Education (ESE)<br>3. Program compliance and common dispute resolution options available to parents |
| Providing specialized instruction and related services | Principal's role in assuring full implementation of specialized instruction and related services for students with disabilities |
| Monitoring Academic Achievement | Their role in monitoring student achievement as it relates to Exceptional Education PreK-12 |
| Transition from Elementary through Post-Secondary | Understanding of the requirements for the provision of services for students with disabilities ages Pre-K to 22. |
| Meeting the needs of students with disabilities and their families | Strategies that maximize positive parent involvement |
| Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 | Overview and compliance of Section 504 |
| Building Inclusive Schools | 1.The meaning and benefits of inclusion<br>2. Essential elements to ensure effective inclusionary practices<br>3. Their role in implementing effective inclusionary practices<br>4. Various service delivery models for providing support to students with disabilities in the general education classroom |

The modules were introduced to school administrators in the fall of 2012 through communication from the Superintendent's office in collaboration with the ESE department. As a mandatory requirement from the Superintendent, all school and district administrators were provided with an overview of the requirements to complete the modules, including deadlines for completion. As a part of the final step in completing the modules and to receive their certificate of completion, each administrator was required to complete a quick questionnaire to indicate their satisfaction with the modules. Additionally, upon completion of the modules first full year of implementation and approximately six months after completing them, all administrators were

asked to take a survey to indicate what they learned as well as the impact of the professional development.

## Discussion

One might assume that inherent challenges would be a large part of any partnership, and the partnership between one of the largest school districts in the country and a large public university would be replete with issues. Yet this common belief was unfounded in this project. As university professors and school district leaders, we worked collaboratively and systematically to use the large data set we gathered from principals to inform the best practice modules that were developed. Our collaborative work certainly aligns with the thinking of Morten Hansen (2009) who stated that we can no longer work alone as school leaders but must work in partnership to accomplish more for the greater good of all. This sense of collaborative practice and professional respect led to a better understanding of what the needs of principals are while indicating the importance of connecting all the resources available. These findings concur with what Lupi and Martin (2005) found; that while skill and dispositions are critical, the "human" piece is critical as well.

While this research was conducted in a large urban school district in partnership with a large metropolitan university, the information is applicable to many school districts. The work truly addresses the title of the conference - City Meets Country: Educators Working to Solve the Challenges of Special Education. The on-line delivery modules were easy to access and were useful for all principals. Based upon the Council for Exceptional Children knowledge standards for special education administrators, confidence in the module content is assured. The content helped administrators to provide education to students with disabilities and information about the successful implementation of the IDEA (2004).

### Implementations

We believe our work has just begun. The school district continues to collect data regarding the modules and their impact on student learning. All principals need to be provided opportunities to learn what works with all students. Through the use of technology, those opportunities can be available at any time. We strongly suggest that school districts and universities form partnerships as a way of sharing what works in schools. We have found through partnership and collaboration, children with disabilities, as all students, are provided more current and effective best practices when principals know what they need to know.

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# TRAINING TEXAS SPECIAL EDUCATORS IN APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS VIA PROJECT-BASED DISTANCE LEARNING

This work was supported in whole or part by a grant from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). The opinions and conclusions expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the opinions or policy of the THECB.

**Abstract**

Everything is bigger in Texas. Texas' land mass, second only to that of Alaska, is larger than the 13 northeast states combined. Texas boasts a population second only to that of California, with a childhood population alone larger than 20 other states combined. But bigger is not necessarily better. One quarter of Texas children live in poverty, half do not attend preschool, and almost three-quarters of Texas fourth graders are not reading proficiently. Like the rest of the country, the number of children with autism is on the rise in Texas as well. Given the sheer size of the state, addressing the needs of Texas teachers and paraprofessionals of students with autism can be challenging. Here we describe the efficacy of an online, project-based model for training educators in applied behavior analysis.

## Introduction

Presently there are 54,098 students receiving special education programming in Texas under autism eligibility. However, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission estimates there are 130,316 Texans with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who are below 22 years of age. (Texas Council on Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders, 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 identifies autism as one of 14 categories under which a child may qualify for special education services. Under IDEA (2004), autism is defined as "a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance". Autism is referred to as a spectrum disorder, meaning that the degree to which autism affects the functional performance of children on the spectrum may differ considerably with respect to their abilities, intelligence, and behavior. Therefore, to meet eligibility criteria for special education and related services under IDEA, it is important to stress that the significance of the disability adversely affects the child's educational performance.

Early diagnosis and intervention are critical for children with autism to live, work, and participate fully in their communities. Under the Part C regulations of IDEA, the early intervention program for infants and toddlers with disabilities, children with autism may be

eligible for early intervention services as part of an individualized family service plan until transitioning into an individualized education program under Part B. Special education programs for students with autism typically focus on improving academics, behavior, communication, social, and daily living skills.

Behavior analysis, the science of how environment affects behavior, is the foundation upon which many successful educational programs for children with autism have been based. Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is the process of systematically applying interventions based on the principles of learning theory to improve socially significant behaviors to a meaningful degree (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968). A well-developed discipline, ABA is recognized as a mature body of scientific knowledge with established standards for evidence-based practice and distinct service methodologies (Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB), 2013). Research indicates that early intensive behavioral intervention may produce large gains in academic and functional skills, and reduce the need for further special services (Eikeseth, 2008; Eldevik et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2011).

In addition to research, an abundance of case law supports the use of ABA for children with autism. In G. v. Fort Bragg Dependent Schools (4th Cir. 2003) and Jaynes v. Newport New Public Schools (4th Cir. 2001) the complaint of the plaintiffs dealt specifically with ABA services not being provided in the public school setting. The children in each case showed significant improvement with the use of ABA techniques in the home, however, the schools refused to put ABA in place for these students as a related service. In both rulings the court found in favor of the parents for reimbursement for ABA services paid for out of pocket.

While the effects of early intensive behavioral services for children with autism is promising, such treatment requires the oversight of a professional who is particularly knowledgeable in behavior analytic procedures to develop and implement an individualized program that can be carried out at home and school. However, providing teachers with access to behavior specialists who have been trained to work with students with autism has been particularly challenging for rural districts. Here we present a model of distance inservice training for teachers and paraprofessionals that employs the principles of ABA to teach ABA.

## Methods

### Participants and Setting

To date, 221 teachers and paraprofessionals throughout Texas have participated in the project. To be selected for the training, participants must have been providing direct services to students, early childhood through grade 12, with either a medical diagnosis or special education eligibility of *autism*. Administrators and other professionals who did not provide direct services to students with autism were excluded from participation. Similarly, parents of children with autism and anyone outside the state of Texas were ineligible.

A total of 574 individuals signed up to participate in the distance ABA training program. Of these, 240 were selected to participate across three cohorts of 80. Each cohort was broken down into eight classes of ten participants each. An average of six individuals attritted from each

training cohort. Participants were selected from 66 different school districts and organizations throughout the state of Texas.

## Materials

Weekly, synchronous meetings were conducted via the Zoom® web conferencing platform at the Pro subscription level. Prior to class each week, the instructor would email a link with instructions to the class on how to join the meeting at the scheduled time. Teachers could participate in the meeting through either a computer, tablet, or smartphone with internet access. In between weekly class meetings, participants completed approximately 8-hours of asynchronous online video modules developed and hosted by Relias Learning® in accordance with the Registered Behavior Technician™ (RBT®) task list put forth by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board® (BACB®).

## Procedures

The online training was structured around five weekly synchronous meetings between a Board Certified Behavior Analyst® or Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst® instructor and classes of up to 10 participants each. In between classes, participants completed approximately eight hours of asynchronous video modules that covered the 37 items identified on the RBT task list (see Appendix A for a more comprehensive overview of the course content).

The first course consisted of introductions by the instructor and each of the participants, an outline of the training program, a brief overview of the behavior-analytic perspective, introducing the first homework assignment, and a pretest of declarative knowledge of the RBT task list. Prior to signing off for the week, participants were given a homework assignment to be completed by the subsequent class meeting in which they were to apply one or more of the behavior-analytic techniques discussed over the previous week within their own classroom.

The next three classes began with a recap of the previous weeks' discussion along with a chance for participants to ask questions about the video modules they completed since the last face-to-face meeting. This discussion was followed by a clinical review of the individualized projects developed by each teacher. One at a time, participants would describe the projects they had implemented over the course of the past week and present student data to demonstrate the efficacy of their intervention. This case staffing model allowed other participants to observe, listen, and engage with one another while providing constructive feedback to the presenting teacher. The participant-generated projects and accompanying student data provided the context for ongoing discussion regarding the acquisition and refinement of target behavior-analytic practices. Based on student performance, participants were posed with the task of determining whether to continue, alter, or discontinue their selected intervention.

The fifth and final synchronous meeting consisted of a brief review of each participants' projects followed by a post-test identical in length and structure to the pre-test completed on the first day of class. All participants who completed the requisite 40-hours of synchronous and asynchronous instruction were presented with a certificate to document their completion of the

RBT training program. No other components of RBT certification were included as part of the training.

## Results and Discussion

Two hundred twenty-one teachers and paraprofessionals who provided direct services to students with autism took part in a five-week, project-based, distance training program. As part of the project, participants completed pre- and post-tests on content knowledge. To measure the efficacy of the program, a paired t-test was conducted to examine the difference in pre- and post-test scores. There was a significant difference in the scores on the pre-test ($M$=56.82, $SD$=13.01) and the post-test ($M$=84.00, $SD$=11.42); $t(169) = 18.897$, $p < .001$. A follow-up one-way ANOVA was conducted on these data as well, and a significant difference was found on the pre/post-test scores for teachers and paraprofessionals of students with autism who completed the distance, project-based instruction [$F(1, 430) = 467.4$, $p < .001$]. Figure 1 shows side-by-side boxplots of the pre- and post-test scores across the five-week course.

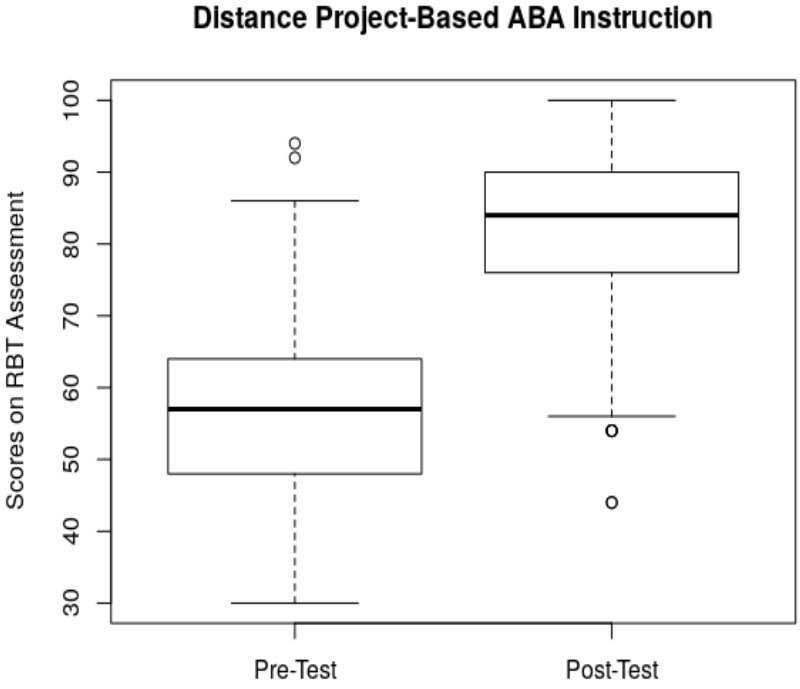


*Figure 1:* Boxplots showing the median, quartile, and range of participant scores on the pre-test (left) and the post-test (right).

Project-based, distance education appears to be a highly-effective method of shaping the behavior-analytic repertoire of inservice teachers and paraprofessionals who work with children with autism throughout the state of Texas. Project-based learning provides a means of

contingency-based selection of behavior-analytic skills to be applied in the classroom. Premised in evolutionary theory, project-based learning provides a framework for repeated practice from which more effective variations can be selected. Furthermore, this type of contingency-shaping provides a foundation to fall back on when a specific intervention is no longer effective.

Overall, participants reported that they benefited from the online video modules. The flexibility of the asynchronous modules afforded participants options to complete this aspect of instruction around their work schedules. However, the weekly synchronous meetings with a BACB-certified instructor were consistently listed as the highlight of the training. The blended components of synchronous and asynchronous instruction appeared to be an effective method for inservice training. Additional research should look more closely at the allocation of time and materials across blended formats to provide recommendations for best practices.

Applied behavior analysis continues to provide a data-based framework to assess present levels of functional performance, monitor student progress, and make programmatic decisions. The model we presented here employs behavior-analytic techniques (i.e., contingency-shaping) in an online instructional delivery format to train teachers and paraprofessionals throughout the state of Texas to work effectively with students with autism. The use of project-based instruction to facilitate meaningful learning experiences reaffirms the notion that teaching is more about selection and less about direction.

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**Appendix A**

| Weekly Topic | Task List Items Covered | Agenda for Synchronous Meetings |
|---|---|---|
| Week 1: Measurement | B-01; C-01; D-01; D-02; D-04; D-05; E-01; E-02; E-03; E-04; E-05; F-05 | -Welcome/Program Orientation<br>-Participant Introductions<br>-Overview of RBT Task List<br>-Pre-Test<br>-Project-Based Assignment |
| Week 2: Assessment | A-01; A-02; A-03; A-04; A-05; B-02; B-03; D-01; D-02; C-02; C-04; C-07; C-08; C-09; C-10; E-04 | -Module Content Review<br>-Teacher/Paraprofessional Case Presentations<br>-BCBA Facilitated Discussion<br>-Project-Based Assignment |
| Week 3: Skill Acquisition | B-04; C-04; C-05; C-07; C-08; C-09; C-10; D-01; D-02; D-03; D-04; D-05; D-06; E-04; F-05 | -Module Content Review<br>-Teacher/Paraprofessional Case Presentations<br>-BCBA Facilitated Discussion<br>-Project-Based Assignment |
| Week 4: Behavior Reduction; Documentation and Reporting | C-01; C-02; C-03; C-04; C-05; C-06; C-11; E-01; E-02; E-03; E-04; E-05 | -Module Content Review<br>-Teacher/Paraprofessional Case Presentations<br>-BCBA Facilitated Discussion<br>-Project-Based Assignment |
| Week 5: Professional Conduct and Scope of Practice | A-01; A-02; A-03; A-04; A-05; B-03; C-01; C-02; C-03; C-04; C-05; C-12; C-12; F-01; F-02; F-03; F-04; F-05 | -Module Content Review<br>-Teacher/Paraprofessional Case Presentations<br>-BCBA Facilitated Discussion<br>-Post-Test<br>-Course Evaluation |

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# PROGRESS MONITORING: EXPLORING BEST PRACTICES

## Abstract

Given that the majority of students with disabilities spend most of their instructional day in general education classrooms, it is critical that teacher preparation programs provide all teacher candidates with evidence-based practices to assist in monitoring and examining their teaching practices to ensure that students with special needs are progressing toward meeting their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals.

## Introduction

Historically poor educational outcomes have been reported for students with disabilities. To address these poor outcomes, IDEA (2004) mandates that educational teams not only identify goals that focus on the individual needs of a child with a disability, but also specify how the child's progress in attaining those goals will be measured and communicated to parents. The purpose of this requirement is to assure that teachers are continually informed about their students' progress in meeting IEP goals and parents are also informed of their child's progress or lack thereof prior to any IEP meeting. Since the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reports that 61.2% of all students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their time in general education classrooms daily, it is critical that general educators have the skills necessary to monitor their students' progress in meeting the student's IEP goals.

As a result of federal mandates coupled with the fact that most students with disabilities spend most of their instructional day in general education, teacher preparation institutes must prepare all teachers (general and special education) with the skills to frequently, systematically and consistently assess both their students' growth in meeting IEP goals and the teaching practices that address the skills delineated in the IEP goals. This ongoing practice of progress monitoring is supported in the literature as an evidence-based practice that results in increased student learning outcomes and effective teacher decision-making (Deno, 2003; Fuchs, Deno, & Mirkin, 1984; Good & Jefferson, 1998). Progress monitoring is one of the major factors that differentiates effective from ineffective instruction (Espin et al., 2009).

Despite research that supports progress monitoring as an evidence-based practice and legislation that safeguards positive outcomes for students with disabilities, the literature indicates

that students with disabilities continue to lag behind their non-disabled peers (Goodman, Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Duffy, & Kitta, 2011; U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Results of the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress further indicates that not only are the majority of students with disabilities not meeting state proficiencies, but the large achievement gaps between students with and without disabilities remain. Since students with disabilities have unique learning needs that often result in the most proven practices not producing the gains desired, teachers must be continually informed about the effectiveness of their instruction and its effect in achieving the required growth necessary to attain IEP goals. The ability to effectively use progress monitoring requires that teacher preparation programs provide preservice teachers with these critical skills.

As students with disabilities reach middle and high school grades, the achievement gap widens. To change the trajectory for students with disabilities, it is critical to match strategies with the unique needs of the student. Therefore, teachers must be continually informed about the effectiveness of their instructional practices and its' effect in achieving the required growth necessary to attain IEP goals (Roach, Chilungu, La Salle, Talapatra, & Vignieri, 2009). The Special Education Resource for General Education (SERGE; 2014) states that monitoring students' progress is a shared responsibility among educational team members to determine acquisition of IEP goals and objectives. Gathering this data is a critical responsibility and requires that information is collected by multiple team members such as general educators, related service personnel, fine arts teachers, as well as the special educator. In practice, however, the special education teacher's role is to coordinate the collection and monitoring of students' progress (ODE, 2015).

**Participants**

In a Midwest, public school district single case study, 14 licensed special education teachers and three related services personnel (one speech and language pathologist, one occupational therapist, and one physical therapist) participated in examining their progress monitoring reports to families. Professionals volunteered to examine a random sampling of the students' they serve progress monitoring reports. The participants' professional experience revealed that 82% ($n$=14) had ten or more years of experience; 11% ($n$=2) had seven-to-nine years of experience; and 5% ($n$=1) had less than three years of experience. Fifty-one progress reports were independently reviewed by the participating special education service providers where each service provider selected and reviewed three progress reports. Identifying information regarding the students was redacted prior to the evaluative process. Reports reviewed indicated that 73% of the students were male and 27% of the students were female.

**Data Collection**

Special Education teachers (59.6%) and educational assistants (36.0%) primarily collected progress monitoring data. The progress monitoring reports were gathered weekly and included narratives (75.6%) and percentages (61.0%) were the types of data most frequently used to determine progress toward IEPs.

## Findings

Progress reports were more often completed for children in Pre-K to grade 3 (38.8%) and most often for students categorized as Autistic (24.4%) or Other Health Impaired (22.0%). Reports reviewed by participants indicated that 80% of the reports noted that students made *some progress* toward IEP goals and *all* IEP goals had progress (61.0% IEP goals and 39% of the reports indicated progress toward some IEP goals).

Progress Reports reviewed by participants indicated that 84% of the reports noted that students met *some* to *all* IEP goals and 8% of the progress reports reviewed indicated changes to the instructional strategies were implemented as a result of the student's progress or lack thereof. Progress monitoring reports were primarily sent home with the child (70.7%) as opposed to being mailed or emailed to the students' parent(s).

## Implications

General educators did not have a significant role in gathering, analyzing data, or reporting students' progress, even though these students spent the majority of their instruction day in general education classrooms. While 84% of the progress reports indicated that the student either met *some* or *all* IEP goals and 16% did *not* meet the IEP goal; only 8% of the progress reports indicated any changes were made to instruction.

Findings from this study revealed that data was either absent or not reported in a manner that communicated to parents and other educational team members how progress toward IEP goals were assessed, and how instructional decisions were made. Although the letter and the spirit of IDEA (2006) encourages a partnership between parents and schools to develop educational plans for students with disabilities and to monitor students' progress in meeting the educational plans, in practice the reports lack clear communication in order to establish this partnership, which limited parents' ability to be active team members in their child's education.

Teacher training programs and sustained professional development must address the disparities of progress monitoring practices and the role they are to fulfill. Possibly providing a checklist on critical elements that should be included in progress monitoring reports would heighten teachers' awareness as to the varying aspects of progress monitoring. This can assist the teachers in developing progress reports that not only meet federal and state requirements, but are also meaningful in determining when a teaching practice specifically selected to address the needs of a particular student needs to be adjusted so that students may attain IEP goals.

A limitation to the study that adversely impacts its generalization was the number of IEP progress reports, the single district involved, and the limited demographics of the district whose documents were examined. Future studies which utilize multiple districts with varying demographics should be explored to further investigate the need for sustained professional development to assist educational teams in not only reporting students' progress in attaining IEP goals and objectives but to include parents and students in the process.

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# RURAL SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATORS' SKILLS NEEDED FOR EFFECTIVE INCLUSION CLASSROOMS

National, state, and local education groups in recent years have made extensive contributions to the body of research that defines effective teaching. These groups, including professional organizations, government agencies, state departments of education, universities, and even local school districts, mostly agree that defining effective teaching is a complex task because of the uniqueness of teachers and learners in each and every situation. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) through its Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC, 2013) provided an updated and expanded set of standards in 2013 that outlines what effective teaching looks like in evolving and improving educational school systems in the United States (NCATE, 2006). Their work has been widely accepted and referenced, and has been adopted as the benchmark by educational accrediting agencies such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), both of whom have merged with the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP).

Much of the research describing effective teaching does offer a consensus as to what it looks like in practice. However, when focused only on rural high-poverty schools, effective teaching has not been examined as extensively. Identifying effective teaching in rural high-poverty districts is complex and convoluted. Fortunately, groups such as the Rural Schools Collaborative (RSC) and the National Rural Education Association (NREA) are leading a movement to isolate characteristics relating to effective teaching in rural high-poverty communities.

The concept and practice of placing students with disabilities in their least restrictive environment has been mandated by law with the first setting on the continuum being the general education classroom (Lewis, Wheeler, & Carter, 2017). Since the middle 1980's, the inclusion phase began requiring students with disabilities to have equal citizenship as learners within the regular education classroom (Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, & Doughty, 2016). Notable research has been conducted on co-teaching, inclusion and the preparation of special educators to work collaboratively within the general education classroom (Friend & Cook, 2013; Ford, 2013). Additional research has been conducted on preservice and in-service teachers' as well as principals' attitudes toward inclusion (Shoulders & Krei, 2016; Chandler, 2015).

According to CAEP (2015), the purpose of an educator preparation program (EPP) is to ensure that future teachers have the knowledge and skills to support the development of all students. Although there is research on inclusion in rural districts (Hoppey, 2016), as well as guidelines for principals to implement inclusion in their schools (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Walsh, 2012), there is little data on administrator's perceptions of skill sets (Brinkmann & Twiford, 2012) needed for both general and special educators working together in rural area inclusion classrooms. Skill sets are critical job skills or abilities necessary to perform a job. Identifying and implementing these inclusion skill sets for both general and special educators can assist educator preparation programs to meet the unique needs of diverse learners in rural schools.

In the 21st century, principals' roles have become more diverse and challenging than ever (Lynch, 2012). Principals must now serve as instructional leaders, managers of personnel and funds, liaisons between the school and community, as well as great public relations advocates for their schools. Along with these multiple roles comes the huge responsibility to create an inclusion setting where everyone feels a sense of family and has the necessary support to experience success (Ngwokabuenui, 2013). Per Urton, Wilbert, and Henneman (2014), the principal's attitude toward inclusion may be a detrimental factor in determining whether a school culture reflects positive inclusion practices maximizing the learning opportunities for students with disabilities.

Literature regarding principal's perceptions toward inclusion provides further insight as to whether positive attitudes produced supportive inclusion practices. In a study by Ngwokabuenui (2013), results indicated principals' attitudes were positive toward students with disabilities being included in the general education setting. However, the data suggested that the principals' attitudes toward more severe disabilities such as intellectual disabilities and emotional disturbances leaned toward a more restricted environment. Since principals are the driving force to implement inclusion at the school site, they must be willing to embrace a leadership style that promotes these practices. Supportive principles organize and plan strategies that assist in meeting the needs of diverse learners (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015).

The recruitment of special education teachers is considered to be a priority for principals working in rural school districts in the twin states area of Alabama and Mississippi (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011). Due to this shortage, universities serving rural districts should examine and alter their educator preparation models for all certification areas to effectively impact P-12 student learning and development, classroom instruction, as well as address the constantly changing needs of diverse learners within rural inclusion classrooms.

The University of West Alabama (UWA) was recently named one of only four recipients for a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) program, (UWA, 2016). The purpose of the grant is to improve the preparedness of prospective and new teachers serving high-need communities in the Black Belt region of Alabama. The Rethinking Rural Education Preparation Programs Initiative (REP) will provide partnering schools with expert teachers who are well prepared in content, concepts, pedagogy, instructional practices, and clinical experiences that support rural students' achievements, which includes working in collaborative classrooms.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify administrators' perceptions of successful inclusion practices and the specific skill sets necessary to support effectual classrooms that meet the distinctive needs of P-12 learners in this rural high-poverty Black Belt region of Mississippi and Alabama.

A survey was delivered in early winter 2017 to principals in the focus region. The survey data results were intended to help effectively meet the needs of our educational partners by providing graduating candidates with theory and field-based applications, as well as an understanding of what administrators perceive as essential skill sets needed for educators in inclusion classrooms. Data from principals in the rural Black Belt areas indicated to faculty, university administrators, and field-based staff, the schools' needs and concerns about the candidates graduating from our educator preparation programs. Because of this, we wanted to identify critical skill sets not only through theory and prior research, but also to include what our administrators saw as essential skills for successful inclusion in today's rural schools of the Black Belt region of Alabama and Mississippi.

The Black Belt region is located in the twin states, Alabama and Mississippi. The Alabama counties are Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Crenshaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Pile, Russell, Sumter, and Wilcox. The Mississippi counties include Kemper, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, Lowndes, Monroe, Clay, Chickasaw, Pontotoc, Lee, and Prentiss. This region, formerly known for its cotton production, stretches along a 300-mile line from south central to central Alabama curving northward through Mississippi to Tennessee. This region has been identified by social scientists as a predominantly rural, lower socioeconomic environment, having a poverty rate of 30% or higher with a large minority population (Living Democracy, 2014).

# Methods

## Survey

A 35-question survey was developed through Qualtrics using a mixed methods approach to identify principals' perceptions of inclusion and skill sets needed for effectual inclusion classrooms in the Black Belt region. The survey, *School Administrators of the Black Belt Region of Alabama and Mississippi Perceptions of Educators' Skills Needed for Effective Inclusion Classrooms,* included: Consent to Participate (1 fill in the blank), Demographic/Training and Experience (11 multiple choice), Principal Perceptions (15 multiple choice), and Teacher Skill Sets (6 short and 2 multiple choice answer) questions.

Out of the 35 questions on the survey, two quantitative multiple answer questions were used to collect data on teacher skill sets. Four short answer qualitative questions were used to collect data on teacher responsibilities and skill sets. Two separate questions asked principals to list specific responsibilities of general and special education teachers. The last two short answer

questions asked respondents to identify any additional skill sets that they perceived as needed by general and special education teachers.

Email addresses were selected from online data provided through the Alabama and Mississippi Departments of Education. A total of 257 email addresses were used to invite principals in schools within the Black Belt region to participate in the anonymous online survey. Three separate emails were sent to principals in public schools in the Black Belt region. The initial email explained the purpose of the research and invited the principals to participate in the anonymous online survey. The second email was sent one week after the first email as a reminder that the principal still had time to participate in the study if they chose to do so. The last email was sent two days before the data collection ended as a final reminder that the survey would be closing soon. The online survey was available to invited participants for a two-week period.

## Results

A total of 41 respondents logged on to the link and opened the survey. Thirty-nine individuals, 15% of the potential participants, completed the survey. Demographic data indicated that 51.28% of the participants were male and 48.72% female. Data also indicated that 56.41% of the participants were from Alabama and 43.59% from Mississippi.

The last training and experience question (#12) in the survey asked principals to indicate which model of inclusion/co-teaching was most frequently used in their school. The largest percentage, 33.33% of the participants, responded that the *One Teach – One Assist* model was the most commonly used. The next two largest percentages, at 17.95% each, were *Alternative Teaching* and *Team Teaching*.

The analysis of the data reported in this research paper and presentation as it relates to teacher skill sets, focused on six questions from the survey. Information provided in questions #28 and #29 were designed to collect quantitative data focusing on which skills were needed by educators in inclusion classrooms. Of the seventeen choices in each of these questions, only five had similar counts and percentages for both general and special education teachers. These included allowing children with disabilities to experiment, analyze and explore, implementing behavioral plans, equal participation within IEP and team meetings, communicating with parents of students within the inclusion classroom, and variation of types of assessments for students with disabilities.

In six of the choices in questions #28 and #29, principals perceived some skills to be more important for general educators. These included providing appropriate activities that present information and content in different ways, facilitating positive interactions between all learners, knowledge of subject matter, high expectations of all students in the inclusion classroom, effective parent collaboration, and collaboration between all students within the inclusion classroom.

In eight of the choices in questions #28 and #29, principals perceived some skills to be more important for special educators, such as collaboration between all teachers in the

classroom, conflict resolution skills, collection and interpretation of data for students with disabilities, providing supports for students with disabilities to be successful in social and behavioral aspects of the classroom and school environment, handling personal care needs of students with disabilities (toileting, etc.), continuous communication with the special/general education teacher working in the inclusion classroom, and teaching students with disabilities to self-monitor in the inclusion classroom.

Qualitative data was gathered from the survey through questions that asked for the principals' perceptions of the responsibilities of the general education teacher (#32) and the special education teacher (#33). Data indicated seven common perceptions for both general and special education teachers. These similar patterns were co-teaching, planning, differentiated instruction, appropriate instructional strategies based on the disability, collaboration as a strategy to be used by both teachers, knowledge of special education law, and working with all students within the classroom. A theme identified by both general and special education teachers was planning, although one respondent wrote that the special education teacher should be allowed to take the lead in planning. Several additional points of view that focused primarily on the responsibilities of special educators included progress monitoring, helping the teacher with instruction and assisting inclusion students, and small group and individualized instruction with students with disabilities.

The qualitative data from questions #34 and #35 identified more common areas listed for general and special educators than in the quantitative questions #28 and #29. In the thematic analysis of responses from questions #34 and #35, the most reoccurring themes were differentiation and knowledge and awareness of the different types of disabilities. One respondent wrote, "Differentiation is expected, and there is no room for a rigid, 'one size fits all', curriculum." Eighty-percent of this theme was identified as a skill set needed for general educators, but only 20% identified it as needed for special educators. Data from the second theme, knowledge and awareness of disabilities, also indicated that 80% of general educators and 20% of special educators needed this skill set. Comments from a participant indicated "It would be beneficial for general education teachers to understand how each student's disability impacts him or her and how to meet those students where they are, in order to close the achievement gap. Another respondent wrote concerning skill sets needed for the special educator that more knowledge about the development and specific disabilities of the students is needed.

Other reoccurring themes were behavior management and working as a team or collaboration. Respondents indicated that both general and special education teachers needed better behavior management skills. It was also noted that special educators needed additional writing skills for developing behavior intervention plans and guidance on working collaboratively. Respondents also indicated that general education teachers should collaborate and be willing to invite the inclusion teacher into shared ownership of the classroom. Other respondents suggested that special education teachers need collaborative skills as well as an understanding of the demands of the general education curriculum. Responses indicated the need for both general and special educators to have experience and training in co-teaching.

## Discussion and Implications

Rural school districts struggle to provide an appropriate education to students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Recruiting special education teachers in rural districts is a high need in the Black Belt region of Alabama and Mississippi. Because of these shortages, all future teachers working in the inclusion classroom should be prepared through the development of skill sets that support all learners.

Examination of the data from the survey, *School Administrators of the Black Belt Region of Alabama and Mississippi Perceptions of Educators' Skills Needed for Effective Inclusion Classrooms*, provided information that will help the University of West Alabama redevelop its educator preparation program by aligning skill sets within courses for both general and special education preservice teachers. Knowledge and awareness of the different types of disabilities and specific strategies for working with individuals from the thirteen disability categories of autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairments should not only be provided for special educators, but also for teachers in the general education classroom.

Further analysis of the qualitative data indicated that principals believe co-teaching, planning, and collaboration, knowledge of special education law, and working with all students within the classroom were important responsibilities of both general and special education teachers. As the University of West Alabama's (UWA) educator preparation program revises its curriculum to include these skill sets for all EPP candidates, these common characteristics will be observed through our signature assessments, field-based experiences, and direct instruction and collaborative activities within the courses taken within the certification program areas.

In fall of 2018, a follow-up survey will be developed related to the skill sets identified in this survey. Principals within the Black Belt region will be invited to participate in an effort to analyze changes in perceptions of inclusion classrooms and the effectiveness of UWA's EPP program in preparing both general and special education teachers to work collaboratively.

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# SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL INSTRUCTION FOR PHYSICAL/HEALTH IMPAIRED STUDENTS: COMPARING MONTESSORI PRACTICE AND INTENTIONAL TEACHING STRATEGIES

## Background on the Study Setting and the Authors

Authors Peter Kopriva, Ed.D. and Sijmontje Renema-Kopriva, M.A. are a married couple who have been involved with the education of students for a number of decades. Home and work are located in the large metropolitan city of Fresno, CA. Fresno is one of the largest cities in the Central Valley of California. Although a metropolitan and thriving city of nearly one million citizens, the valley in which it sits is considered "The World's Food Basket" because of the enormous amount of fruit and other agricultural crops grown in the valley. We reside in a largely rural area of the state while experiencing a continued population growth that includes diverse ethnicities, as well as a growing array of cultures. Former Fresno Pacific University President D. Merrill Ewert (2006) stated, "While Fresno County is the nation's most productive agricultural region, 23 percent of the residents and 32 percent of the children live in poverty. About one-third of high school freshmen drop out of school and unemployment is often at 14 percent" (p. 8). Urbanization continues in key areas that support industry, jobs, and homes for families. Like the state itself, population growth is constant, yet the rural nature of our San Joaquin Valley is changing. The dynamics of these changes are very evident in our schools. Diversity and cultural awareness are ongoing and necessary themes within our educational community.

The authors of this study have enjoyed educational careers that include preschool, elementary school, and university instruction. Renema-Kopriva has been an elementary classroom special education teacher for the physically and health impaired in the Fresno Unified School District of Fresno, California for more than three decades. Fresno Unified School District is among the five largest school districts in the state and currently has student enrollment approaching or exceeding 80,000 students. Kopriva is a faculty-member within the School of Education at Fresno Pacific University (FPU) in Fresno, California. FPU is a private Christian University serving approximately 4,400 undergraduate and graduate students on the main campus and up and down the Central Valley via satellite campuses. The University's online programs serve thousands of students throughout the United States and around the world. Previous faculty responsibilities included Special Education Division Chair with a robust

teaching load of select special education courses, as well as supervision of teacher candidates. Desiring change and an opportunity to be involved in teaching responsibilities for a newly developed and approved degree program in Early Childhood Development, Kopriva has spent the last decade explicitly focused on the training of adults enrolled in a specialized, accelerated degree completion program. Never tiring of the field of study that holds a focus on individuals that live with disabilities, he continues to hold strong professional interest in special education, particularly in early childhood, physical and health impairments, and intellectual disabilities.

The specific study outlined in this article is a result of Kopriva applying for and receiving a University Faculty Research Grant for Academic Year 2015-2016 to support ongoing faculty research in select areas of active research and instruction for students in need of skill-building in areas of social understanding and development. The grant provided needed funds to purchase teaching materials and equipment. The majority of the money was used for the provision of a professional photographer who captured select pictures and video-recordings of teaching and instructional time with students. With a continued emphasis on helping children understand unique qualities of themselves, this project also attempted to discover select class discussions, children's literature, puppets, music, play, lessons and activities that highlight the commonalities that the children might share with one another. Friendship, caring, empathy, kindness, joy, disappointment, fear, and anger/frustration were all qualities of life that were focal points during the academic year. In order to increase social skill areas of high need in each student, the key to each of these planned instructional times would be to compare and contrast lessons designed and implemented using Montessori Inspired Teaching and Intentional Teaching Strategies. Both educators, while not possessing formal Montessori Teacher Training, have read and studied Montessori Education for years and hold memberships in Montessori professional organizations. Backgrounds in the use of Intentional Teaching and Direct Teaching with students who experience special learning needs have fostered the desire to compare both Montessori Practices and Intentional Teaching Strategies in the educational setting of Edith Storey Elementary School. The intention of the Pilot Study was to continue needed skill development in vital areas of social/emotional growth and understanding in each student enrolled in Renema-Kopriva's classroom, as well as to attempt to determine whether one method of instruction held added benefit for both the teachers and students or if they might be similar in terms of planning and providing instruction. Regardless of the study's outcome, the couple clearly understood from teaching and personal experience, that individuals who live with disabilities and/or the additional burden of social-skills deficits pay a tremendous price in terms of academic achievement, fostering and enjoying friendships, and meeting societal expectations in school, home, and the greater community. This concern, matched with the desire to continue assisting students in building and attaining new insights and skills pertaining to social expectations and understanding consistent with their developmental levels, led the two to plan and implement the study that will be shared as a presentation at the 2017 ACRES Conference.

**Pilot Study Setting and Methods**

The proposed work with children during School Year 2015-2016 was intended to continue the identification, instruction, and improvement of social skills areas of high need in individual students in the study. This intentional action research was planned with the classroom teacher and the school principal of Edith Storey Elementary School, who approved the elements

of the study. Prior to implementation of the study, students in Renema-Kopriva's classroom had been assessed and, with parental permission, were receiving social skills instruction under a previous project authorization. A new authorization form was prepared and issued to all parents, requesting to continue instruction and authorize use of photography and video during the study. Additionally, IRB guidelines set forth by Fresno Pacific University were followed, and the appropriate documentation for approval of the new project was granted prior to any work being initiated with students.

The research methodology used in this study is Qualitative Design. Each student in the study had been individually evaluated and monitored in a previous project. Data were collected, analyzed, and graphed using the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) Rating Scale. Documentation and knowledge of student levels of needs in strengthening skills were carried over to the new approved project. The Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) authored by Gresham and Elliot (2008) was the main mode of assessment and instruction used in the study. Student performance levels, using criterion-referenced descriptions of classroom behavior in the SSIS Rating Scale, were used to determine what skill areas were most in need of improvement. The SSIS Rating Scales enable targeted assessment of individuals and small groups to help evaluate social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence. Teacher, parent, and student forms helped provide a comprehensive picture of a student's use and understanding of social skills, competing problem behaviors, and academic competence across school, home, and community settings.

The four skill areas evaluated by the SSIS are (a) pro-social behavior; (b) motivation to learn; (c) reading skills; and (d) math skills. Student performance levels using criterion-referenced descriptions of classroom behavior in the SSIS Rating Scale were obtained. The students selected for study indicated the following areas of high need for improvement: (a) listen to others; (b) follow the rules; (c) pay attention to your work; (d) ask for help; (e) stay calm with others; and (f) do the right thing. Along with adding SSIS instruction material, Kopriva and Renema-Kopriva decided to introduce planned lessons and instruction which also follow Common Core State Standards (CCSS; 2010): Literature, Art, Music, Written/Oral Communication, and Play. Individualized Education Plans contained CCSS embedded in the Goals/Objectives set forth for each student, with the teacher, Renema-Kopriva, responsible for the design and implementation of instruction. Among these stated needs were areas within social/emotional growth and understanding, determined to be of high necessitate for the student.

Is the school and the setting of this study representative of the community of Fresno, CA? Are students and their parents' representative of other schools and community populations within the greater city? The setting of the project is based in a highly diverse culturally and linguistically rich elementary school that provides education to well over one thousand students, many of whom live in modest or impoverished family units. One focus of the study is personal diversity in an effort to help the children realize that it is one area of their lives that requires understanding and, optimistically, will develop an appreciation in themselves and others. Diversity is valued and celebrated at Edith Storey Elementary School.

Time and attention was spent in preparing lessons and discussion periods to share with students on the topic of self-advocacy. Understanding its meaning and the responsibility they

have for speaking up for themselves was one of many critical topic areas. Brown, Anderson, and De Pry (2015) wrote:

> Self-determined actions are identified by four essential characteristics: 1) the person acts autonomously, 2) the behavior is self-regulated, 3) the person initiates and responds to the event(s) in a psychologically empowered manner, and 4) the person acts in a self-realizing manner." (p. 321)

The importance of self-advocacy for individuals that live with disabilities really cannot be overstated. Raymond Loomis championed that choices and desires must be voiced by those who frequently are silenced or not properly paid attention to in society. He explained the aim of the self-advocacy movement in this way: "If you think that you are handicapped, you might as well stay indoors. If you think you are a person, come out and tell the world" (as cited in Williams & Shoultz, 1982, p. 17).

Specific to the Pilot Study was the desire on the part of the authors to experience "hands on" learning as teachers investigating the distinct differences/similarities that are held within Intentional Teaching and that of Montessori Inspired Teaching. Lessons and instruction were planned using each model in an effort to surmise the effectiveness of the model, along with teacher satisfaction of the experience and success of each planned lesson. It was understood by both authors that, in the face of increased expectations under CCSS, classroom teachers remain committed to also meeting students' needs for meaningful social, physical, and artistic experiences. Teachers interacted with students in ways that respected the students' different personalities, varying levels of development and abilities, diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and individual modes of inquiry and learning.

Life today means enduring numerous challenges in a complicated, distracting world. Things come fast and people appear to expect fast and spontaneous responses from others. Galinsky (2010) noted, "It is clear that there is information children need to learn–facts, figures, concepts, insights, and understandings. But we have neglected something that is equally essential–children need life skills" (p. 1). Kopriva and Renema-Kopriva's experiences and personal beliefs in teaching dictated that in order to attain skill development in the lessons aimed at promoting understanding, there would need to be good amounts of play, music, art, reading, storytelling, and most certainly the opportunity to share in conversations together before, during, or following lessons. Authors such as Drapeau (2014); Miller and Almon (2009); Gronlund (2010); Lucado (1997); Hoffman and Binch (1991); and Harris and Westcott (2012) suggested that, without allotting for self-discovery through planned activities with others and/or in activities of learning and play, schools are not supporting an understanding of self and/or others. In support of such learning for children, Dinkmeyer (1970) created Developing Understanding of Self and Others (DUSO). Within a large blue metal case, Dinkmeyer provided a myriad of planned lessons for assisting students in understanding and appreciating themselves and others. Inside this case was real magic for young children, in the form of puppets, music, photographs, and countless other wonderful things that could spark their interest and curiosity. DUSO the Dolphin was available to take them on adventures. In the early 1970's, Kopriva embraced the use of this kit with his young preschool students who experienced physical and health impairments. Great success was had with DUSO, and as fate would have it, a DUSO Kit was obtained on eBay

in time to be used on this project! Although older than when in his twenties and excited to be a newly credentialed special education teacher, Kopriva's use of the DUSO Kit during the year of this study proved that its effectiveness with children, in the learning and sharing of themselves with classmates, never went out of style. This nearly fifty-year-old DUSO Kit will be used and enjoyed with many young children in future work that has a focus of social skills strengthening and the understanding of oneself and others.

Epstein (2014), distinguished author and early childhood educator, clarified what she believes to be the guiding element of a teacher who desires to approach the craft of teaching in a thoughtful and reflective manner:

> *The Intentional Teacher* sets forth the rationale for a blended approach that combines what I call *child-guided learning* and *adult-guided learning* experiences. I use the term *child guided learning* to refer to experience that proceeds primarily along the lines of children's interests and actions, although teachers often provide materials and other support. The term *adult-guided learning* I refer to experience that proceeds primarily along the lines of the teacher's goals, although that experience may also be shaped by children's active engagement. (p. xii-xiii)

Moreover, Epstein (2014) recommended that, regardless of whether children are engaged in child-guided or adult-guided experiences, teachers continually play a vital educational role by creating supportive environments and scaffolding learning.

One of the greatest innovators in education and cognitive psychology was Maria Montessori. Unlike other famous well-known innovators of her time, such as Jean Piaget and John Dewey, Montessori's work was extremely practical. She was less interested in why children did things at a certain time than in providing ways to support and enhance healthy development and learning. Seldin and Epstein (2006) wrote about the wonder that Dr. Montessori experienced as she observed students engaged in learning: "Maria Montessori discovered that when young children concentrate and investigate a set of purposely designed activities, they tend to develop self-control; their movements become ordered, and they appear peaceful. Their demeanor towards others becomes kind and gentle" (p. 10). Though child-size furniture, objects for young mathematicians to manipulate, and the innovations we now call *hands-on learning* are almost universally accepted today, Montessori originated them all. Furniture designed and sized for a three-year-old child was almost impossible to find as recently as thirty years ago. Dr. Montessori was promoting and providing these thoughtful, educational innovations and practices in 1907. Her ideas regarding how all children benefit from well-designed instruction are now common practice.

Zink's (2009) *Montessori for Everybody Complete Home Study Cours*e provided the foundation for planning and use of Montessori Theory/Practice when preparing and designing instruction for the children. The course contains instructional manuals, videos, examples of lessons, and materials commonly used with young students across academic and social learning environments. Dr. Montessori acknowledged that the emphasis she placed on preparation of the environment was likely the main characteristic by which people identified her method. Planning a supportive environment for instruction, using effective teaching strategies, building positive

relationships between classmates and teachers, and finally, teaching and improving desired social skills through effective intervention were all imperative to the authors of this study.
Questions asked prior to initiation of this study were:

1. Will subjects identified as having high need social skills deficits increase these abilities with the explicit instruction resulting from this study?
2. Will subjects show evidence of skill development in high need areas across conditions commonly encountered at school during the duration of this study?
3. What are the effects using Intentional Teaching as foundation for instructional planning and teaching as compared to Montessori Inspired Practice? What conclusions can be drawn between the two instructional approaches when working with the children?

Work on this project began in fall 2015 when a photographer, with whom the authors' had previous experience, was hired. Prior to Christmas 2015, select activities were photographed and recorded, and the girls and boys were shown media of themselves engaged in these activities. During the fall, lessons were offered using The Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) with lessons made available in small group settings. These were composed of students that appeared to enjoy such group instruction together. Skills learned and practiced within the classroom were then observed throughout the school day in different settings with other students, then documented by the classroom teacher, her teaching assistants, and, when on campus, the co-author of the study.

During spring 2016, eighteen formal days were planned for developing and offering lessons to the students with a focus on those select skills discussed earlier in this article. Lessons were divided equally between planning and implementing these in a manner that would be considered Intentional Teaching with activities deliberately infused with a good deal of teacher directed assistance and monitoring until lessons were completed by each student. Alternatively, Montessori Inspired Teaching lessons and activities received less teacher direction, as made apparent through the photography and video. Once materials were made available, students were allowed to use their time and engage in the activities as they desired. The two teachers' excitement when preparing and offering the activities caused the students to anticipate these activities as well. More than eighteen days of individual and small group instruction over a period of approximately eight weeks was conducted. Small group instruction was provided for four students using the SSIS as one means of determining if instruction was beneficial to them.

**Findings**

Findings indicated that all of the lessons made available were beneficial, though the two specific models of instruction resulted in a noted difference. Although each lesson had a similar objective, once students were left alone to engage and enjoy the Montessori Inspired activities, many quickly faltered and did not or could not complete all portions of the activity without adult assistance and encouragement. The authors' noticed, time and again, that student interest was quickly lost because working without assistance was either too difficult or too taxing. Or could it have been because the students were accustomed to having assistance in their learning? Both authors of the study found that they enjoyed the two forms of lessons, but, without question, lessons offered using Intentional Teaching, with a high degree of teacher involvement with individual students, indicated higher student productivity. Interest in the lessons offered was so high that students who missed a lesson due to illness or therapy sessions were anxious to have a

"make-up" lesson, following reports from classmates of how they enjoyed the lesson. Of course, it was not always possible to provide a make-up session for one or more students who were absent on a given day, but frequent efforts were made to honor the requests.

The opportunity to duplicate this study with similar age students or students who experience different disabilities would lend information that could show different impressions of the two distinctly different teaching methods. Our belief–that time devoted to improvement in social skills of high need with each student would indicate the strengthening of those skill areas–proved to be correct. One premise Kopriva and Renema-Kopriva hold to be true is that for many students, these students in particular, incidental learning of social skills likely will be ineffective, yet intentional teaching can be extremely effective. However, time is essential to the process, yet with the structures of the school setting, it is often insufficient.

**Authors' Inspiration and Closing Thoughts**

The authors' inspiration for teaching and for their work with students, families, and their community stems from an interest in humanity in general. Kopriva and Renema-Kopriva follow the examples forged by others before them: pioneers from different walks of life, including educators, psychologists, medical specialists of all sorts, and talented individuals, who have followed their star in the arts. Some, very specifically, have been religious and sought to improve lives through their example of work and prayer. Kopriva and Renema-Kopriva believe their work with physically and health impaired students contains a spiritual component. Individuals such as Hernandez (2006), like Nouwen (1997) before him, support Kopriva and Renema-Kopriva's conviction that human imperfection should simply be accepted as a part of human life. Given this, the authors cannot help but conclude that those who live with disabilities are full human beings, worthy of respect and love (Vanier, 1998). Marion (2011) discussed at length what he ascertains as the three necessary components of spiritual growth for the individual: the mastery of meditative states of consciousness, the realization of cognitive states of awareness, and the pursuit of psychological awareness or wholeness.

How do people become aware of the presence of the sacred in their lives? Stillness and silence help to provide this opportunity, and an individual's heart assists in clarification, providing direction to follow in order to experience the divine in this life (Kopriva & Renema-Kopriva, 2016). McCarroll (2001) explained that awareness of the sacred was likely less difficult for our primitive ancestors who experienced the whole natural world as sacred reality. The rational, the practical, the psychological, and the spiritual aspects of life were all integrated, and they were all sacred. The quest for the sacred has continued to be a part of the way in which many, perhaps most, women and men have unfolded the wonder of their humanity. Teaching approached in a manner of preparing oneself to be attuned and fully engaged with students can offer educators an opportunity to become more fully human; that is, more compassionate, gentle, forgiving, understanding, and filled with the joys of life and human interaction.

Personal experience and years of study have taught the authors that if adequate attention is not given to learning needed skills, this will create an untold burden on students and those with whom they interact at home, in school, and in their community. Inadequate social skills will contribute to poor academic achievement, strained or non-existent relationships, and even

violence against themselves and others. For these reasons and more, the topic of social skill deficits and the need for deliberate, well-planned, and explicit instruction to counter these deficits is relevant, regardless of a person's status as an educator, administrator, parent, or community member.

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# THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION IN RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

The evolution of Response to Intervention (RTI), its legislative and research-based structure and impact (issues and benefits) on students, service personnel, and administrators in rural special education settings, is an ever evolving concept. RTI as an educational concept is embedded in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 and the final regulations published in June 2005. The new legislation is less about compliance and accountability and more about prevention and early intervention, whereas the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which replaced the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, removed all the national features and turned over all of the components to the individual states. The ESSA (2015) and IDEA (2004) both require research-based models that consist of dependable screening and progress monitoring of student responses to evidence-based instruction. They also require the use of data to be compatible with instructional interventions for areas of specific student need as soon as those needs become apparent. The process requires documentation that lack of achievement is not due to lack of appropriate instruction.

Individual schools are required under the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act/Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA/ESSA) to strategically plan and develop a needs assessment process involving all stakeholders. This process leads to a multi-tiered support system that includes a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based systemic practices that support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making. The multi-tiered system should be designed to address needs for professional development, resources, and specific outcomes for students (Knoff, 2017). Schools should not depend on just one RTI Model; special educators should help school personnel identify or design a model that meets the needs of their unique students.

Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010) maintained that there are two conceptualizations of the RTI process; one that is embedded in the IDEA (2004) and one in NCLB (2001). The IDEA group seeks intervention for students, primarily delivered through application of standard protocol interventions. The NCLB group seeks intervention for students, primarily delivered

through problem solving models. According to Searle (2010), protocol models (standardized programs) may be limited and may not accommodate the needs of all; they have weak buy-in because educators have no input in the creation of the model. However, the benefits of the protocol model (standardized program) are efficient training that focuses on one predetermined research-based intervention for a specific problem, easy fidelity monitoring, and decrease in meeting time. The problem solving model requires team members to possess a high level of expertise in many areas, the training and intervention design is more time consuming and monitoring such a fluid procedure is difficult. The benefits of the problem solving model include flexible custom plans that fit the learner and the educator, plans that can be modified to meet individual needs and the strong buy-in because of educator input.

The ESSA (2015) and IDEA (2004) have language that predicts comparable educational results. ESSA recommends the use of scientifically based reading instruction, while IDEA mandates that children should not be placed in special education resulting from poor, inadequate instruction. Consequently, IDEA and ESSA gave the legal burden to states and districts for implementing Response to Intervention (RTI). IDEA (2004) allowed for the use of scientific, research-based interventions, but did not require the use of those interventions. The law further stated that RTI cannot be excluded if a school district decides to use it (IDEA, 2004).

Not only does IDEA encourage the use of evidence-based interventions, but it also emphasizes early intervention services. The foundation of IDEA has been to intervene early to help prevent a child from having to receive special education services. RTI uses federal special education funds to support children who are at risk through a tiered model of service using research based strategies, positive behavioral supports, and evidence-based instruction.

Due to issues with timeline expectations and the disproportionate placement of some students with special needs, it has become difficult to implement an appropriate identification process in any school system. Although it is easier to adopt one model to utilize, it is not the model as much as it is the implementation process designed by a particular school system that is the key to success. Many school personnel have not studied or utilized more than one RTI model and do not understand the options available. Furthermore, there is a need for a consistent operational definition of RTI frameworks (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Berkley et al., 2009; Bradley, 2007; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Fuchs et al, 2010; Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Martinez, Nellis, & Prendergast, 2006; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010;). There is also a need for training and follow-up training (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Daly, Martens, Barnett, Witt, & Olson, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2011; Greenfield et al. 2008; Hollenbeck, 2007; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007; LaRocco & Merdica, 2009; Lyon & Weiser, 2009; Martinez et al., 2006; Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009; Samuels, 2008; Torres, 2015). In addition, training should incorporate pre-service (universities) and in-service within the school setting (Kratochwill et al. 2007).

Since the special education statute includes protocols and procedures for continuous examination regarding implementation of services as well as the roles and expectations for administrators and educators serving students with special needs, it is important to reevaluate the utilization of service delivery models (Zirkel, 2015). Referring a student for special education services must be prompted initially by reliable data gathered during the initial phases (Taylor,

Smiley, & Richards, 2015). Each phase in the process must be evaluated and results reported to assist special education personnel with the provision of services to qualifying students. RTI is now being implemented in a number of states to replace the over forty year old discrepancy model, or used in addition to the discrepancy model. Although the IDEA (2004) indicates that a local educational agency may utilize the RTI model as part of the intervention process, legal protections and ramifications concerning the IDEA requirements of individualized assessments are often overlooked during the evaluation process. Sugai and Horner (2009) pointed out that there is little evidence supporting the use of RTI in what they call "high stakes decisions for students" (p. 226). Even the potential use of assessments conducted in the general education classroom that are not always formal in nature, as still required by the law, may lead to legal issues. Many have questioned whether RTI can be defended as the sole determinant of eligibility for learning disabilities (Fiorello et al., 2006; Flanagan et al., 2006; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2010; Hale et al., 2010; Hale et al., 2006; Hollenbeck, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Machek & Nelson, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005; McKenzie, 2009; Ofiesh, 2006; Reschly, 2005; Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009; Spencer, & Daley, 2006; Torres, 2015). For example, the Georgia Department of Education Department of Exceptional Children (GADOE-DEXC) maintained that there is a place for both RTI and the ability-achievement discrepancy model in the instruction and assessment of students suspected as having a disability. Flanagan, Ortiz, Afonso, and Dynda (2006), Willis and Dumond (2006), and Shinn (2007), also agreed that there is a place for both RTI and the achievement discrepancy model in the instruction and assessment of students suspected as having a disability.

Another issue to be considered is the proper provision of individualized services to students with special needs. It is evident that it is important to identify the factors that lead to student success in any inclusive classroom. All school personnel involved in the referral and placement process to serve students with disabilities need training when the process is changed, often requiring more funding (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Friedman, 2010; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). In rural settings where services may be limited, funding would in all likelihood be a major issue. General education and special education teachers who do not receive adequate inclusionary training and administrative support will probably not have the ability to implement effective inclusionary strategies (Gehrke & Cocchiarella, 2013). Additionally, special education teachers may receive more training about special education laws and procedures than general education teachers (Wang, Hall, & Rahimi, 2015).

Kame'enui (2007) noted that it is not a small matter to use the RTI Model as a substitute component to identify students with learning disabilities under federal law. Now the general education teachers, interventionists, and administrators will be faced with the challenge of providing the due process protections of the law and ensuring that students with disabilities receive the appropriate identification, placement, and service required under the IDEA, sometimes without the close scrutiny provided in the past by special education administrators and staff. Kovaleski (2007) stated that the IDEA (2006) clearly places the burden on the principal at each school to ensure that school-wide programs, core curriculum, and supplemental interventions are implemented with fidelity as well as provide the additional pre-service and in-service training needed to ensure proper monitoring and assessing of student progress. Intervention specialists without special education background and training may be responsible

for scheduling students, forming groups for instructional purposes, and determining what assessments will be utilized. Without significant collaboration with trained personnel who understand the needs of students with disabilities, litigation will be forthcoming since the RTI assessment process does not replace the need for a comprehensive evaluation, not just RTI assessment data, and instruction provided by qualified personnel (IDEA, 2006). Zirkel (2007) also added that services under the IDEA are not limited to just scientifically based instruction, broadening this to include other types of support for students with special needs, including the doubling and tripling of service time. Additionally, teaching other subjects, such as spelling, may need to be added to the schedule for some students with special needs who are performing significantly below grade level.

As the process of evaluation for students with disabilities evolves, it is evident that some positive and negative aspects need to be considered. On the positive side, looking at different ways to evaluate students provides more options for teachers and more success for students with different needs. Evaluation should be conducted on a regular basis to ensure student success when utilizing different intervention programs. If the problem solving model is utilized, including flexible custom plans that fit the learner and the educator, then individual needs will probably be met. On the negative side, if the RTI Model is utilized exclusively, individual student success may not always be evident. Time constraints may lead to the inability to follow the legally designed education plans. If the time allotted for instruction is not honored, as stated on the individualized education plan, the student may not be able to succeed.

In summary, more than one service delivery model may be needed to properly serve students requiring specialized instruction and additional time to complete assignments successfully. If special education students in inclusive classrooms are being served in groups for instructional purposes, any specific programs required for those students must be utilized. Students may not respond to services provided in inclusive classrooms unless the individual success rates of each student are considered. It is also more important to properly implement whatever model is selected than it is to single out one specific model as ideal. Services should not be limited to just scientifically based instruction, allowing teachers to utilize any programs that lead to student success. Without ongoing training through teacher inservices that will sometimes require additional funding by school districts, it would be highly unlikely that current research and study findings would be provided to all teachers working with students with individual needs. Also, without significant collaboration with all school personnel who understand the needs of students with individualized education programs, litigation will be forthcoming.

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