INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL EDUCATION



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EDEL 110: Introduction to Special Education

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1: WHY BECOME A TEACHER

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

1. Articulate their personal motivations for pursuing a career in teaching and connect those motivations to their developing professional identity.
2. Distinguish between teacher centered and student centered approaches to instruction and explain the implications of each for student learning.
3. Identify the key characteristics of an effective teacher and evaluate how those characteristics apply to working with students with disabilities.
4. Reflect analytically on the concept of teaching as a calling and explain how personal values and beliefs shape teaching philosophy.
5. Examine the unique rewards and challenges associated with working with students with disabilities and articulate why this population is meaningful to them personally.

1.1: The Teaching Profession

1.2: What is the difference between teacher-centered vs. student-centered philosophies?

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1.1: The Teaching Profession

Setting the Stage

If someone asked you right now why you want to become a teacher, what would you say? Take a moment and really think about it. Your answer to that question is actually one of the most important things you will carry with you throughout your entire career. It is what will keep you going on the hard days, and trust me, there will be hard days.

Teaching is one of those professions that is incredibly difficult to explain to someone who has never done it. From the outside it can look like a straightforward job. You show up, you teach a lesson, you go home. But anyone who has spent real time in a classroom knows that it is so much more than that. Teaching is relational, emotional, creative, and deeply personal work. It asks everything of you, and somehow, the best teachers keep giving anyway.

So what is it that draws people to this profession in the first place? And more specifically, what draws people to teaching students with disabilities? The answers are as unique as the people who choose this path, but a few themes tend to come up again and again.

It Starts with Believing in People

At the core of most teachers' motivation is a genuine belief in people. A belief that every person has potential, that growth is always possible, and that the right environment and the right support can change the entire trajectory of someone's life. That belief is not naive, it is actually backed up by decades of research showing that teacher quality is one of the single greatest factors in student success.

Think about the teachers who made a difference in your own life. Chances are they were not just knowledgeable about their subject. They believed in you, sometimes before you believed in yourself. They noticed you. They pushed you. They made you feel like you belonged in that classroom. That is the kind of teacher most people entering this profession are hoping to become.

Teaching is About Being Flexible

One thing that surprises a lot of new teachers is just how creative the job is. Every student learns differently, every classroom has its own dynamic, and no two days are ever quite the same. The teachers who thrive are the ones who embrace that unpredictability and see it as an opportunity rather than a frustration.

Finding new ways to explain a concept, designing a lesson that actually reaches the kid in the back row who has been checked out all semester, figuring out what motivates a student who has been told their whole life that they are not a good learner. These are creative challenges, and solving them is one of the most satisfying parts of the job.

The Work is Not Easy, and That is Kind of the Point

Here is something that might sound strange: a lot of teachers are drawn to this profession precisely because it is hard. There is something deeply fulfilling about doing work that matters, work that challenges you, work that requires you to grow alongside your students.

Teachers who work in high need communities, with students who carry heavy burdens outside of school, or with students who have been overlooked and underestimated, often describe a sense of purpose that is hard to put into words. They are not just teaching content. They are showing up for human beings who need someone in their corner, and that is a powerful thing to be a part of.

Why Special Education?

For those who feel called specifically to special education, the motivation often runs even deeper. This is not a field people

typically stumble into by accident. Most special education teachers can point to a specific moment, a person, or an experience that made them realize this was their path.

For some it is personal. Maybe they grew up with a sibling with a disability and watched how the right teacher transformed their experience at school. Maybe they have a disability themselves and remember what it felt like to finally have someone who understood how they learned. Personal connection to disability, whether your own or someone you love, has a way of making this work feel less like a career choice and more like a responsibility.

For others the pull comes from witnessing the depth of progress that is possible when a student with a disability gets the right support. Progress in special education does not always look like what the world typically celebrates. It might be a student finally communicating a need for the first time. It might be a child who has struggled with reading for years suddenly finding their stride. It might be a teenager with significant support needs successfully participating in a general education class for the first time. These moments are quiet and often go unnoticed by the world, but for the teacher in the room they are absolutely unforgettable.

Special education teachers are also advocates in a way that goes beyond what most people imagine when they think of teaching. They sit at tables and make sure their students' voices are heard. They navigate complex systems on behalf of families who may not know how to do it alone. They collaborate with speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and general education teachers to make sure every piece of a student's support system is working together. It is layered, demanding work, and the people who choose it tend to find it incredibly meaningful.

There is also something worth naming about the relationships that develop in special education settings. When you work closely with a student who faces significant challenges, when you spend months or even years learning how they communicate, what motivates them, what shuts them down, and what makes them come alive, the bond that forms is unlike anything else in the profession. Those students stay with you. Their growth becomes part of your story.

What Do You Get Out Of It?

Nobody goes into teaching or special education expecting external recognition. The rewards in this field are deeply personal and often invisible to anyone who was not in the room when they happened.

It is the student who walked in unable to write their name and walked out writing sentences. It is the parent who breaks down at an IEP meeting because for the first time someone actually listened to them. It is the former student who finds you years later to tell you that you were the first person who ever made them feel capable.

These are the moments that remind you why you chose this work. And on the days when the paperwork feels endless, the systems feel broken, and the challenges feel bigger than you, those moments are what you hold onto.

Where Do You Fit In?

As you begin this course and this journey toward becoming a teacher, it is worth spending some real time with the question of why you are here. Not the answer you think sounds good, but the honest one. What experiences have brought you to this point? What do you believe about students with disabilities? What kind of teacher do you want to be and what kind of difference do you want to make?

There are no wrong answers. But the clearer you are about your own why, the more grounded and resilient you will be when this work gets hard. And it will get hard. It will also be some of the most meaningful work you have ever done.

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1.2: What is the difference between teacher-centered vs. student-centered philosophies?

Students vs. Teachers: Two Ways of Thinking About the Classroom

Walk into ten different classrooms and you will probably notice two very different vibes. In some rooms the teacher is at the front, leading the show. In others the teacher is moving around, asking questions, and letting students drive the conversation. Neither approach is wrong. Both teachers genuinely want their students to succeed. They just have very different ideas about how to get there.

This is the difference between teacher-centered and student-centered teaching philosophies, and figuring out where you land on that spectrum is one of the most important things you can do as you begin developing your own teaching identity (Kidd et al., 2023).

What Are Teacher-Centered Philosophies?

Teacher-centered philosophies are probably the ones you are most familiar with from your own time in school. In this approach, the teacher decides what students need to learn and delivers that content directly, often through lecture, structured assignments, and whole class instruction. Think about your own experience for a second. Do you remember sitting in rows, taking notes off a whiteboard while your teacher explained a concept at the front of the room? That is teacher-centered instruction in action.

In this model, the teacher is the authority and the primary source of knowledge. Instruction tends to be highly structured, and the focus is on making sure every student receives the same essential content (Kidd et al., 2023). Two of the most common teacher-centered philosophies are essentialism and perennialism.

Essentialism

Essentialism is built around the idea that there is a core set of knowledge and skills every student needs in order to succeed in life, often described as the basics: reading, writing, and math. Essentialist classrooms tend to be structured and teacher led, with a strong emphasis on academic discipline, traditional subjects, and measurable outcomes like test scores. The underlying belief is that if students master these essentials, they will be equipped to handle whatever life throws at them (Kidd et al., 2023).

Perennialism

Perennialism shares some similarities with essentialism but takes a slightly different angle. Instead of focusing on practical, real world skills, perennialism is rooted in the idea that certain truths and ideas are timeless and apply across every era of human history. Perennialist classrooms often emphasize great works of literature, history, and philosophy, with the belief that studying humanity's most enduring ideas helps shape thoughtful, well rounded individuals (Kidd et al., 2023). Where essentialism asks what skills will help you succeed, perennialism asks what ideas have always mattered and always will.

What Are Student-Centered Philosophies?

Now let us flip the script. Student-centered philosophies put the learner, not the teacher, at the center of the classroom. Instead of asking what should I teach today, student-centered teachers ask what does this particular group of students need, and how can I help them get there. In this model, the teacher is less of an authority figure delivering information and more of a guide helping students construct their own understanding (Kidd et al., 2023).

This approach often looks like small group work, hands on projects, open ended discussion, and instruction that is shaped around student interests and real world problems rather than a fixed script. Three of the most well known student-centered philosophies are progressivism, social reconstructionism, and existentialism.

Progressivism

Progressivism is all about learning by doing. Progressivist classrooms are built around the experiences, interests, and abilities of the students themselves, and they tend to encourage collaboration, experimentation, and real world problem solving. Instead of lecturing about a concept, a progressivist teacher might use games, simulations, or hands on projects to help students discover the concept for themselves. The goal is not just to memorize information but to build the kind of problem solving skills students will actually use throughout their lives (Kidd et al., 2023).

Social Reconstructionism

Social reconstructionism takes student-centered learning a step further by connecting it directly to social change. This philosophy encourages students to examine real world inequities, like poverty, discrimination, or injustice, and think critically about how those problems might be solved. A social reconstructionist teacher does not just want students to learn academic content. They want students to become active, informed citizens who recognize unfairness in the world and feel empowered to do something about it (Kidd et al., 2023).

Existentialism

Existentialism centers almost entirely on the individual student. This philosophy places enormous value on personal choice, self discovery, and individual meaning making. Rather than handing students a predetermined set of truths, an existentialist teacher creates an environment where students are free to explore different ideas and perspectives and ultimately decide for themselves what they believe and value. The teacher's role becomes less about delivering content and more about creating space for students to figure out who they are and what matters to them (Kidd et al., 2023).

So Which One Is Right?

Here is the honest answer: there is no single right philosophy. Most effective teachers actually borrow from multiple approaches depending on the subject, the students, and the goals of a particular lesson. A teacher might lean on more structured, teacher-centered methods when introducing a brand new and complex concept, and then shift to a more student-centered approach once students have a foundation to build on and explore independently.

What matters most is being intentional. As you continue through this course and begin observing real classrooms during your fieldwork, start paying attention to where the teachers you observe fall on this spectrum. Are they leading from the front, or are they stepping back and letting students take the wheel? Neither approach is automatically better, but understanding the difference will help you start thinking critically about your own emerging teaching philosophy and what kind of classroom you want to create.

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1.4: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. **Which of the following best describes why passion is considered an important quality in teaching?**

a) Passionate teachers earn higher salaries than those who are not passionate

b) Passionate teachers bring energy and enthusiasm into the classroom that students can feel and respond to

c) Passionate teachers are better at classroom management than other teachers

d) Passionate teachers are more likely to work in high need schools

2. **According to the chapter, what makes teaching in high need schools meaningful for the educators who choose to stay?**

a) The higher pay and additional benefits offered in those schools

b) The relationships with students, the feeling of being needed, and the desire to make a real difference

c) The smaller class sizes and more manageable workload

d) The access to more resources and administrative support

Reflection

3. Think about a teacher who made a real difference in your life. What qualities did they have that stood out to you? How do those qualities connect to what you read in this chapter?

4. The chapter describes teaching as a calling rather than just a career. Do you agree with that idea? Why or why not? What does the idea of a calling mean to you personally as you begin this journey?

5. Why do you want to work with students with disabilities specifically? Was there a moment, a person, or an experience that drew you to this path? Reflect on what that means for the kind of teacher you want to become.

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2: WHAT IS SPECIAL EDUCATION

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

1. Define special education and explain how it differs from general education in terms of purpose, design, and legal foundation.
2. Summarize the history of special education in the United States and identify the landmark legislation that transformed access to education for students with disabilities.
3. Identify and describe the thirteen disability categories recognized under IDEA and explain the criteria for special education eligibility.
4. Explain the continuum of special education services and describe the purpose and characteristics of each placement option including co taught classrooms.
5. Define Least Restrictive Environment and articulate why inclusion in the general education setting is both a legal requirement and an evidence based practice.

2.1: K-12 Special Education

2.2: Definitions of Intellectual Disabilities

2.3: References

2.4: Review Questions

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2.1: K-12 Special Education

Before We Dive In

Take a moment to think about your own school experience. Did you have classmates who received extra support? Did you ever notice a student being pulled out of class for a different kind of instruction? Maybe you were that student. Whatever your experience, chances are special education touched your life in some way, even if you did not have a name for it at the time.

Special education is one of those terms that gets used a lot but is not always well understood, even by people entering the teaching profession. So let us start from the beginning and build a solid foundation for everything you will learn in this course and beyond.

A Brief History: How Did We Get Here?

To understand what special education is today, it helps to know where it came from. For most of American history, students with disabilities were not welcomed in public schools. In fact, many were excluded entirely. Families were often told their children were "uneducatable" and were encouraged to place them in institutions rather than schools. It was a deeply unjust system, and for a long time very few people challenged it.

That began to change in the mid twentieth century as the civil rights movement sparked a broader conversation about equality and access. Advocates, many of them parents of children with disabilities, began pushing back against a system that had long ignored their children. They argued that every child, regardless of ability, deserved access to a quality education.

Their efforts paid off. In 1975, the United States Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was later renamed and strengthened in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, better known as IDEA. This landmark legislation changed everything. It established that students with disabilities have a legal right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment possible. For the first time in history, schools were required by law to serve all students, not just the ones who were easiest to teach (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

It is worth pausing here to appreciate how significant that shift was. Before IDEA, millions of students with disabilities had no legal right to an education. Today that right is protected by federal law. Understanding this history is important because it reminds us that inclusion is not just a teaching strategy. It is a matter of equity and justice.

So What Exactly is Special Education?

At its most basic level, special education is specially designed instruction that is tailored to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability. It is not a place, it is not a program, and it is not a label. It is a service (IDEA, 2004).

That distinction matters more than it might seem. Special education is not about pulling students out of the general education setting and putting them somewhere separate. It is about making sure that whatever a student needs to access their education and make meaningful progress, they get it. Sometimes that looks like a modified curriculum. Sometimes it looks like assistive technology. Sometimes it looks like additional support in the general education classroom. The form it takes depends entirely on the individual student.

Disability Categories Under IDEA

IDEA identifies thirteen disability categories under which a student may be eligible for special education services. These categories are important because eligibility for special education is not based on a diagnosis alone. A student must have a disability that falls within one of these categories and that disability must have an adverse effect on their educational performance (IDEA, 2004).

The thirteen categories are:

- Autism
- Deaf-Blindness
- Deafness
- Emotional Disturbance
- Hearing Impairment
- Intellectual Disability
- Multiple Disabilities
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Other Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Visual Impairment Including Blindness

Each of these categories encompasses a wide range of needs and abilities. Two students who both qualify under the category of Autism, for example, may have very different strengths, challenges, and support needs. This is why special education is individualized by design. There is no one size fits all approach, and there never should be.

It is also worth noting that the most common disability category in public schools is Specific Learning Disability, which includes conditions like dyslexia and dyscalculia. The second most common is Speech or Language Impairment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Understanding these categories will help you as you begin your fieldwork and start observing students in real classroom settings.

The Continuum of Services

One of the foundational principles of special education is that services should be delivered in the setting that is most appropriate for each individual student. This is where the continuum of services comes in.

The continuum of services refers to the range of educational placements available to students with disabilities, from the most inclusive to the most restrictive. Think of it as a spectrum rather than a ladder. No placement is inherently better or worse than another. What matters is whether it is the right fit for a particular student at a particular point in time (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2023).

Here is a general overview of the placements along the continuum:

General Education Classroom with Support: The student spends the majority or all of their day in the general education classroom and receives support from a special education teacher or paraeducator within that setting.

Co-Taught Classroom: One of the most common and effective models within the general education setting is the co-taught classroom, where a general education teacher and a special education teacher share responsibility for planning and delivering instruction to all students in the class. In a co-taught classroom, both teachers are present at the same time and work together to meet the needs of every learner, including students with and without disabilities. Co-teaching can look different depending on the needs of the class. Sometimes one teacher leads the lesson while the other circulates and provides support. Sometimes the class is split into two groups with each teacher leading their own group simultaneously. Sometimes both teachers share the delivery of instruction equally. What makes co-teaching powerful is that it brings specialized expertise into the general education setting without pulling students out or making them feel singled out. It is one of the clearest examples of what true inclusion looks like in practice, and research consistently shows that when co-teaching is done well, it benefits all students in the classroom, not just those with disabilities (Friend & Cook, 2017).

Resource Room: The student spends most of their day in the general education classroom but is pulled out for a portion of the day to receive specialized instruction in a smaller setting. This is often used for targeted academic support in areas like reading or math.

Mild to Moderate Special Day Class: The student receives instruction in a self contained special education classroom for most or all of the day. This setting typically serves students who need a more structured environment and more intensive support.

Extensive Support Needs Classroom: This setting serves students with more significant disabilities who require a highly specialized curriculum and a higher level of support throughout the school day.

Non Public School: In some cases, a student's needs cannot be met within the public school setting and they are placed in a specialized non public school at the district's expense. This is considered the most restrictive placement and is used only when no other setting can appropriately meet the student's needs.

The key thing to remember is that placement decisions should always be driven by the student's individual needs, not by convenience, budget, or availability. Every student deserves a placement that gives them the best possible opportunity to learn and grow.

Least Restrictive Environment

The concept of Least Restrictive Environment, or LRE, is one of the most important principles in special education law. Under IDEA, students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs. This means that to the maximum extent possible, students with disabilities should be educated alongside their non disabled peers (IDEA, 2004).

LRE does not mean that every student with a disability should be in a general education classroom one hundred percent of the time. It means that the default assumption should be inclusion, and that any move toward a more restrictive setting must be justified by the student's individual needs. The burden of proof, so to speak, falls on demonstrating why a more restrictive setting is necessary, not on justifying why a student should be included.

This principle reflects a broader belief that students with disabilities belong in their school communities. Segregating students based on disability not only limits their academic opportunities, it also limits their social development and sends a message about their worth and belonging that can follow them for a lifetime. Research consistently shows that students with disabilities who are educated in inclusive settings tend to have better academic and social outcomes than those educated in more restrictive settings (National Institutes of Health, 2020).

Inclusion vs. Self Contained Classrooms

One of the conversations you will hear a lot in special education is the debate between inclusion and self contained classrooms. It is worth understanding both sides of this conversation so you can think critically about it as you develop your own teaching philosophy.

Inclusion, sometimes called mainstreaming or integrated education, refers to the practice of educating students with disabilities alongside their non disabled peers in the general education setting. A truly inclusive classroom is one where all students are welcomed, valued, and supported to participate fully in the life of the classroom. This does not mean that all students are doing the exact same thing at the exact same time. It means that every student belongs there and that the curriculum and environment are designed to be accessible to everyone (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2023).

A self contained classroom, on the other hand, is a setting where students with disabilities receive their instruction separately from the general education population, typically with a special education teacher and a smaller student to teacher ratio. Self contained classrooms can be incredibly effective for students who need a high level of structure, individualized instruction, or a more therapeutic environment. They are not inherently inferior to inclusive settings. What matters is whether the setting meets the student's needs.

The reality is that most students with disabilities spend time in both settings to varying degrees. A student might participate in general education for electives, lunch, and social activities while receiving specialized academic instruction in a resource room or self contained class. The goal is always to find the right balance for each individual student.

As a future special education teacher, you will likely work across multiple settings. You might co teach in a general education classroom, lead a small group in a resource room, or work in a self contained class. Each setting brings its own challenges and rewards, and being flexible and open to all of them will make you a much more effective educator.

A Brief Introduction to IEPs

If there is one document that sits at the heart of special education, it is the Individualized Education Program, or IEP. Every student who qualifies for special education services is entitled to an IEP, and that document drives everything that happens in their educational life.

An IEP is a legally binding document that is developed collaboratively by a team that includes the student's parents or guardians, their general and special education teachers, a school administrator, and when appropriate the student themselves. The IEP outlines the student's current levels of performance, their annual goals, the services they will receive, and the accommodations and modifications that will be put in place to support their learning (IDEA, 2004).

Think of the IEP as a roadmap. It says here is where this student is right now, here is where we want them to be by the end of the year, and here is exactly how we are going to get them there. It is individualized by design, which means no two IEPs should ever look exactly alike because no two students are exactly alike.

We will spend several weeks of this course diving deep into the IEP process, so do not worry if it feels overwhelming right now. For the moment, just know that the IEP is the cornerstone of special education and understanding it will be one of the most important skills you develop as a future educator.

Who Does a Special Education Teacher Serve?

Special education teachers serve students with disabilities across a wide range of ages, abilities, and needs. In California, special education services are available from birth through age twenty two, meaning that special education teachers can work with infants and toddlers in early intervention programs all the way through young adults in transition programs designed to prepare them for life after school.

In a K through 12 setting, special education teachers typically hold a credential in one of two areas. A Mild to Moderate Support Needs credential prepares teachers to work with students who have learning disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorder at various support levels, and other health impairments. A Extensive Support Needs credential prepares teachers to work with students who have more significant disabilities and require a higher level of support across all areas of their educational program.

But the students are only part of the picture. Special education teachers also serve families. They are often the primary point of contact for parents who are navigating a complicated and sometimes confusing system. Building trusting relationships with families is one of the most important things a special education teacher can do, and it is a skill that takes time and intentionality to develop.

Special education teachers also serve as members of collaborative teams. They work alongside general education teachers, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school psychologists, administrators, and paraeducators to make sure every student's needs are being met. In many ways, being a special education teacher means being the connector, the person who brings all the pieces of a student's support system together.

Bringing It Back to You

As you read through this chapter, you might have found yourself connecting some of these concepts to your own experiences. Maybe you thought about a classmate from your school years who you now recognize was receiving special education services. Maybe you thought about a family member or someone close to you with a disability. Maybe you are thinking about your own learning journey and how a different kind of support might have changed things for you.

That is exactly the kind of reflection this course is asking you to do. Special education is not an abstract concept. It is about real people, real students, and real lives. The more personally connected you are to this work, the more effective and compassionate a teacher you will become.

Students with disabilities belong in our schools, in our classrooms, and in our communities. Not because the law says so, although it does. But because every human being deserves to be seen, valued, and given the opportunity to reach their full potential. That is the foundation of special education, and it is the foundation of everything you will learn in this course.

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2.2: Definitions of Intellectual Disabilities

Defining Intellectual Disability: Three Different Lenses

When we talk about intellectual disability in a special education context, it helps to know that there is not just one single definition floating around out there. In fact, there are three major definitions that you are likely to come across, one from IDEA, one from the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, known as AAIDD, and one from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, known as the DSM. Each of these organizations approaches the definition a little differently, and understanding all three will help you make sense of how students are identified and supported in real classrooms.

The IDEA Definition

Let us start with the definition you will encounter most often as a special education teacher, since it is the one written directly into federal law. According to IDEA, intellectual disability means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning that exists at the same time as deficits in adaptive behavior, and that this combination shows up during the developmental period in a way that negatively affects a child's educational performance (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Let us break that down into plain language. Subaverage general intellectual functioning basically means scoring below 68 on a standardized intelligence test, which is notably lower than the average score of 100. The developmental period refers to the span of time between birth and eighteen years of age. So in short, IDEA's definition is about an intellectual score that is significantly below average, paired with challenges in everyday adaptive skills, both of which must be present before adulthood and must be getting in the way of a student's success at school.

The AAIDD Definition

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is an advocacy organization dedicated to promoting the rights and well being of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. AAIDD publishes its own diagnostic manual, and its definition looks a little different from IDEA's.

According to AAIDD, intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, and those limitations show up across conceptual, social, and practical skills. AAIDD also defines the developmental period a bit more broadly than IDEA, setting the cutoff at before the individual turns twenty two rather than eighteen (AAIDD, n.d.).

Both the IDEA and AAIDD definitions lean heavily on the concept of adaptive behavior, so let us take a closer look at what that actually means. AAIDD describes adaptive behaviors as learned behaviors that reflect a person's social and practical competence in meeting the everyday demands of life (AAIDD, n.d.). AAIDD breaks adaptive behavior down into three categories.

Conceptual skills include things like memory, language, reading, writing, math reasoning, applying practical knowledge, problem solving, and exercising good judgment in new situations.

Social skills include empathy, communicating well with others, building and maintaining friendships, exercising social judgment, and being aware of what other people are thinking and feeling.

Practical skills include the kind of everyday self management that helps someone function across different settings, such as personal hygiene, managing money, getting around using transportation, managing one's own behavior, and staying on task at school or work.

It is worth pausing here to point out something important. Adaptive behaviors are not fixed. They are malleable, meaning that with the right interventions and supports, students with intellectual disabilities absolutely can grow and strengthen their adaptive skills over time. That is an encouraging and important takeaway for any future special education teacher.

The APA Definition

Finally, let us look at how the American Psychiatric Association defines intellectual disability through the DSM. The DSM describes intellectual disability as a disorder that begins during the developmental period and includes deficits in both intellectual functioning and adaptive functioning across conceptual, social, and practical domains (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.).

According to the APA, three specific criteria must all be met for someone to be diagnosed with an intellectual disability.

First, there must be deficits in intellectual functions such as reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience. These deficits must be confirmed through both clinical assessment and individualized, standardized intelligence testing.

Second, there must be deficits in adaptive functioning severe enough that the person fails to meet developmental and sociocultural expectations for personal independence and social responsibility. Without ongoing support, these deficits limit the person's ability to function in daily life activities like communication, social participation, and independent living, and this limitation must show up across multiple settings such as home, school, work, and the community.

Third, both the intellectual and adaptive deficits must have begun during the developmental period.

The APA also requires that any diagnosis be based on a combination of clinical assessment, standardized testing of intellectual functioning, standardized neuropsychological testing, and standardized testing of adaptive functioning (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.). Beyond the diagnosis itself, the DSM identifies four severity levels of intellectual disability, mild, moderate, severe, and profound, which are determined based on a person's level of adaptive functioning rather than their IQ score alone. It is important to know that this classification is considered optional. It exists to help educators and clinicians design more appropriate and individualized interventions, not to label or limit a student.

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2.3: References

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2.4: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. **Under IDEA, which of the following must be true for a student to qualify for special education services?**

a) The student must have a medical diagnosis from a licensed physician

b) The student must have a disability that falls within one of the thirteen IDEA categories and that disability must adversely affect their educational performance

c) The student must be performing two or more grade levels below their peers

d) The student must have already received Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions through MTSS

2. **What does the term Least Restrictive Environment mean in the context of special education?**

a) The classroom with the fewest students and the most teacher support

b) The setting that costs the district the least amount of money to provide

c) The educational setting where students with disabilities are educated alongside non disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate

d) The setting where students with disabilities receive the most intensive level of support

Reflection

3. Before reading this chapter, what did you think special education was? How has your understanding changed or deepened after reading? Be specific about what surprised you or what confirmed what you already believed.

4. Think about the continuum of services described in this chapter. Why do you think it is important that no single placement is considered better or worse than another? How does this idea connect to the concept of individualized education?

5. The chapter describes inclusion as both a legal requirement and an evidence based practice. In your own words, what does true inclusion look like in a school setting? What do you think are the biggest barriers to making it a reality, and what role can teachers play in overcoming those barriers?

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3: TEACHER PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS (TPES)

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

1. Define the California Teacher Performance Expectations and explain their purpose in guiding the development of beginning teachers in California.
2. Identify and describe each of the six TPEs and explain how they connect to effective teaching practice in special education settings.
3. Analyze how the TPEs reflect the principles of equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive practice in today's K-12 classrooms.
4. Connect specific TPEs to observable teaching practices encountered during fieldwork observations.
5. Explain how the TPEs will be used as a framework for portfolio development throughout the course.

3.1: What are TPEs?

3.1.1: TPE 1

3.1.2: TPE 2

3.1.3: TPE 3

3.1.4: TPE 4

3.1.5: TPE 5

3.1.6: TPE 6

3.2: References

3.3: Review Questions

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3.1: WHAT ARE TPES?

Setting the Stage

Let's start with a question. What does it actually mean to be a good teacher? Think about it for a second. Is it someone who knows their subject inside and out? Someone who connects with students? Someone who manages a classroom with confidence? Someone who plans thoughtful lessons and reflects on what is and is not working?

The answer, of course, is all of the above. And then some.

Teaching is one of the most complex professional skills that exists. It requires you to be knowledgeable, relational, organized, creative, culturally aware, legally informed, and reflective, often all at the same time, often in the span of a single class period. So how do we define what good teaching actually looks like in a way that is clear, measurable, and useful?

That is exactly what the California Teacher Performance Expectations, or TPEs, were designed to do.

So What Are the TPEs?

The TPEs are a set of six standards developed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing that describe what beginning teachers in California are expected to know and be able to do (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016). They are not a checklist of tasks or a list of rules to follow. They are a framework, a way of thinking about teaching that is meant to guide your growth and development as an educator from the very beginning of your career.

Think of the TPEs as a professional roadmap. They describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities that effective teachers demonstrate in the classroom, and they give teacher preparation programs like this one a shared language for talking about what good teaching looks like. When your instructor observes you during fieldwork, when you reflect on your practice, and when you build your portfolio throughout this course, the TPEs are the lens through which all of that work is organized and evaluated.

It is also worth knowing that the TPEs were revised in 2016 to better reflect the demands of teaching in today's diverse and complex classrooms. The current version of the TPEs places a strong emphasis on equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive practice, which means they are especially relevant for anyone pursuing a credential in special education.

Why Do the TPEs Matter?

You might be wondering why a set of state standards matters to you right now, at the very beginning of your journey. That is a fair question. Here is the honest answer.

The TPEs matter because they give you a framework for understanding your own development as a teacher. Without some kind of structure, it is easy to walk into a classroom during fieldwork and feel completely overwhelmed. There is so much happening at once that it can be hard to know what to pay attention to, what to notice, and what to reflect on.

The TPEs give you a focus. They help you ask better questions about the teaching you are observing and eventually doing. Instead of just watching a teacher manage a classroom and thinking, wow they are really good at that, the TPEs help you ask, what specific strategies is this teacher using to create a positive learning environment, and how are they adapting those strategies for students with different needs? That shift from passive observation to active, structured reflection is one of the most important skills you will develop in this course.

The TPEs also matter because they are the foundation of your teaching credential. When you eventually complete a credential program, you will be required to demonstrate competency across all six TPEs. Starting to think about them now, even at an introductory level, gives you a head start and helps you begin building the kind of reflective practice that strong teachers rely on throughout their careers.\

An Overview of the Six TPEs

Let us walk through each of the six TPEs so you have a clear picture of what they cover. As you read through them, think about how each one might show up in a special education setting specifically.

TPE 1: Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning

This TPE is all about making sure every student in your classroom has the opportunity to learn. It focuses on how teachers use their knowledge of students, including their backgrounds, strengths, interests, and needs, to design instruction that is engaging, accessible, and meaningful. For special education teachers, this TPE is especially important because it directly addresses the need to differentiate instruction and use frameworks like Universal Design for Learning to reach every learner (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

In practice, TPE 1 might look like a teacher who knows that one student learns best through visuals while another needs hands on activities, and who plans lessons that incorporate both. It might look like a teacher who checks in with students individually to make sure the content is connecting, or who adjusts their approach mid lesson when they notice students are confused. It is about being responsive, flexible, and genuinely invested in every student's success.

TPE 2: Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments for Student Learning

If TPE 1 is about what you teach and how you reach students, TPE 2 is about the environment in which that learning happens. This TPE focuses on classroom management, physical space, routines, procedures, and the social and emotional climate of the classroom. A well managed classroom is not just a quiet one. It is a space where students feel safe, respected, and ready to learn (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

For special education teachers, this TPE takes on additional layers. Students with disabilities often have unique behavioral, sensory, and emotional needs that require thoughtful environmental design. A classroom that works for one student might be overwhelming for another. TPE 2 asks teachers to think carefully about how every element of the classroom environment, from the arrangement of furniture to the way transitions are handled, affects every student's ability to access learning.

TPE 3: Understanding and Organizing Subject Matter for Student Learning

This TPE focuses on the content you teach and how you organize and present it in ways that make it accessible to all learners. It is not enough to know your subject. You have to be able to break it down, sequence it thoughtfully, connect it to what students already know, and adapt it for students who may be approaching the content from very different starting points (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

In a special education context, TPE 3 is closely connected to the concepts of accommodations and modifications. How do you adapt the general education curriculum so that a student with a learning disability can access it? How do you maintain high expectations while also meeting a student where they are? These are the kinds of questions TPE 3 pushes you to think through.

TPE 4: Planning Instruction and Designing Learning Experiences for All Students

TPE 4 is about the intentional work that happens before you ever step in front of a classroom. It focuses on lesson planning, learning objectives, assessment, and the deliberate design of learning experiences that are aligned to standards and responsive to student needs (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

For teachers in training, this is often where a lot of growth happens. Learning to write a clear learning objective, to align your instruction to the right standards, and to anticipate where students might struggle and plan accordingly, these are skills that take time and practice to develop. TPE 4 gives you a framework for thinking about planning as a professional and intentional act rather than something you just do on the fly.

TPE 5: Assessing Student Learning

Assessment is one of those words that can make people nervous, but it does not have to. TPE 5 is about understanding how to use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to find out what students know, monitor their progress, and adjust instruction accordingly (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

In special education, assessment is especially layered. It includes the formal assessments used to determine eligibility for special education services, the ongoing progress monitoring that drives IEP goal writing, and the informal day to day assessments that tell a teacher whether a student is understanding the lesson. TPE 5 asks teachers to think about assessment not as a final judgment but as a continuous and collaborative process that informs everything they do.

TPE 6: Developing as a Professional Educator

The final TPE is perhaps the most personal one. TPE 6 is about your growth as a professional, your ability to reflect on your own practice, collaborate with colleagues and families, stay current with research and policy, and commit to your own ongoing learning (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

Teaching is not a profession where you graduate from a credential program and then know everything you will ever need to know. The field is always evolving. Research is always growing. The students in front of you are always unique. TPE 6 is a reminder that the best teachers are the ones who never stop learning, who seek out feedback, who reflect honestly on what is working and what is not, and who approach their professional life with the same curiosity and growth mindset they hope to cultivate in their students.

How the TPEs Connect to Special Education

Now that you have an overview of all six TPEs, let us talk specifically about why they matter in a special education context.

Special education teachers work at the intersection of all six TPEs every single day. They need to engage and support students with widely varying needs, manage complex classroom environments, adapt and organize content, plan individualized instruction, conduct and interpret assessments, and continuously grow as professionals. In many ways, special education teachers are asked to demonstrate all six TPEs simultaneously, which is part of what makes the work so demanding and so meaningful.

There is also a legal dimension to the TPEs in special education that is worth naming. When you work with students who have IEPs, you are legally obligated to provide the instruction and services outlined in those documents. That means your ability to plan effectively, assess accurately, manage your classroom well, and collaborate with families and colleagues is not just a matter of professional best practice. It is a matter of legal compliance and ethical responsibility.

The TPEs also connect directly to the principles of equity and inclusion that run throughout special education. When TPE 1 asks you to engage and support all students, it means all students, including the ones who learn differently, communicate differently, and experience the world differently. When TPE 2 asks you to create effective learning environments, it means environments that work for students with sensory sensitivities, behavioral support needs, and physical disabilities. The TPEs, at their core, are a framework for equitable and inclusive teaching, which is exactly what special education is all about.

How the TPEs Are Addressed In This Course

Throughout this course, you will engage with each of the six TPEs in depth. Each unit is built around one or more TPEs, and as you move through the course you will be asked to reflect on how each TPE shows up in the real classrooms you are observing during fieldwork.

One of the most important ways you will engage with the TPEs is through your portfolio. Your e-portfolio is not just a collection of assignments. It is a living document that tells the story of your developing teaching practice. For each TPE, you will write a reflection that connects the concepts you have learned to what you have observed and experienced in your fieldwork placement. Over time, your portfolio will become a powerful record of your growth as a future educator.

Here is something important to keep in mind as you work on your TPE reflections: the goal is not to write what you think your instructor wants to hear. The goal is to engage honestly with your own developing understanding of teaching. What are you

noticing in the classrooms you observe? What surprises you? What challenges your assumptions? What confirms what you already believed? The more honest and specific your reflections are, the more valuable they will be, both for your learning and for your portfolio.

What Does It Actually Look Like to Meet a TPE?

This is one of the questions students ask most often, and it is a great one. Meeting a TPE does not mean performing a perfect lesson or checking off a list of behaviors. It means demonstrating a developing understanding of the concepts within that TPE and an ability to apply them thoughtfully in a real classroom context.

For a beginning teacher or teacher candidate, meeting a TPE looks like showing growth. It looks like noticing something in a classroom observation and being able to connect it to what you have learned. It looks like writing a lesson plan that considers the needs of diverse learners. It looks like reflecting honestly on a strategy that did not work the way you expected and thinking through what you might do differently. It looks like asking good questions and being willing to sit with uncertainty while you continue to grow.

Here is a helpful way to think about it. Meeting a TPE is not a destination. It is a direction. The TPEs describe the kind of teacher you are working toward becoming, and every observation, every reflection, every lesson plan, and every conversation you have in this course is a step in that direction.

One of the most powerful things you can do as you move through this course is to start connecting what you are learning in the classroom to what you are seeing in the field. When you observe a teacher using flexible grouping to support different learners, that is TPE 1 in action. When you see a teacher using a visual schedule to help students with autism navigate transitions, that is TPE 2. When you watch a teacher break down a complex concept into smaller steps for a student who is struggling, that is TPE 3. The TPEs are not abstract ideas. They are happening in real classrooms every single day, and learning to recognize them is one of the most valuable skills you will take away from this course.

A Note Before You Move On

As you continue through this course and begin spending more time in your fieldwork placement, keep the TPEs in the back of your mind. You do not need to have them memorized, and you do not need to feel like an expert on all six of them right now. What matters at this stage is that you are beginning to build a mental framework for thinking about teaching as a professional practice.

The TPEs will come up again and again throughout this course, and each time you revisit them, your understanding will deepen. By the time you reach the end of the semester, you will look back at this chapter and realize how far your thinking has already come. That growth is exactly what this course is designed to support.

3.1.1: TPE 1

3.1.2: TPE 2

3.1.3: TPE 3

3.1.4: TPE 4

3.1.5: TPE 5

3.1.6: TPE 6

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3.1.1: TPE 1

A Closer Look: The TPEs Through a Special Education Lens

Now that you have a general picture of the six TPEs, it is time to slow down and really dig into each one. Knowing what a TPE says is one thing. Knowing what it actually looks like when a real teacher is standing in front of real students, some of whom have IEPs, some of whom are on 504 plans, some of whom are general education students sitting right next to them, is another thing entirely.

This is where things get interesting, because special education is not a separate universe with its own set of rules. It exists on the same continuum as general education. The difference is not that special education teachers are doing something completely different. The difference is one of degree, of intensity, and of individualization. A general education teacher might differentiate a lesson for three or four learning styles. A special education teacher might be differentiating that same lesson for a student who communicates through an augmentative device, a student who needs the content chunked into thirty second segments, and a student who needs almost no modification at all beyond a little extra processing time.

To help you see this clearly, each TPE below is broken down into what it tends to look like for three different groups of students you will encounter across your fieldwork: students with mild to moderate support needs, students with extensive support needs, and students receiving special education services inside an inclusive general education classroom. Keep in mind these are not rigid boxes. Real students rarely fit neatly into categories, and a single student might move between these descriptions depending on the subject, the day, or the setting. Think of these examples as starting points for your own observations, not a script to memorize.

TPE 1: Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning

The heart of TPE 1 is knowing your students well enough to reach them. In a general education classroom, this might mean a teacher varies their instruction because some students are visual learners and others prefer discussion. In special education, that same instinct has to stretch much further, because the range of needs in the room is often much wider and the stakes of getting it wrong are much higher. A general education teacher who misses the mark on engagement might lose a student's attention for a lesson. A special education teacher who misses the mark might miss a student's only access point to the content altogether.

Elements of TPE 1

1. Apply knowledge of students, including their prior experiences, interests, and social-emotional learning needs, as well as their funds of knowledge and cultural, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds, to engage them in learning.
2. Maintain ongoing communication with students and families, including the use of technology to communicate with and support students and families, and to communicate achievement expectations and student progress.
3. Connect subject matter to real-life contexts and provide active learning experiences to engage student interest, support student motivation, and allow students to extend their learning.
4. Use a variety of developmentally and ability-appropriate instructional strategies, resources, and assistive technology, including principles of Universal Design of Learning (UDL) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to support access to the curriculum for a wide range of learners within the general education classroom and environment.
5. Promote students' critical and creative thinking and analysis through activities that provide opportunities for inquiry, problem solving, responding to and framing meaningful questions, and reflection.
6. Provide a supportive learning environment for students' first and/or second language acquisition by using research based instructional approaches, including focused English Language Development, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE), scaffolding across content areas, and structured English immersion, and demonstrate an understanding of the difference among students whose only instructional need is to acquire Standard English proficiency, students who may have an identified disability affecting their ability to acquire Standard English proficiency, and students who may have both a need to acquire Standard English proficiency and an identified disability
7. Provide students with opportunities to access the curriculum by incorporating the visual and performing arts, as appropriate to the content and context of learning.
8. Monitor student learning and adjust instruction while teaching so that students continue to be actively engaged in learning.

Mild to Moderate Support Needs

Picture a sixth grade student with a specific learning disability in reading who is working on a unit about ecosystems. The general education content stays the same, but the teacher provides a graphic organizer, reads key vocabulary aloud before the lesson begins, and breaks the reading into shorter chunks with comprehension checks along the way. The student is engaging with grade level content, just with scaffolds that make it accessible.

Extensive Support Needs

Now picture a ninth grader with a moderate to severe intellectual disability who is working on a modified version of that same ecosystems unit in a separate class. Engagement here might look completely different. The teacher uses a real terrarium the student can touch and observe, pairs simple vocabulary with picture symbols, and uses a communication device so the student can respond to yes or no questions about what they are seeing. The goal is not memorizing the nitrogen cycle. The goal is building conceptual understanding of living things and their environment in a way that is meaningful for that student.

Inclusion Setting

Now picture a third grader with autism who is included in a general education science class for this same kind of unit, supported by a paraeducator. The general education teacher delivers the lesson to the whole class, and the paraeducator quietly helps the student use a visual choice board to participate in group discussion and follows the same graphic organizer the student's IEP calls for. The student is learning alongside peers, engaging with the same content, just with the individualized support written into their plan.

Notice What Stays Constant Across All Three Examples: In every case, the teacher started with the same question. What does this student need in order to genuinely access this content? That is TPE 1, no matter where it shows up.

A Culturally Responsive Lens on TPE 1.

Knowing your students well enough to reach them also means knowing where they come from. A student's cultural background, home language, and family experiences shape how they engage with content just as much as a disability does. A teacher practicing TPE 1 in a culturally responsive way might choose examples and texts that reflect the cultural backgrounds actually present in the room, rather than defaulting to material that only reflects the dominant culture. In special education specifically, this matters even more, because students of color have long been identified for special education services at disproportionately higher rates than their peers, often because a cultural or linguistic difference gets misread as a learning deficit. Part of engaging and supporting all students well means a teacher pausing to ask whether a student's struggle is truly rooted in a disability, or whether it is being misread through a cultural or linguistic lens that does not match the student's actual needs.

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3.1.2: TPE 2

TPE 2: Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments for Student Learning

In a general education setting, TPE 2 often centers on things like classroom rules, seating arrangements, and building a respectful classroom culture. In special education, the environment itself frequently becomes a form of instruction. How a room is arranged, how transitions are handled, and how sensory input is managed can be the difference between a student who is ready to learn and a student who is in crisis before the lesson even starts.

Elements of TPE 2

1. Promote students' social-emotional growth, development, and individual responsibility using positive interventions and supports, restorative justice, and conflict resolution practices to foster a caring community where each student is treated fairly and respectfully by adults and peers.
2. Create learning environments (i.e., traditional, blended, and online) that promote productive student learning, encourage positive interactions among students, reflect diversity and multiple perspectives, and are culturally responsive.
3. Establish, maintain, and monitor inclusive learning environments that are physically, mentally, intellectually, and emotionally healthy and safe to enable all students to learn, and recognize and appropriately address instances of intolerance and harassment among students, such as bullying, racism, and sexism.
4. Know how to access resources to support students, including those who have experienced trauma, homelessness, foster care, incarceration, and/or are medically fragile.
5. Maintain high expectations for learning with appropriate support for the full range of students in the classroom.
6. Establish and maintain clear expectations for positive classroom behavior and for student-to-student and student-to teacher interactions by communicating classroom routines, procedures, and norms to students and families.

Mild to Moderate Support Needs

A high school student with ADHD in a resource classroom might benefit from a seat away from the door, a visual timer during independent work, and a predictable routine for turning in assignments. None of this changes what is being taught. It changes whether the student can sit still long enough to learn it.

Extensive Support Needs

A kindergartner with a significant sensory processing need and an intellectual disability might need a classroom with a designated calm down corner, noise reducing headphones available at all times, and a visual schedule with removable icons so the student always knows what is coming next. For this student, the physical and sensory environment is not a background detail. It is often the single biggest factor in whether the day goes smoothly.

Inclusion Setting

A fifth grader with an emotional disturbance included in general education might have a behavior plan that allows for a nonverbal signal to request a break, a preferential seat near a calm, predictable peer, and a quiet corner of the general education room where the student can regulate without leaving the class entirely. The general education teacher and the special education teacher collaborate so that this support is seamless and does not single the student out in front of classmates.

Across all three examples, the common thread is intentionality. Nothing about the environment is accidental. Every choice is made with a specific student's needs in mind, which is exactly what TPE 2 is asking of you.

A Culturally Responsive Lens on TPE 2.

What feels safe, respectful, and calm can look different across cultures. Eye contact, personal space, tone of voice, and even what counts as respectful behavior toward an adult can vary depending on a student's cultural upbringing. A teacher building a culturally responsive environment does not treat their own cultural norms as the default setting for the whole classroom. For example, a behavior expectation like always look at the adult who is speaking to you might conflict with a student's cultural norm around eye contact with authority figures. A teacher applying TPE 2 well works to tell the difference between a behavior that is truly a safety or learning concern and one that is simply unfamiliar to the teacher because it comes from a different cultural framework than their own.

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3.1.3: TPE 3

TPE 3: Understanding and Organizing Subject Matter for Student Learning

General education teachers ask how to sequence and present content so it makes sense to a room full of students who are, broadly speaking, working toward the same grade level standard. Special education teachers are often asking a more layered question. How do I take this same content and either scaffold it, modify it, or completely restructure it, depending on which student is in front of me?

Elements of TPE 3

1. Demonstrate knowledge of subject matter, including the adopted California State Standards and curriculum frameworks.
2. Use knowledge about students and learning goals to organize the curriculum to facilitate student understanding of subject matter, and make accommodations and/or modifications as needed to promote student access to the curriculum.
3. Plan, design, implement, and monitor instruction consistent with current subject-specific pedagogy in the content area(s) of instruction, and design and implement disciplinary and cross-disciplinary learning sequences, including integrating the visual and performing arts as applicable to the discipline. (See Subject-Specific Pedagogical Skills in Section 2 for reference)
4. Individually and through consultation and collaboration with other educators and members of the larger school community, plan for effective subject matter instruction and use multiple means of representing, expressing, and engaging students to demonstrate their knowledge.
5. Adapt subject matter curriculum, organization, and planning to support the acquisition and use of academic language within learning activities to promote the subject matter knowledge of all students, including the full range of English learners, Standard English learners, students with disabilities, and students with other learning needs in the least restrictive environment.
6. Use and adapt resources, standards-aligned instructional materials, and a range of technology, including assistive technology, to facilitate students' equitable access to the curriculum.
7. Model and develop digital literacy by using technology to engage students and support their learning, and promote digital citizenship, including respecting copyright law, understanding fair use guidelines and the use of Creative Commons license, and maintaining Internet security.
8. Demonstrate knowledge of effective teaching strategies aligned with the internationally recognized educational technology standards.

Mild to Moderate Support Needs

An eighth grader with dyslexia working on a persuasive essay unit might receive the exact same standard and rubric as everyone else, with accommodations like speech to text software and a simplified graphic organizer for structuring arguments. The content and expectations for mastery are unchanged. The path to get there is adjusted.

Extensive Support Needs

A tenth grader with a significant cognitive disability working during that same persuasive writing unit might have a modified goal entirely, such as expressing a preference between two choices using single words or picture supports, for example choosing between two lunch options and stating a reason using a communication board. The connection to the general education content is there, persuasion and expressing an opinion, but the depth and format look entirely different.

Inclusion Setting

A seventh grader with a mild intellectual disability included in a general education English class might work on a shortened version of the same persuasive essay, focusing on writing three clear reasons instead of a full five paragraph essay, using a word bank of transition words provided by the special education teacher as part of co-planning with the general education teacher.

What ties these together is the idea of access with integrity. TPE 3 is not about lowering expectations. It is about finding the

version of rigor that is genuinely appropriate for each learner.

A Culturally Responsive Lens on TPE 3

Organizing subject matter well also means noticing when the content itself carries cultural assumptions. A math word problem about a family road trip, a reading passage about a holiday tradition, or a science example built around a specific kind of household can quietly leave out students whose lives look different. A teacher applying TPE 3 with a culturally responsive mindset looks for opportunities to connect new content to a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, not just one. For a student who is an English learner and also receiving special education services, this becomes especially important, because that student is working through both a language barrier and a disability related barrier at the same time, and the content needs to be organized with both of those realities in mind rather than just one.

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3.1.4: TPE 4

TPE 4: Planning Instruction and Designing Learning Experiences for All Students

In general education, planning usually starts with a standard and works backward to design a lesson that gets most students there. In special education, planning often has to start with the individual student's IEP goals first, and then work outward to figure out how those goals connect to what is happening in the broader curriculum.

Elements of TPE 4

1. Locate and apply information about students' current academic status, content- and standards-related learning needs and goals, assessment data, language proficiency status, and cultural background for both short-term and long-term instructional planning purposes.
2. Understand and apply knowledge of the range and characteristics of typical and atypical child development from birth through adolescence to help inform instructional planning and learning experiences for all students.
3. Design and implement instruction and assessment that reflects the interconnectedness of academic content areas and related student skills development in literacy, mathematics, science, and other disciplines across the curriculum, as applicable to the subject area of instruction.
4. Plan, design, implement, and monitor instruction, making effective use of instructional time to maximize learning opportunities and provide access to the curriculum for all students by removing barriers and providing access through instructional strategies that include:
    - Appropriate use of instructional technology, including assistive technology;
    - Applying principles of UDL and MTSS;
    - Use of developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate learning activities, instructional materials, and resources for all students, including the full range of English learners;
    - Appropriate modifications for students with disabilities in the general education classroom;
    - Opportunities for students to support each other in learning; and
    - Use of community resources and services as applicable
5. Promote student success by providing opportunities for students to understand and advocate for strategies that meet their individual learning needs and assist students with specific learning needs to successfully participate in transition plans (e.g., IEP, IFSP, ITP, and 504 plans.)
6. Access resources for planning and instruction, including the expertise of community and school colleagues through inperson or virtual collaboration, co-teaching, coaching, and/or networking.
7. Plan instruction that promotes a range of communication strategies and activity modes between teacher and student and among students that encourage student participation in learning.
8. Use digital tools and learning technologies across learning environments as appropriate to create new content and provide personalized and integrated technology-rich lessons to engage students in learning, promote digital literacy, and offer students multiple means to demonstrate their learning.

Mild to Moderate Support Needs

A fourth grader with a speech and language impairment might have an IEP goal around using complete sentences in writing. A well planned lesson on writing a personal narrative would intentionally build in a moment where the teacher checks specifically for sentence completeness in that student's work, not as an afterthought, but as a planned point of instruction tied directly to the goal.

Extensive Support Needs

A twelfth grader with multiple disabilities working on a functional life skills goal around following a two step direction might have that goal embedded into a classroom job, like following a recipe card with two picture steps during a cooking activity. The lesson is planned around a real, motivating task, with the IEP goal woven directly into the structure of that task.

Inclusion Setting

A first grader with a mild motor impairment included in general education math might have an IEP goal around using an adapted grip pencil to complete written work independently. The general education teacher, in collaboration with the special education teacher, plans the math lesson with that adapted material already built in, rather than treating it as a last minute accommodation.

In every case, planning is not just about the lesson. It is about making sure the lesson and the student's individual goals are moving in the same direction at the same time.

A Culturally Responsive Lens on TPE 4

Planning instruction well means planning with a student's whole life in mind, not just their goals on paper. This includes thinking about a family's cultural expectations around disability itself. In some families and cultures, a disability diagnosis carries stigma, or family members may have very different beliefs about independence, communication, or appropriate support than what is reflected in a standard IEP goal. A teacher practicing TPE 4 with cultural responsiveness in mind plans instruction that respects those family perspectives, and works to include families as genuine partners in decision making rather than assuming every family shares the same cultural framework the school operates from.

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3.1.5: TPE 5

TPE 5: Assessing Student Learning

General education assessment usually asks, did the student learn what I taught. Special education assessment asks that question too, but it also has to ask a second question running underneath it at all times. Is this assessment even capturing what this student actually knows, or is it being blocked by something unrelated to the content, like a reading barrier, a communication barrier, or an anxiety response?

Elements of TPE 5

1. Apply knowledge of the purposes, characteristics, and appropriate uses of different types of assessments (e.g., diagnostic, informal, formal, progress-monitoring, formative, summative, and performance) to design and administer classroom assessments, including use of scoring rubrics.
2. Collect and analyze assessment data from multiple measures and sources to plan and modify instruction and document students' learning over time.
3. Involve all students in self-assessment and reflection on their learning goals and progress and provide students with opportunities to revise or reframe their work based on assessment feedback.
4. Use technology as appropriate to support assessment administration, conduct data analysis, and communicate learning outcomes to students and families.
5. Use assessment information in a timely manner to assist students and families in understanding student progress in meeting learning goals.
6. Work with specialists to interpret assessment results from formative and summative assessments to distinguish between students whose first language is English, English learners, Standard English learners, and students with language or other disabilities.
7. Interpret English learners' assessment data to identify their level of academic proficiency in English as well as in their primary language, as applicable, and use this information in planning instruction.
8. Use assessment data, including information from students' IEP, IFSP, ITP, and 504 plans, to establish learning goals and to plan, differentiate, make accommodations and/or modify instruction.

Mild to Moderate Support Needs

A ninth grader with dysgraphia taking a history exam might demonstrate the same content knowledge as their peers, but only if allowed to respond verbally into a recorder or type their answers instead of handwriting them. Without that accommodation, the assessment would be measuring handwriting ability rather than historical understanding.

Extensive Support Needs

A middle schooler with a significant intellectual disability being assessed on an IEP goal around identifying basic community safety signs might be assessed through a hands on task, physically sorting picture cards of a stop sign, a crosswalk, and a exit sign into correct and incorrect categories, rather than through a written multiple choice test the student could not access.

Inclusion Setting

A second grader with an intellectual disability included in general education might take the same spelling test as classmates, but with a reduced list of words that were pre selected in collaboration with the special education teacher to match that student's individual IEP goals, while still participating in the same weekly classroom routine as peers.

Notice that in every example, the format of the assessment changes to fit the student, but the underlying purpose stays the same, finding out what a student actually knows and can do.

A Culturally Responsive Lens on TPE 5

Assessment is one of the areas where cultural bias can hide most easily. A standardized test normed on one population, or an assessment that assumes a certain kind of background knowledge, can make a student appear to struggle academically or intellectually when the real barrier is unfamiliarity with the cultural or linguistic content of the test itself. This is part of why students who are English learners, or students from historically underserved communities, have sometimes been overidentified for special education services based on assessments that were not designed with their backgrounds in mind. A teacher applying TPE 5 well asks not just what did this assessment show, but is this assessment even a fair and accurate way to measure this particular student's knowledge.

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3.1.6: TPE 6

TPE 6: Developing as a Professional Educator

This TPE looks fairly similar across general and special education on the surface. Every teacher needs to reflect, collaborate, and keep growing. What makes it distinct in special education is the sheer number of people a teacher has to collaborate with, and the legal weight that collaboration carries.

Elements of TPE 6

1. Reflect on their own teaching practice and level of subject matter and pedagogical knowledge to plan and implement instruction that can improve student learning.
2. Recognize their own values and implicit and explicit biases, the ways in which these values and implicit and explicit biases may positively and negatively affect teaching and learning, and work to mitigate any negative impact on the teaching and learning of students. They exhibit positive dispositions of caring, support, acceptance, and fairness toward all students and families, as well as toward their colleagues.
3. Establish professional learning goals and make progress to improve their practice by routinely engaging in communication and inquiry with colleagues.
4. Demonstrate how and when to involve other adults and to communicate effectively with peers and colleagues, families, and members of the larger school community to support teacher and student learning.
5. Demonstrate professional responsibility for all aspects of student learning and classroom management, including responsibility for the learning outcomes of all students, along with appropriate concerns and policies regarding the privacy, health, and safety of students and families. Beginning teachers conduct themselves with integrity and model ethical conduct for themselves and others.
6. Understand and enact professional roles and responsibilities as mandated reporters and comply with all laws concerning professional responsibilities, professional conduct, and moral fitness, including the responsible use of social media and other digital platforms and tools.
7. Critically analyze how the context, structure, and history of public education in California affects and influences state, district, and school governance as well as state and local education finance.

Mild to Moderate Support Needs

A special education teacher supporting a caseload of students with learning disabilities in a general education setting might spend part of every week co-planning with several different general education teachers, making sure accommodations are actually being implemented consistently across math, science, and English classes, not just written down on paper.

Extensive Support Needs

A special education teacher working with students who have significant support needs might collaborate regularly with speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, behavior specialists, and families, often in the same week, to make sure everyone is working toward the same goals in the same way across every setting the student moves through during the day.

Inclusion Setting

A special education teacher supporting inclusion might spend time building a genuine working relationship with a general education co-teacher, sitting in on grade level team meetings, and helping general education colleagues understand not just what a student's accommodations are, but why those accommodations matter and how to deliver them in a way that does not draw unwanted attention to the student.

Across all three, TPE 6 shows up as the quiet, ongoing work of staying connected to other professionals and to families, because no special education teacher can meet a student's needs working in isolation.

A Culturally Responsive Lens on TPE 6

Growing as a professional includes being honest with yourself about your own cultural assumptions and blind spots. A teacher committed to TPE 6 seeks out training on cultural responsiveness, reflects on their own biases, and stays curious about the communities their students come from rather than assuming their own upbringing is the universal norm. This also means being willing to have uncomfortable conversations, including examining whether disproportionality in special education referrals is happening in your own school or district, and taking responsibility for being part of the solution rather than treating it as someone else's problem to solve.

A Final Thought on These Breakdowns

As you spend more time in your fieldwork placement, try using this same three part lens on your own. When you observe a lesson, ask yourself, what would this look like for a student with mild to moderate needs, what would it look like for a student with more extensive needs, and what would it look like if that student were included in a general education setting instead. That habit of mentally testing a lesson against different student profiles is one of the most valuable thinking tools you can develop as a future special education teacher, and it is a skill that will serve you well long after this course ends.

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3.3: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. What is the primary purpose of the California Teacher Performance Expectations?

a) To evaluate whether teachers should receive salary increases or promotions

b) To provide a framework that describes what beginning teachers in California are expected to know and be able to do

c) To determine which students qualify for special education services

d) To outline the curriculum that teachers are required to follow in California classrooms

2. Which of the following best describes TPE 6: Developing as a Professional Educator?

a) It focuses on how teachers design engaging and accessible lessons for all learners

b) It focuses on how teachers assess student learning and use data to drive instruction

c) It focuses on how teachers reflect on their own practice, collaborate with colleagues and families, and commit to ongoing professional growth

d) It focuses on how teachers create safe and structured classroom environments

Reflection

3. Out of all six TPEs, which one resonates most with you at this point in your journey and why? What experiences or beliefs do you have that connect to that particular TPE?

4. The chapter describes the TPEs as a professional roadmap rather than a checklist. What do you think the difference is between approaching the TPEs as a roadmap versus a checklist? How might that difference affect the kind of teacher you become?

5. Think about your fieldwork placement so far. Can you identify a moment where you observed a teacher demonstrating one of the six TPEs? Describe what you saw and explain which TPE it connects to and why.

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4: LESSON PLANNING AND INSTRUCTION

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

1. Explain the backwards design approach to lesson planning and articulate why it is an effective framework for planning instruction for diverse learners.
2. Write clear and measurable learning objectives that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards and appropriate for students with disabilities.
3. Describe the key components of an effective lesson plan and explain the purpose of each component in supporting student learning.
4. Differentiate between accommodations and modifications and explain the legal and instructional implications of each for students with IEPs.
5. Distinguish between formal and informal assessment and explain how ongoing assessment data can be used to drive instructional decisions.

4.1: Active Learning- Moving Beyond Lecture and Notes

4.2: Staying Organized

4.3: Response to Intervention RTI

4.4: References

4.5: Review Questions

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4.1: Active Learning- Moving Beyond Lecture and Notes

Setting the Stage

Let's start with a question. How did you learn in school?

If your experience was anything like most people's, it probably looked something like this: the teacher talked, you took notes, and then the night before the test you crammed everything you had written down hoping enough of it would stick. The goal was not really to understand the material. It was to memorize it long enough to get through the exam and then move on.

Sound familiar?

Here is the thing though. That approach to learning, as common as it is, is actually one of the least effective ways to help students retain and apply what they are being taught. And as future educators, that is something worth thinking seriously about.

There is an old saying often attributed to Confucius that captures this idea beautifully: I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand. Read that last part again. I do and I understand. There is something really important in those six words.

Educational researchers Chickering and Gamson built on this same idea when they wrote that learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much by simply sitting in a classroom listening, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and repeating answers back on a test. Real learning happens when students talk about what they are learning, write about it, connect it to their own experiences, and apply it to their daily lives (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

What Chickering and Gamson are describing is what educators call active learning. Active learning is both hands on, meaning students are actually doing something, and minds on, meaning students are reflecting on and making sense of what they are doing. It is the difference between being told how to ride a bike and actually getting on one.

As future teachers, we owe it to our students to move beyond the lecture and notes model that many of us grew up with. Students who are actively involved in their own learning are more engaged, retain information longer, and develop a deeper understanding of the material (Freeman et al., 2014). That is the kind of classroom experience we should be working toward every single day.

Active Learning Strategies

Short Lecture, Class Exercise, and Review

In traditional learning, teachers often lecture for long periods of time while students take notes. Research consistently shows that students learn more when lectures are broken into small segments followed by a class exercise. Class exercises help you as the teacher gauge whether students understand what you have just taught, and they also tend to spark more questions. After the exercise, provide a summary of what was learned, highlighting the most important ideas and concepts.

For example, if you are teaching math, give students math problems to test their understanding. If you are teaching history or literature, have students write a short reflection on what they learned from the discussion. After students complete the exercise, review their responses as a group to check for understanding. This strategy of short lecture, class exercise, and review is far more active than the traditional approach of long lectures followed by passive note taking, and research on active learning in STEM fields has found that this kind of structured engagement leads to meaningfully better student performance compared to straight lecture (Freeman et al., 2014).

Peer Teaching

To make learning even more active, research consistently points to peer teaching, meaning students teaching other students, as one of the most effective ways to deepen understanding. There is a well known idea in education that we retain far more of what we teach to someone else than what we simply hear or read on our own, and current research backs this up. Peer led instruction has been shown to improve both academic performance and student engagement across a wide range of subjects and grade

levels (Increasing Independent and Active Learning, n.d.).

When you prepare to teach something to someone else, you naturally become more invested in understanding it deeply. You build a lesson you feel confident in, anticipate the kinds of questions that might come up, and dig into the material in a way that simply listening to a lecture rarely requires. Peer teaching does not have to involve an entire class. It works just as well in small groups or even pairs. Beyond content knowledge, peer teaching also strengthens communication skills, since students are practicing how to explain ideas clearly to someone else. It can be used for something as complex as a multi step science concept or as simple as practicing spelling words or math facts, with each student taking turns being both the teacher and the learner.

Cooperative Learning Groups

Another powerful active learning strategy is cooperative learning. Cooperative learning means grouping students together so they can work toward a shared academic goal, with success depending on how well the group works together and supports one another (Cooperative Learning Institute, n.d.). Unlike simply placing students in a group and hoping for the best, true cooperative learning is intentional. It typically involves positive interdependence, meaning each student's success is tied to the group's success, along with individual accountability so that every student is responsible for contributing.

In addition to cooperative learning groups, debate teams offer another engaging way to deepen understanding. By dividing students into teams that take opposing positions on a topic, you create an environment where students must fully understand both sides of an issue in order to argue effectively. The added pressure of a debate format tends to motivate deeper preparation and more critical thinking about the material.

Role Playing, Case Studies, and Simulations

To bring real life experiences into the classroom, role playing, case studies, and simulations are all highly effective strategies. Role playing allows students to step into someone else's shoes, building empathy and a deeper understanding of other people's experiences and perspectives. It can also be used to walk students through the steps of a process in a way that feels concrete rather than abstract.

Case studies work in a similar spirit but are grounded in real world problems. A good case study presents a scenario without a tidy conclusion, asking students to act as the decision maker and apply their own analytical and problem solving skills to work toward a solution.

Simulations take this a step further by placing students directly into a decision making role within a simplified version of a real world situation. Simulations are a great way to bridge classroom learning with the complexity of real life, and many digital tools now exist that allow teachers to build these experiences directly into their curriculum. Simulation elements can also be layered into role playing or case study activities to make them even more immersive.

Games

Games are another active learning strategy that consistently engages students while reinforcing content knowledge. There are countless ways to incorporate games into a lesson. A classic example is a baseball style review game, where the class is split into two teams and students answer questions to advance bases, with a wrong answer counting as an out. Classroom Jeopardy is another popular option, where the teacher provides an answer and students must respond with the correct question, a format that works especially well for reviewing facts like multiplication tables or vocabulary terms. The student or team with the most points at the end can earn a small, low cost reward, like being first in line for lunch or first out for recess.

Journals and Portfolios

Journals and portfolios are two more valuable active learning tools, particularly useful for helping students track their own progress over time. A journal or portfolio might be compiled over a nine week grading period or across an entire school year. These tools give both students and teachers a clear picture of where a student started, how they have grown, and what they have learned along the way, and they encourage ongoing reflection rather than learning that only gets assessed at the end of a unit.

Traditional Learning versus Active Learning

Based on a substantial body of research, active learning methods genuinely help students retain and understand material more deeply than traditional lecture based instruction. One of the most well known studies on this topic, a large scale analysis of active learning in science, technology, engineering, and math courses, found that students in active learning classrooms performed significantly better on exams than students in traditional lecture based classrooms, and that failure rates were notably lower as well (Freeman et al., 2014).

That said, two common concerns come up whenever active learning is discussed. The first is time. Active learning strategies can feel time intensive, which raises a fair question: is it possible to implement these strategies while still covering all the required content and standards? The research suggests that it is, particularly when active learning is designed thoughtfully rather than added on top of existing lecture time. Many of the same studies showing improved performance also found that this happened without sacrificing curriculum coverage, because students were learning more efficiently during the time they did spend on a topic (Freeman et al., 2014).

The second common concern is class size. Some educators worry that active learning is only practical in small classrooms and becomes too chaotic in larger ones. Researchers who have studied this question directly tend to disagree, often arguing that the larger the class, the more essential active learning actually becomes, since large lecture formats make it especially easy for students to disengage without anyone noticing (Felder & Brent, 1999). One practical strategy for managing active learning in a large class is to divide students into small groups of two or three, allow time for a brief activity or discussion, and then call on individual students at random to share their group's thinking. Knowing that anyone could be called on tends to keep every student engaged rather than letting a few do all the work while others coast.

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4.2: Staying Organized

Here is something that might surprise you. The most important work a teacher does often happens before any students ever walk through the door.

Planning is one of the most underestimated skills in teaching. From the outside, a great lesson can look effortless, like the teacher just showed up and everything naturally fell into place. But behind that effortless delivery is almost always a significant amount of intentional, thoughtful preparation. Great lessons do not happen by accident. They are designed.

In this chapter we are going to explore what it means to plan instruction with purpose, how to write lessons that work for all learners including students with disabilities, and how assessment fits into the whole picture. We will also connect everything back to TPE 4 and TPE 5, two of the California Teacher Performance Expectations that speak directly to planning and assessment.

By the end of this chapter you will have a much clearer sense of what it looks like to plan and teach with intention, and why that matters so much in a special education setting.

Starting with the End in Mind: Backwards Design

Let us start with one of the most powerful ideas in instructional planning: backwards design.

Backwards design is a planning approach developed by curriculum scholars Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe that flips the traditional way most people think about lesson planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Instead of starting with what you are going to teach and figuring out the assessment later, backwards design asks you to start with the end in mind.

Here is how it works. Instead of asking yourself, what am I going to cover today, you start by asking, what do I want my students to know and be able to do by the end of this lesson or unit? Once you are clear on that, you ask, how will I know if they got there? In other words, what does mastery look like, and how will I assess it? Only after you have answered those two questions do you start thinking about the actual instructional activities and materials you will use to get students there.

It sounds simple, but it is actually a significant mindset shift. Most of us grew up in classrooms where teachers followed a textbook chapter by chapter or covered material because it was next on the list. Backwards design pushes you to be much more intentional. It forces you to ask, why am I teaching this, and what is the point?

For teachers working with students with disabilities, backwards design is especially valuable. When you are clear about what you want a student to learn, you can much more easily identify what accommodations, modifications, or supports they will need to get there. The destination does not change, but the path to get there might look different for different students. That is exactly what individualized instruction is all about.

Writing Clear Learning Objectives

Once you know where you are headed, the next step is to write a clear learning objective. A learning objective is a statement that describes what students will know or be able to do as a result of a lesson. It sounds straightforward, but writing a truly clear and useful learning objective is a skill that takes practice.

A good learning objective has a few key qualities. It is specific, meaning it describes a concrete and observable skill or piece of knowledge rather than something vague. It is measurable, meaning you can actually tell whether or not a student has achieved it. And it is student centered, meaning it describes what the student will do, not what the teacher will do (Bloom et al., 1956).

Here is an example of the difference between a weak objective and a strong one.

Weak objective: Students will learn about fractions.

Strong objective: Students will be able to identify the numerator and denominator in a fraction and explain what each represents using a visual model.

See the difference? The second objective tells you exactly what students should be able to do and gives you a clear picture of what mastery looks like. It is also much easier to assess. You can watch a student work with a visual model and pretty quickly tell

whether they have got it or not.

One of the most widely used tools for writing learning objectives is Bloom's Taxonomy, a framework that organizes thinking skills from lower order to higher order, moving from remembering and understanding all the way up to analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Bloom et al., 1956). When you write learning objectives using action verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy, you end up with objectives that are specific, measurable, and cognitively meaningful.

For students with disabilities, learning objectives might be adapted to reflect individual goals. A student working toward an IEP goal might have a modified objective that targets a prerequisite skill or a different level of the taxonomy. But the principle is the same: be clear about what you want the student to learn, and make sure you can tell whether they got there.

Aligning Objectives to the Common Core State Standards

If you have spent any time in a K through 12 classroom you have probably heard the phrase Common Core. The Common Core State Standards, or CCSS, are a set of academic standards in English language arts and mathematics that describe what students should know and be able to do at each grade level (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

California adopted the Common Core State Standards, and they serve as the foundation for what is taught in public schools across the state. As a teacher, one of your responsibilities is to make sure your instruction is aligned to these standards. That means your learning objectives should connect to what the standards expect students to know at their grade level.

Here is why this matters. Standards alignment ensures that students are working toward meaningful academic goals that are connected to a larger educational framework. It also ensures equity, because every student, regardless of which school or classroom they are in, is working toward the same grade level expectations.

For students with disabilities, standards alignment can feel complicated. If a student is working several grade levels below their peers, do the grade level standards still apply? The answer, under IDEA, is yes. Students with disabilities are expected to have access to the general education curriculum and to make progress toward grade level standards, even if the path looks different for them (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). This might mean that a student works toward a modified version of a standard, or that they receive additional support to access grade level content. But the standard itself does not disappear just because a student has a disability. This is an important and sometimes challenging concept, and it is one you will revisit many times throughout your career.

Planning Instruction for Students with Disabilities

Planning instruction for a diverse classroom that includes students with disabilities requires you to think beyond the typical lesson plan. It requires you to anticipate the needs of every learner in the room and design instruction that is flexible enough to meet those needs without requiring you to create an entirely separate lesson for every student.

This is where frameworks like Universal Design for Learning, or UDL, come in. UDL is an instructional framework that encourages teachers to build flexibility into their lessons from the very beginning rather than retrofitting accommodations after the fact (CAST, 2018). The idea is that if you design your lesson to be accessible to a wide range of learners from the start, you end up with better instruction for everyone, not just students with disabilities.

UDL is organized around three principles. The first is multiple means of representation, which means presenting information in more than one way so that students who learn differently all have access to the content. The second is multiple means of action and expression, which means giving students different ways to demonstrate what they know rather than requiring everyone to show mastery in the same way. The third is multiple means of engagement, which means finding different ways to motivate and engage students based on their individual interests and needs (CAST, 2018).

In practice, a lesson designed with UDL principles in mind might include a verbal explanation of the content alongside a visual diagram. It might offer students the choice of writing a paragraph, creating a poster, or recording a short video to demonstrate their understanding. It might include a hands on activity for students who learn best by doing. None of these additions require a separate lesson plan for students with disabilities. They just make the lesson better for everyone.

Beyond UDL, planning for students with disabilities also means knowing and implementing the accommodations and modifications listed in each student's IEP. Accommodations are changes to how a student accesses content or demonstrates learning, such as extended time, preferential seating, or access to a text to speech tool. Modifications are changes to what a

student is expected to learn, such as a reduced number of problems or a simplified version of the text. Both are legally required if they are written into a student's IEP, and it is your responsibility as the teacher to make sure they are in place (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Components of an Effective Lesson Plan

Now let us talk about the actual structure of a lesson plan. There is no single universal format for a lesson plan, and different schools, programs, and districts use different templates. But most effective lesson plans share a common set of components that help ensure the lesson is well organized, purposeful, and responsive to student needs.

Here is an overview of the key components you will typically find in a lesson plan:

Objective: As we discussed earlier, this is a clear statement of what students will know or be able to do by the end of the lesson. It should be specific, measurable, and aligned to the relevant standard.

Standard: The Common Core State Standard or other relevant standard that the lesson addresses. This connects your objective to the larger academic framework.

Materials: A list of everything you will need to teach the lesson, including any technology, manipulatives, handouts, or other resources.

Introduction/Hook or Anticipatory Set: How you will open the lesson and capture student interest. This is sometimes called the anticipatory set, and its purpose is to activate prior knowledge, spark curiosity, and set the stage for the new learning.

Direct Instruction: The portion of the lesson where you introduce new content. This might look like a mini lecture, a read aloud, a demonstration, or a multimedia presentation. The key is that it is focused, clear, and accessible.

Guided Practice: After introducing new content, students need an opportunity to practice with your support. This might look like working through problems together as a class, small group discussion, or a structured activity where you circulate and provide feedback.

Independent Practice: Once students have had a chance to practice with support, they work independently to apply what they have learned. This is often where you can see most clearly whether students have grasped the concept.

Closure: How you will wrap up the lesson. Closure is often overlooked, but it is one of the most important parts of a lesson because it gives students a chance to consolidate their learning and make connections. This might look like an exit ticket, a brief discussion, or a quick reflection prompt.

Assessment: How you will know whether students achieved the objective. This connects directly to the backwards design process we talked about earlier.

Accommodations and Modifications: For classes that include students with IEPs or 504 plans, this section outlines the specific supports that will be in place during the lesson.

When you write your lesson plan for this course, you will use a template that incorporates all of these components. Do not worry if it feels overwhelming at first. Like any skill, lesson planning gets easier and more intuitive with practice.

Writing a Lesson Plan for a Diverse Classroom

Writing a lesson plan for a classroom that includes students with diverse needs, including students with disabilities, English learners, and students performing above and below grade level, is one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of teaching.

The key is to design with flexibility in mind. Rather than writing one lesson for the average student and then figuring out how to adapt it for everyone else, try to think about the range of learners in the room from the very beginning. Who in this classroom might struggle with this concept, and why? Who might already know it and need to be pushed further? How can I present this content in a way that gives everyone a meaningful entry point?

This kind of thinking is sometimes called differentiated instruction, and it is a core expectation for teachers working in inclusive settings. Differentiation does not mean creating a different lesson for every student. It means being thoughtful about the different ways students might access, engage with, and demonstrate learning, and building enough flexibility into your lesson to

accommodate that range (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003).

For students with disabilities specifically, differentiation also means honoring what is written in their IEPs. If a student's IEP says they need access to a graphic organizer, that graphic organizer should be ready and available before the lesson starts. If a student needs preferential seating near the teacher, that should be part of your classroom setup. Planning for students with disabilities is not something that happens after the lesson is written. It is part of the lesson design process from the very beginning.

Understanding Assessment

Now let us shift to assessment, which is one of the most important and most misunderstood aspects of teaching.

When most people hear the word assessment, they think of tests. And while tests are certainly one form of assessment, they are far from the only one, and in many cases they are not even the most useful one. Assessment is really just the process of gathering information about what students know and can do in order to make better instructional decisions. When you think about it that way, assessment is happening all the time, not just at the end of a unit.

There are two broad categories of assessment that every teacher needs to understand: formal and informal.

Formal Assessment

Formal assessments are structured, standardized tools that are used to measure student learning in a systematic way. They typically have a specific format, are scored according to a rubric or scoring guide, and produce data that can be compared across students or over time. Examples of formal assessments include standardized tests, district benchmark assessments, end of unit tests, and the psychoeducational assessments used to determine eligibility for special education services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Formal assessments have their place in education, but they also have limitations. They tend to measure a narrow range of skills, they can be influenced by test taking anxiety or language barriers, and they often provide a snapshot of performance on a single day rather than a picture of a student's overall growth and ability.

Informal Assessment

Informal assessments are the ongoing, day to day tools teachers use to check for understanding and monitor student progress. They are typically less structured than formal assessments and are not always scored in a traditional way. Examples include exit tickets, thumbs up or thumbs down checks, observation notes, class discussions, student work samples, and quick writes (Heritage, 2010).

Informal assessments are incredibly valuable because they give you real time information about how your students are doing. If you notice during a class discussion that several students are consistently giving incorrect answers, that tells you something important about what they understand and what they still need. You can adjust your instruction immediately rather than waiting until the end of the unit to find out that students were lost.

For special education teachers, informal assessment is especially important because it connects directly to the progress monitoring required by IDEA. Students with IEPs must have their progress toward their goals monitored on a regular basis, and informal assessments are often the primary tool used for that monitoring (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

How Assessment Drives Instruction

Here is one of the most important ideas in this entire chapter: assessment should drive instruction, not just follow it.

What does that mean? It means that the information you gather through assessment should directly inform what you teach next, how you teach it, and who needs additional support. Assessment is not just a way to assign grades. It is a feedback loop that helps you continuously improve your instruction and better meet the needs of every student in your classroom.

Think about it this way. If you give an exit ticket at the end of a lesson and discover that only half of your students understood the concept, that is not a failure. That is valuable data. It tells you that you need to reteach the concept, probably in a different way, before you can move on. If you discover that most students got it but three students are still struggling, that tells you those three students need some additional targeted support while the rest of the class moves forward.

This kind of responsive, data informed teaching is sometimes called formative assessment practice, and it is one of the hallmarks

of highly effective teachers. It requires you to stay curious about where your students are, stay flexible in your planning, and stay humble enough to recognize when something is not working and change course (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

For students with disabilities, this approach is not just good teaching practice. It is a legal requirement. IDEA mandates that teachers regularly collect and analyze data on student progress toward IEP goals and use that data to make instructional decisions. Building strong assessment habits now, even as a teacher candidate, will set you up for success in this area later.

Connecting It All Back to TPE 4 and TPE 5

Everything we have covered in this chapter connects directly to two of the California Teacher Performance Expectations: TPE 4, which focuses on planning instruction and designing learning experiences, and TPE 5, which focuses on assessing student learning.

TPE 4 asks you to demonstrate your ability to plan instruction that is purposeful, standards aligned, responsive to student needs, and designed with all learners in mind. Every element of lesson planning we have discussed in this chapter, from backwards design to UDL to accommodations and modifications, is part of what TPE 4 expects of you as a developing teacher (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

TPE 5 asks you to demonstrate your ability to use a range of assessment strategies to monitor student learning, make instructional decisions, and communicate student progress to families and colleagues. The ideas we explored about formal and informal assessment, progress monitoring, and data driven instruction are all central to what TPE 5 is asking of you (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

As you move through your fieldwork placement this semester, pay close attention to how the teachers you observe plan and assess. How do they open a lesson? How do they check for understanding during instruction? What do they do when students are not getting it? How do they track progress toward IEP goals? These are the questions that will help you connect what you are reading in this chapter to what is actually happening in real classrooms, and that connection is exactly what your TPE portfolio reflections should capture.

Before You Move On

Planning and assessment are two of the foundational skills of effective teaching, and they are deeply interconnected. You cannot plan well without thinking about how you will assess, and assessment only makes sense in the context of what you are trying to teach. Together, backwards design, clear objectives, standards alignment, UDL, and responsive assessment form the core of what it means to plan and teach with intention.

As you begin working on your own lesson plan for this course, try to approach it not as an assignment to complete but as a genuine exercise in professional thinking. Ask yourself, who are the students in this classroom, what do I want them to learn, how will I know if they got there, and what will I do if they did not? Those four questions are at the heart of every great lesson, and getting comfortable with them now will serve you for your entire career.

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4.3: Response to Intervention RTI

What You Need to Know

Since the passage of the No Child left behind act of 2001, focus on student achievement has become a major issue within education. Parents and legislators have discussed both the need for improvement of student performance and the inordinate amount of time spent testing students (Layton, 2015). In response to growing concerns over the amount of time spent testing, the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS; 2015) conducted a study of 66 large school districts and found students spent 20 to 25 hours of instructional time per year on standardized testing in grades three through 11. This study further described that the average student will take approximately 8 standardized tests per year in reading and math and three formative exams in at least two subjects. In response to this report, the United States Department of Education (USDOE, 2015) released an action plan that, among other things, suggested that students should spend no more than 2% of instructional time taking assessments and that the clear majority of assessments should be tied to improvment in student learning. These sentiments were reiterated in the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) and a brief published by the USDOE in 2016 which called for reducing test time and implementing fair and more innovative tests.

Special Education has, in many respects, become synonymous with the assessment of students. Indeed, one of the mainstays of current special-education practice is utilizing data to inform the goals in a students' individual education programs (IEPs), to inform instructional practices, and modify them as necessary. In addition, the current focus on preventative measures based on a response to intervention (RTI) approach, though generally a school-wide assessment system, was largely born out of special education (See Figure 1). Specifically, RTI was initially proposed as a method of providing early intervention and identification services to reduce the number of students being falsely identified as learning disabled (LD) due to poor instruction and a flawed assessment approach (IQ-achievement discrepancy).

It could be said, then that RTI initiatives and special education could be blamed for at least some of the increased amount of testing conducted in schools. For example, these models ask that universal screening measures (USM; also referred to as benchmark assessments) be delivered to students three times per year to determine those students who are at-risk for learning, social, and/or behavioral disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Lane, Ennis, Kalberg, & Carter, 2007). These universal screening measures (e.g., Dynamic Indicatorsof Basic Early Literacy Skills [DIBELS] and Measures of Academic Progress [MAPS]) are meant to be brief measures to determine skill level. However, because some of these measures (e.g., DIBELS) require individual student testing by the teacher or para professional, they can become laborious and time consuming in an already full teaching day.

What is RTI?

The RTI framework has since been expanded to include three-tiered models of prevention that include behavioral and social emotional systems. With this expansion, acronyms have exploded to describe similar constructs: RTI, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS), and comprehensive, integrated, three-tiered models of prevention (Ci3T). In most cases, these acronyms are synonymous and simply reference utilization of a three-tiered model (see below) of prevention where Tier 1 (approximately 80% of students) is universal instruction; Tier 2 (15% of students) are students determined to be at-risk and receive small group instruction, and Tier 3 (5% of students) are those needing specialized instruction, or special-education. Thus, for the sake of clarity and ease of understanding, this text will use the term RTI to describe the threetiered models of prevention broadly, not just its oft limited use to describe assessment of learning disabilities.

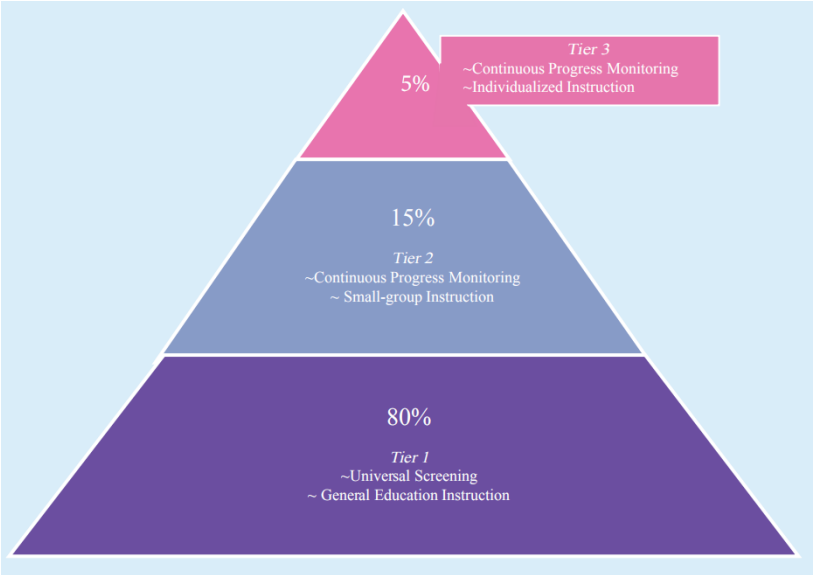


Figure 4.3.1

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- 2.1: Introduction by Mickey Losinski is licensed CC BY-ND 4.0.

4.4: References

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4.5: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. Which of the following best describes the backwards design approach to lesson planning?

a) Starting with the materials and activities and then figuring out what students will learn from them

b) Starting with the desired learning outcomes and then designing assessments and instruction to get students there

c) Starting with the state standards and working backwards to identify what prior knowledge students need

d) Starting with informal assessments and using the results to plan future lessons

2. What is the difference between an accommodation and a modification in special education?

a) Accommodations change what a student is expected to learn while modifications change how they access content

b) Accommodations are only used in general education classrooms while modifications are only used in special education classrooms

c) Accommodations change how a student accesses content or demonstrates learning while modifications change what the student is expected to learn

d) There is no meaningful difference between accommodations and modifications

Reflection

3. Think about a lesson or learning experience from your own schooling that was particularly effective. Using what you learned in this chapter about backwards design, UDL, and clear objectives, can you identify what made that lesson work? What elements of good instructional design were present even if the teacher did not use those exact terms?

4. The chapter describes assessment as a feedback loop rather than just a way to assign grades. How does this idea change the way you think about testing and evaluation? How might you use informal assessment differently than formal assessment in your own future classroom?

5. Imagine you are planning a lesson for a classroom that includes students with a range of abilities and needs, including two students with IEPs, one student who is an English learner, and several students who are performing above grade level. What are the most important things you would consider as you plan, and how would you use UDL principles to make the lesson accessible to everyone?

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5: DEVELOPING AS A PROFESSIONAL AND MTSS

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

1. Define professional practice in the context of special education and identify the key qualities and responsibilities of a professional educator.
2. Explain the importance of reflective practice and professional goal setting in the ongoing development of an effective special education teacher.
3. Describe the three tiers of the Multi-Tiered System of Support framework and explain the purpose and characteristics of each tier.
4. Explain the Student Study Team process and describe how it connects to the MTSS framework as a tool for supporting students before special education referral.
5. Analyze how MTSS and the SST process reflect the legal requirements of IDEA regarding early intervention and the provision of appropriate instruction prior to special education referral.

5.1: Growing as an Educator

5.2: Working Collaboratively

5.3: References

5.4: Review Questions

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5.1: Growing as an Educator

Let's take a step back for a moment and think about the bigger picture.

You have spent the last several chapters building knowledge about special education, the TPEs, and instructional planning. You are starting to develop a sense of what it means to teach, what students with disabilities need, and how classrooms are structured to support diverse learners. That is real and meaningful progress.

But here is something that does not always get talked about enough in teacher preparation programs: being a great teacher is about so much more than what happens inside your classroom. It is about who you are as a professional, how you grow and develop over time, how you collaborate with the people around you, and how you show up for students and families even when things get complicated.

This chapter is about all of that. We are going to explore what it means to be a professional educator, how to think about your own growth and development, and how two important frameworks, the Multi-Tiered System of Support and the Student Study Team process, fit into the bigger picture of supporting students before they ever reach the point of a special education referral.

All of this connects to TPE 6, the California Teacher Performance Expectation focused on developing as a professional educator. By the end of this chapter you will have a much clearer sense of what professional practice looks like in a real school setting and why it matters so much in special education specifically.

What Does It Mean to Be a Professional Educator?

This might seem like a question with an obvious answer, but it is worth sitting with for a minute. What does professionalism actually look like in teaching?

On the surface level, professionalism includes the things you probably already associate with the word: showing up on time, dressing appropriately, communicating respectfully, meeting deadlines, and following school policies and procedures. These things matter, and they are a baseline expectation in any professional setting.

But in teaching, professionalism goes much deeper than that. It includes the way you talk about your students, both inside and outside of school. It includes the care you take to protect student confidentiality and privacy. It includes how you handle disagreements with colleagues or parents. It includes the effort you put into staying current with research and best practices. And perhaps most importantly, it includes your willingness to reflect honestly on your own practice and do something about what you find (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

One of the things that sets truly professional educators apart is their approach to relationships. Teaching is fundamentally relational work. Your relationships with students, families, colleagues, and administrators are not just nice to have. They are essential to doing your job well. A teacher who is technically skilled but dismissive of families, or who creates conflict with colleagues, or who treats students as problems to be managed rather than people to be served, is not operating at a professional level no matter how good their lesson plans are.

In special education specifically, professionalism takes on additional dimensions. You will be working with families who are often navigating an overwhelming and emotional system. You will be sitting at IEP tables making decisions that have real legal and personal consequences for students and their families. You will be collaborating with a team of professionals including speech therapists, psychologists, occupational therapists, and general education teachers, all of whom have different areas of expertise and different perspectives. Being a professional in this context means bringing humility, empathy, and genuine collaboration to all of those interactions.

It also means understanding your legal and ethical obligations. Special education teachers are bound by federal and state law in ways that go beyond what most other teachers encounter. Knowing the law, following it carefully, and advocating within it on behalf of your students is a core part of what professional practice looks like in this field.

Teaching Goals and Professional Growth

Here is something that might seem counterintuitive: the best teachers are not the ones who have figured everything out. They are the ones who never stop trying to figure things out.

Teaching is a profession of continuous growth. The research on effective instruction is always evolving. The students in your classroom every year are unique. The challenges facing schools and communities change over time. A teacher who relies on the same strategies they learned in their credential program and never updates their practice is going to fall behind, and more importantly, their students are going to miss out.

So what does professional growth actually look like in practice? It starts with reflection. Reflective practice is the habit of regularly examining your own teaching, asking yourself what is working, what is not, and why, and using those insights to make intentional changes (Schön, 1983). This is not about beating yourself up when a lesson does not go well. It is about approaching your practice with curiosity and a genuine desire to improve.

Professional growth also looks like seeking out feedback. Strong teachers ask their colleagues to observe them and share what they notice. They participate in professional development opportunities with an open mind rather than just sitting through them to check a box. They read, ask questions, and stay curious about their field.

Setting teaching goals is another important part of professional growth. Just like we write learning objectives for students, it helps to have clear goals for your own development as a teacher. What specific area of your practice do you want to strengthen this year? What do you want to know more about? What kind of teacher do you want to be in five years, and what steps are you taking to get there?

For teacher candidates like yourself, this process of goal setting and reflection starts right now. Your fieldwork placement is not just an observation requirement. It is an opportunity to begin developing the habits of a reflective professional. Every time you observe a lesson, every time you write a TPE reflection, and every time you think critically about what you are seeing and experiencing, you are practicing the skills that will make you a stronger educator throughout your career.

Introduction to MTSS: What It Is and Why It Matters

Now let us shift to one of the most important frameworks in modern education: the ***Multi-Tiered System of Support, or MTSS.***

If you have spent any time in a school recently, you have probably heard this term. MTSS is a framework that schools use to provide support to all students based on their individual needs, using a tiered approach that ranges from universal supports for everyone to highly individualized supports for students who need the most help (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

The best way to visualize MTSS is as a triangle or pyramid divided into three tiers. Here is how each tier works.

Tier 1: Universal Supports

Tier 1 is the foundation of the MTSS triangle and it applies to every single student in the school. At this level, the focus is on high quality core instruction that is delivered in the general education classroom and designed to meet the needs of the majority of students. Research suggests that when Tier 1 instruction is truly effective, it should meet the needs of approximately eighty to eighty five percent of students without any additional intervention (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

Tier 1 also includes universal supports like positive behavior expectations, social emotional learning programs, and culturally responsive teaching practices. The idea is that if you get Tier 1 right, you prevent a lot of the academic and behavioral challenges that would otherwise require more intensive support.

Tier 2: Targeted Supports

When a student is not making adequate progress with Tier 1 instruction alone, they move into Tier 2. At this level, students receive more targeted support in addition to their regular classroom instruction. This might look like a small group intervention for reading or math that meets a few times a week, or a structured social skills group for students who are struggling behaviorally.

Tier 2 supports are designed to be more intensive than Tier 1 but are still delivered in a group format rather than individually. The goal is to address specific skill gaps and get students back on track before their challenges become more significant. Research suggests that Tier 2 supports should serve approximately ten to fifteen percent of the student population at any given time (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

Tier 3: Intensive Supports

Tier 3 is the most intensive level of support within MTSS and is reserved for students whose needs are not being met by Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports alone. At this level, students receive highly individualized intervention that is tailored specifically to their

needs and delivered with greater frequency and intensity than lower tier supports.

It is important to understand that Tier 3 does not automatically mean special education. A student can receive Tier 3 supports without having a disability or an IEP. However, students who are receiving Tier 3 supports and still not making adequate progress may be referred for a special education evaluation to determine whether they qualify for additional services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

The SST Process and Its Connection to MTSS

Within the MTSS framework, one of the most important tools schools use to coordinate support for struggling students is the ***Student Study Team, or SST.***

An SST is a collaborative problem solving meeting that brings together a team of educators, support staff, and the student's family to discuss a student's challenges and develop a plan to address them. The SST process is typically initiated when a teacher or parent has concerns about a student's academic progress, behavior, attendance, or social emotional wellbeing, and it is one of the primary ways schools respond to those concerns before considering a special education referral (California Department of Education, 2023).

Here is how the SST process generally works. A teacher, parent, or other school staff member raises a concern about a student. The SST team, which typically includes the student's teacher, an administrator, a school counselor or psychologist, the student's parents or guardians, and sometimes the student themselves, meets to discuss the concern in depth. Together they review any existing data on the student, identify the specific areas of difficulty, brainstorm strategies and interventions, and develop a written action plan with clear goals and timelines. The team then reconvenes after a set period of time to review the student's progress and determine whether the interventions are working or whether additional support is needed.

The SST process is closely connected to MTSS because it is often the formal mechanism through which students move between tiers. When a student is not responding to Tier 1 instruction, the SST might develop a Tier 2 intervention plan. If that plan does not produce adequate progress, the SST might recommend a Tier 3 intervention or initiate a referral for a special education evaluation.

It is worth noting that the SST process is not punitive. It is not a meeting where a student gets in trouble or where parents are called in to hear bad news. At its best, it is a collaborative and strengths based conversation that centers the student's wellbeing and brings together everyone who cares about that student to figure out the best way to help them.

How MTSS Supports Students Before Special Education

One of the most important things to understand about MTSS is its role as a preventive framework. MTSS is designed to identify and support struggling students early, before their challenges become significant enough to require special education services.

This matters for several reasons. First, early intervention is almost always more effective than late intervention. The sooner a student gets the support they need, the better their outcomes tend to be. Second, MTSS helps ensure that students are not referred to special education simply because they did not receive adequate instruction. Under IDEA, schools are required to consider whether a student's learning difficulties are the result of lack of appropriate instruction before determining that they have a disability (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). MTSS provides the documentation and the process to make that determination thoughtfully and fairly.

Third, MTSS supports all students, not just those with or at risk for disabilities. Because Tier 1 focuses on improving instruction for everyone, a well implemented MTSS framework raises the bar for the entire school. Students who might never need Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports still benefit from the high quality instruction and positive school culture that MTSS is designed to create.

For special education teachers, understanding MTSS is essential because you will often be involved in the process at multiple levels. You might provide Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention supports to students who do not yet have IEPs. You might participate in SST meetings as a specialist. You might collaborate with general education teachers to help them strengthen their Tier 1 instruction for students with disabilities. In all of these roles, your knowledge of MTSS will make you a more effective advocate and collaborator.

Connecting It All to TPE 6

Everything we have covered in this chapter connects directly to TPE 6, which focuses on developing as a professional educator. Let us take a moment to make those connections explicit.

When TPE 6 asks you to demonstrate professional responsibility and reflective practice, it is asking you to be the kind of educator who thinks critically about their own teaching, sets meaningful goals, seeks out feedback, and commits to continuous growth. That is exactly what we talked about in the first part of this chapter (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016).

When TPE 6 asks you to collaborate with colleagues, families, and the broader school community, it is asking you to be an active and constructive participant in the kinds of team based processes we discussed when talking about the SST. Showing up to an SST meeting prepared, engaged, and focused on the student's best interests is a demonstration of TPE 6 in action.

When TPE 6 asks you to understand and apply professional and legal obligations, it is asking you to know the frameworks, including MTSS and IDEA, that govern how schools support students with diverse needs, and to operate within them with integrity and intentionality.

As you observe classrooms during your fieldwork this semester, pay attention to the ways teachers demonstrate professional practice beyond the lesson itself. How do they interact with parents? How do they collaborate with colleagues? Do they participate in team meetings? How do they talk about students who are struggling? These observations will give you rich material for your TPE 6 portfolio reflection and will help you begin forming your own vision of what it means to be a truly professional educator.

A Few Thoughts Before You Move On

Professionalism, growth, and collaboration are not things you figure out once and then have forever. They are ongoing commitments that evolve throughout your career. The teachers who make the biggest difference for students are rarely the ones with the most impressive credentials or the most elaborate lesson plans. They are the ones who show up every day with humility, curiosity, and a genuine commitment to getting better at what they do.

MTSS and the SST process are tools that reflect that same commitment at a systems level. They are built on the belief that every student deserves early, responsive, and thoughtful support, and that the adults in a school have a collective responsibility to provide it.

As you move forward in this course and in your fieldwork, keep asking yourself, what kind of professional do I want to be? How do I want to show up for my students, my colleagues, and the families I serve? Those questions do not have easy answers, but sitting with them is one of the most important things you can do as you begin this journey.

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5.2: Working Collaboratively

Collaboration

Exceptional students may receive instruction in a general education classroom with the support of a special educator and paraprofessional while also receiving related services from different clinicians throughout the school day. All these professionals work together to support the student's needs by providing different types of knowledge and expertise. In special education, collaboration also includes different models that educators, clinicians, and paraprofessionals might use to structure their interactions (Smiley et al., 2022).

Teacher Collaboration

Teachers use different co-teaching models. When co-teaching, general and special education teachers or other specialized teachers (e.g., reading specialists) work together to plan and facilitate lessons for a class that includes students with disabilities. Co-teaching allows each teacher to utilize their expertise to meet individual student needs and promote student learning. The following are different co-teaching models. Each model has strengths and weaknesses; it is up to the collaborating teachers to determine what model will work best for their specific circumstances.

One Teach, One Observe - In the one teach, one observe model, one teacher teaches while the other observes during instruction. For example, while the general education teacher is instructing the class, the special education teacher is observing a student with a disability to ensure they are grasping the concepts taught in the lesson.

One Teach, One Assist - In one teach, one assist, one teacher assumes greater responsibility for planning and facilitating instruction. The assisting teacher observes and provides support to students as needed. The one teach, one assist model extends the one teach, one observe model and works well when co-planning time is limited.

Station Teaching - In station teaching, teachers divide a lesson into parts, and each teacher instructs a small group of students at a station. The groups then rotate between stations. This model is often used at the elementary level. For example, when teaching a math lesson, one teacher might instruct a group on using manipulatives to solve a problem while the other teacher instructs a group on solving the same problem using mathematical computation.

Parallel Teaching - In parallel teaching, each teacher presents the same lesson to a small group of students. The primary benefit of this model is the smaller teacher-to-student ratio. This model is best for reviewing material that has already been taught.

Supplemental or Alternative Teaching - In supplemental teaching, one teacher works with students at their expected grade level, while the other works with students requiring remediation (i.e., re-teaching) or enrichment. For example, one teacher may work with a group of students who have fallen behind because of repeated absences.

Teaming - In teaming, teachers take equal responsibility for planning and instruction. This model is the most collaborative of all the co-teaching models. Teachers regularly change roles, each taking the lead and assisting when needed (Friend et al., 2010; Smiley et al., 2022).

Collaboration with Paraprofessionals

Teachers and clinicians regularly collaborate with paraprofessionals, who are sometimes referred to as paraeducators, aides, or education support professionals. Paraprofessionals provide specific classroom or student support and are supervised by teachers. For example, a paraprofessional assigned to a classroom might tutor students or assist the teacher with classroom management and instructional material organization. When a paraprofessional is hired to support an individual student, they will accompany that student to their classes and school-related activities to provide assistance and instructional support. It’s important for teachers, clinicians, and paraprofessionals to build positive, trusting relationships to best support students. Administrators should provide a time for teachers and paraprofessionals to plan and train together (Smiley et al., 2022).

Collaboration with Clinicians

Teachers and clinicians collaborate when students receive related services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that related services are delivered in a student's least restrictive environment. For example, if speech services can be delivered effectively in the general education classroom, that should be where services are delivered. If a student's needs require an environment free from distractions and individualized instruction, services should be delivered in a separate setting. Many clinicians and related service personnel serve students in various schools in a district. For example, a speech–language pathologist may be assigned to work with students in multiple elementary schools in a district. Working in multiple schools can sometimes hinder collaboration because time and resources are limited. Depending on the situation, collaboration with clinicians may occur primarily during individualized education program (IEP) meetings or through scheduled consultations throughout the school year (Downing, 2004; Smiley et al., 2022).

Collaboration with Families

The IDEA ensures students and their families are involved in the education process. For example, states must provide Parent Training and Information Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers. These centers help students with disabilities and their families understand their rights and connect them with appropriate services. Formal collaboration with families usually occurs during the IEP process. However, sometimes families are not as involved as educators and clinicians would like, but it's important to remember that there are many possible reasons for limited involvement. For example, some parents may have jobs that limit their ability to participate in IEP meetings during the school day. Others may have limited options for transportation or may not have reliable internet access to participate in remote IEP meetings. Whatever the reason, the school needs to engage in ongoing communication with families and accommodate their needs to encourage participation in their child's education (Smiley et al., 2022). Importantly, some families may be hesitant to talk with or ask questions of teachers or clinicians. Communicating with families outside of the mandated meetings is critical. Informal daily or weekly communication can help build a relationship between the family, teachers, and clinicians.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Cultural and linguistic differences between families, teachers, and clinicians may impact the success of collaboration. Educators and clinicians need to use effective communication techniques and work to develop positive and trusting relationships with families (Friend & Cook, 2013). This includes initiating communication, using a communication format and language that accommodates the family's needs, and using translators and interpreters. In addition, educators and clinicians should demonstrate a willingness to learn about the cultures of families whose backgrounds are different from their own (Smiley et al., 2022).

Recognizing implicit bias is critical when working with culturally diverse families and students. *Implicit bias* is a form of bias that occurs automatically and unintentionally and affects judgments, decisions, and behaviors. When a teacher or clinician interacts with a student or family member from a different background or culture, their implicit biases may impact their conclusions. It is important for teachers and clinicians to assume personal responsibility to better understand and address their own biases.

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5.4: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. Which of the following best describes Tier 2 of the MTSS framework?

a) High quality core instruction provided to all students in the general education classroom

b) Highly individualized intensive intervention for students with the most significant needs

c) Targeted small group intervention for students who are not making adequate progress with Tier 1 instruction alone

d) Special education services provided through an IEP for students with identified disabilities

2. What is the primary purpose of the Student Study Team process?

a) To determine whether a student qualifies for special education services

b) To bring together a collaborative team to problem solve around a student's challenges and develop a support plan before considering a special education referral

c) To evaluate a student's academic performance using standardized assessments

d) To develop a student's annual IEP goals and determine their educational placement

Reflection

3. The chapter describes professionalism in teaching as going far deeper than showing up on time and dressing appropriately. In your own words, what does professional practice look like in a special education setting? What aspects of professionalism do you feel most prepared for, and what areas do you think will take more time and experience to develop?

4. Think about a time when you received support from someone who genuinely believed in you and showed up for you when things were hard. How did that experience affect you? How does that connect to the role that teachers play in the lives of students who are struggling, and what does it mean for how you want to show up in your own classroom?

5. Now that you understand how MTSS works, reflect on your own educational experience. Do you think your school had something like MTSS in place when you were a student? Were there students in your school who you think could have benefited from earlier and more targeted support? What might have been different for them if a strong MTSS framework had been in place?

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6: WHAT IS AN IEP?

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

1. Define the Individualized Education Program and explain its legal basis, purpose, and role as the cornerstone of special education services.
2. Identify the required members of the IEP team and describe the role and contribution of each member in the IEP development process.
3. Identify and describe the required components of an IEP and explain how each component contributes to the overall design of a student's educational program.
4. Explain the special education eligibility process including the referral, evaluation, and eligibility determination steps and identify the timelines required by IDEA.
5. Describe the procedural safeguards provided to parents and students under IDEA and explain why family partnership is essential to the IEP process.

6.1: More Than Just a Document

6.2: References

6.3: Review Questions

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6.1: More Than Just a Document

Setting the Stage

If there is one document that sits at the absolute center of special education, it is the Individualized Education Program, better known as the IEP.

You are going to hear this term a lot throughout this course, throughout your fieldwork, and throughout your entire career as a special education teacher. And yet, despite how central it is to everything we do in this field, a lot of people, including many educators, do not fully understand what an IEP actually is, how it works, or why it exists in the first place.

So let us fix that.

This chapter is going to give you a solid foundation in IEP basics. We are going to talk about what an IEP is and why it exists, who is involved in creating it, what it contains, how students become eligible for one, and what rights parents and students have throughout the process. By the end of this chapter you will not be an IEP expert, that takes years of practice and experience, but you will have the foundational knowledge you need to start making sense of what you are seeing in your fieldwork placement and to build toward the more detailed IEP work coming in the chapters ahead.

What Is an IEP and Why Does It Exist?

Let us start with the basics. An IEP, or Individualized Education Program, is a legally binding document that outlines the special education services, supports, and goals for a student with a disability who qualifies for special education under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

The key word in that definition is individualized. Every IEP is unique to the student it was written for. It is not a template that gets filled in the same way for every child. It is a document that reflects that specific student's strengths, needs, present levels of performance, and the specific services and supports they require to access their education and make meaningful progress.

The IEP exists because of a simple but powerful idea: students with disabilities deserve an education that is designed for them, not just a version of the general education program that they are expected to fit into. Before IDEA was passed in 1975, students with disabilities were often excluded from public schools entirely, or placed in settings that provided little to no meaningful instruction. The IEP was created as a tool to ensure that every eligible student receives a free and appropriate public education that is tailored to their individual needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Think about what that means in practice. An IEP says to a student and their family: we see you, we know what you need, and we are legally committed to providing it. That is not a small thing. For many families, especially those who spent years fighting to get their child's needs recognized, the IEP represents something profound. It is a document that says your child matters and their education matters, and here is our specific plan to make sure they get what they need to succeed.

As a future special education teacher, the IEP will be one of the most important documents you work with on a daily basis. You will write IEPs, implement them, monitor progress toward them, and revise them. Understanding what they are and why they exist is the foundation of everything else.

The IEP Team and Each Member's Role

One of the things that makes the IEP process unique is that it is not something a single person creates in isolation. An IEP is developed collaboratively by a team, and federal law is very specific about who must be part of that team (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Let us walk through each member of the IEP team and what they bring to the table.

The Parents or Guardians

Parents and guardians are not just invited guests at the IEP table. They are equal members of the team. IDEA gives parents significant rights in the IEP process, including the right to participate in all meetings, to review all records related to their child, to request evaluations, and to disagree with the team's decisions and pursue dispute resolution if needed.

Parents bring something to the IEP table that no one else can: deep knowledge of their child as a whole person. They know their child's history, their personality, their fears and joys, what motivates them, what shuts them down, and what life looks like for them outside of school. That knowledge is invaluable, and a truly collaborative IEP process centers and honors it.

One of the most important things you will learn as a special education teacher is how to build genuine partnerships with families. This means communicating clearly and without jargon, listening as much as you talk, following up when you say you will, and making families feel like true partners rather than afterthoughts.

The General Education Teacher

At least one of the student's general education teachers must be part of the IEP team whenever the student is or may be participating in the general education environment. This requirement exists because the general education teacher has direct knowledge of the general curriculum, the classroom environment, and the grade level expectations the student is working toward.

The general education teacher's role on the IEP team is to provide insight into how the student is performing in the general education setting, what supports are already in place, and what additional accommodations or modifications might help the student succeed in that environment. They are also responsible for implementing any accommodations or modifications listed in the IEP within their own classroom.

The Special Education Teacher

The special education teacher is typically the person most familiar with the student's disability related needs and with the specialized instruction and supports that will help them make progress. They often take the lead in writing the IEP document, coordinating the IEP meeting, and communicating with other team members between meetings.

As a future special education teacher, this will be one of your most central professional responsibilities. It is a role that requires strong organizational skills, deep knowledge of disability and special education law, the ability to communicate clearly with a wide range of people, and a genuine commitment to advocating for your students.

A Representative of the Local Education Agency

Every IEP team must include a representative from the local education agency, or LEA, which is typically the school district. This person must be qualified to provide or supervise special education services and must have the authority to commit district resources. In practice, this is often a school principal, assistant principal, or special education coordinator.

The LEA representative plays an important role in ensuring that the services outlined in the IEP are actually available and that the district can deliver on its commitments.

A Person Who Can Interpret Evaluation Results

Someone on the IEP team must be able to explain what the student's assessment data means and how it connects to the educational decisions being made. This might be the school psychologist, the special education teacher, or another qualified professional. This requirement exists because assessment data can be complex, and families deserve to have it explained in a way that is clear and meaningful.

Related Services Providers

Depending on the student's needs, the IEP team may also include related services providers such as a speech and language

pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, school counselor, or orientation and mobility specialist. These professionals provide services that support the student's ability to access and benefit from their education.

The Student

Whenever appropriate, and especially for students who are sixteen years of age or older, the student themselves should be part of the IEP team. IDEA places a strong emphasis on transition planning for older students, and student involvement in that process is essential. But even for younger students, finding age appropriate ways to include their voice in the IEP process is a powerful practice that honors their agency and helps them develop self advocacy skills.

An Overview of IEP Components

Now that you know who creates the IEP, let us talk about what is actually in it. While the specific format of an IEP can vary from district to district, federal law requires that every IEP include certain components (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance

This is often called the PLAAFP or present levels, and it is the foundation of the entire IEP. The present levels section describes where the student is right now, academically and functionally, based on current assessment data and input from teachers, parents, and the student. It should paint a clear and specific picture of the student's strengths as well as their areas of need.

The present levels are important because everything else in the IEP flows from them. If the present levels are vague or inaccurate, the goals and services that follow will be built on a shaky foundation. We will spend an entire chapter later in this course going deep on how to write strong present levels.

Annual Goals

Based on the present levels, the IEP team writes annual goals that describe what the student is expected to achieve within one year. Goals should be specific, measurable, and directly connected to the student's identified areas of need. They should also be ambitious but realistic, reflecting genuine expectations for growth rather than either setting the bar too low or aiming for something unattainable.

IEP goals can address academic skills like reading and math, functional skills like communication and self care, behavioral goals, social skills, and transition related skills for older students. We will spend an entire chapter on goal writing later in this course because it is one of the most important and nuanced skills a special education teacher develops.

Special Education and Related Services

This section of the IEP outlines the specific services the student will receive, including the type of service, how often it will be provided, where it will be delivered, and who will provide it. This might include special education instruction, speech therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, transportation, or any other service the team determines is necessary for the student to receive a free and appropriate public education.

Accommodations and Modifications

As we discussed in the previous chapter, accommodations are changes to how a student accesses content or demonstrates learning, while modifications are changes to what the student is expected to learn. Both are documented in the IEP and are legally required to be implemented in every setting where the student receives instruction.

Least Restrictive Environment Statement

The IEP must include a statement explaining the extent to which the student will or will not participate in general education

settings. If the student will be educated separately from their non disabled peers for any portion of the day, the IEP must explain why that is necessary. This requirement reflects the legal mandate to educate students in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs.

Participation in State and District Assessments

The IEP must also indicate how the student will participate in standardized testing. Some students participate in the standard assessment with accommodations. Others participate in an alternate assessment designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The IEP team makes this determination based on the student's individual needs and abilities.

Transition Planning

For students who are sixteen or older, the IEP must include a transition plan that addresses post secondary goals related to education, employment, and independent living. Transition planning is a significant area of special education practice and reflects the recognition that the ultimate goal of education is to prepare students for meaningful lives beyond school.

The Assessment Timeline and Eligibility Process

Before a student can receive an IEP, they must go through a formal evaluation process to determine whether they have a disability that qualifies them for special education services. This process is carefully structured by IDEA and comes with specific timelines that schools are legally required to follow (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Here is how the process generally unfolds:

Referral

The process begins with a referral, which can come from a teacher, a parent, another school staff member, or in some cases the student themselves. A referral is a formal request for the school to evaluate a student to determine whether they have a disability and need special education services.

Before a referral is made, schools are expected to have already tried other supports, which is where the MTSS process we discussed in the previous chapter comes in. A student who has received Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports and is still not making adequate progress is a strong candidate for a special education referral.

Consent for Evaluation

Once a referral is received, the school must notify the parents and obtain their written consent before any evaluation can take place. Parents have the right to say no, and the school cannot proceed without their agreement. If parents consent, the evaluation must be completed within sixty days under federal law, although some states have shorter timelines.

The Evaluation

The evaluation is a comprehensive assessment conducted by a team of qualified professionals to determine whether the student has a disability and, if so, what their educational needs are. It must be thorough, meaning it cannot rely on a single test or a single professional's opinion. It must assess the student in all areas related to the suspected disability, using a variety of tools and strategies (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

The evaluation might include standardized cognitive and academic testing conducted by the school psychologist, observations in the classroom, review of school records and work samples, input from parents and teachers, and assessments of specific areas like speech and language, motor skills, or adaptive behavior depending on the nature of the concern.

Eligibility Determination

Once the evaluation is complete, the IEP team meets to review the results and determine whether the student is eligible for

special education. To be eligible, the student must meet two criteria: they must have a disability that falls within one of the thirteen IDEA categories we discussed in Chapter 2, and that disability must have an adverse effect on their educational performance (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

It is important to understand that having a diagnosis does not automatically mean a student qualifies for special education. A student with ADHD, for example, might or might not qualify depending on whether their ADHD is adversely affecting their educational performance. The eligibility determination is always made on an individual basis.

The IEP Meeting

If the student is found eligible, the team must develop an IEP within thirty days. The IEP meeting brings together all the team members we discussed earlier to review the evaluation results, establish present levels, write annual goals, determine services, and make placement decisions.

Annual Review and Three Year Reevaluation

Once an IEP is in place, it must be reviewed at least once a year to assess the student's progress toward their annual goals and make any necessary updates. Every three years, the student must be reevaluated to determine whether they still have a disability and still need special education services. This is sometimes called the triennial review.

Parent and Student Rights in the IEP Process

IDEA gives parents and students significant rights throughout the special education process, and understanding those rights is an essential part of your professional knowledge as a special education teacher. These rights are often referred to as procedural safeguards, and they exist to ensure that families are genuine partners in the process and that students with disabilities are protected (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Here are some of the most important rights families have under IDEA.

The Right to Prior Written Notice

Schools must notify parents in writing before they propose or refuse to take any action related to the identification, evaluation, placement, or provision of services for their child. This notice must be written in language that is understandable to the parent and must explain what the school is proposing or refusing to do and why.

The Right to Participate in Meetings

Parents have the right to participate in any meeting related to their child's identification, evaluation, or placement. Schools must make a genuine effort to schedule meetings at a time and place that is convenient for parents, and they must provide interpreters if parents do not speak English.

The Right to Review Records

Parents have the right to inspect and review all educational records related to their child, including evaluation reports, IEP documents, and placement decisions.

The Right to an Independent Educational Evaluation

If parents disagree with the school's evaluation of their child, they have the right to request an independent educational evaluation, or IEE, conducted by a qualified professional of their choosing. Under certain circumstances, the school district may be required to pay for this evaluation.

The Right to Dispute Resolution

If parents disagree with any aspect of their child's IEP or special education services, they have several options for resolving that dispute. They can request mediation, file a state complaint, or request a due process hearing. These options exist to ensure that families have a formal and fair process for advocating for their child when they believe the school is not meeting its obligations.

Student Rights

For students who are eighteen or older, many of the rights that previously belonged to parents transfer directly to the student. This transfer of rights is an important part of the transition process and reflects the recognition that students with disabilities are adults who have the right to make decisions about their own education and lives.

Even before students reach the age of majority, best practice in special education involves preparing students to understand their own disabilities, advocate for their own needs, and participate meaningfully in their IEP meetings. Self advocacy is a skill, and like any skill, it needs to be taught and practiced over time.

Connecting It to Your Role as a Future Teacher

If this chapter has felt like a lot of information, that is because it is. The IEP process is genuinely complex, and understanding it deeply takes time and experience. Do not worry if you do not feel like you have it all figured out right now. That is completely normal and completely okay.

What matters at this stage is that you are beginning to build a mental framework for understanding how the IEP process works and what your role within it will be. As you continue your fieldwork this semester, start paying attention to the ways IEPs show up in the classrooms you observe. You might notice a teacher pulling out a graphic organizer for a specific student, that is likely an IEP accommodation. You might see a paraeducator providing one on one support, that is likely an IEP service. You might observe a student being pulled out for a small group session, that is likely IEP related instruction.

The more you can connect what you are reading in this chapter to what you are seeing in real classrooms, the more meaningful both experiences will become. Your fieldwork is not separate from your coursework. It is the place where your coursework comes to life.

In the chapters ahead we are going to go much deeper into the specific components of the IEP, including how to write present levels, how to develop strong and measurable IEP goals, and how to determine and document student services. By the time you finish this course you will have a solid working knowledge of the IEP process that will serve you well as you continue your journey toward becoming a special education teacher.

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6.3: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. Which of the following is required to be part of every IEP team under IDEA?

a) The student's pediatrician and a district special education attorney

b) The parents or guardians, the general education teacher, the special education teacher, and a representative of the local education agency

c) The school principal, the school psychologist, and at least two general education teachers

d) The student, both parents, and all of the student's current teachers

2. What is the purpose of the procedural safeguards included in IDEA?

a) To give school districts authority to make placement decisions without parental input

b) To ensure that evaluations are completed within the required sixty day timeline

c) To protect the rights of students and families and ensure they are genuine partners in the special education process

d) To outline the specific services that every student with a disability is entitled to receive

Reflection

3. The chapter describes the IEP as a document that says to a student and their family: we see you, we know what you need, and we are legally committed to providing it. What does that statement mean to you? Have you ever experienced or witnessed a moment where a student or family felt truly seen and supported by a school system? What did that look like?

4. Think about the IEP team and the role each member plays. Which team member's role do you think is most often misunderstood or undervalued, and why? What could schools do to make the IEP process feel more genuinely collaborative for all team members, especially families?

5. The chapter emphasizes that parents are equal members of the IEP team, not just guests who are invited to hear what the school has decided. Why do you think family partnership is so important in special education specifically? What are some concrete things you could do as a future special education teacher to make families feel genuinely welcomed and respected at the IEP table?

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7: STUDENT PRESENT LEVELS AND GOAL WRITING

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

1. Define present levels of academic achievement and functional performance and explain their role as the foundation of the IEP.
2. Identify the key characteristics of strong present levels including the use of specific data, student strengths, description of disability impact, and use of plain language.
3. Explain what makes an IEP goal effective and identify the qualities that distinguish a strong goal from a weak one.
4. Apply the SMART framework to evaluate and write IEP goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound.
5. Demonstrate the connection between present levels and annual goals by explaining how identified areas of need in the present levels drive the development of IEP goals.

7.1: The Roadmap to Student Success

7.2: Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

7.3: References

7.4: Review Questions

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7.1: The Roadmap to Student Success

Setting the Stage

If you ask most experienced special education teachers what the hardest part of writing an IEP is, a lot of them will point to two things: present levels and goals.

Not because these sections are complicated in theory. The concepts behind them are actually pretty straightforward. But doing them well, writing present levels that truly capture a student and goals that are genuinely meaningful and measurable, that is where the craft of special education teaching really shows up.

This chapter is going to walk you through both. We are going to talk about what present levels are, why they matter so much, and what it looks like to write them well. Then we are going to dig into IEP goal writing, including what makes a goal strong, how to use the SMART framework to structure your goals, and how present levels and goals connect to each other in a way that makes the whole IEP more coherent and purposeful.

By the end of this chapter you are going to have a much clearer sense of what strong IEP writing looks like, and you are going to start developing the eye for it that will serve you throughout your career.

What Are Present Levels of Performance and Why Do They Matter?

Let us start at the beginning. Present levels of performance, sometimes called present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, or PLAAFP, are the section of the IEP that describes where a student is right now (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

That sounds simple enough. But here is why it matters so much.

Everything else in the IEP is built on the present levels. The annual goals come from the present levels. The services come from the goals. The accommodations and modifications are designed to address the needs identified in the present levels. If your present levels are vague, inaccurate, or incomplete, every other part of the IEP is built on a shaky foundation.

Think of it this way. Imagine you are a doctor and a patient comes in with a health concern. Before you can treat them, you need to understand exactly what is going on. You run tests, you gather information, you ask questions, and you build a clear picture of their current health status. Only then can you develop a treatment plan that actually addresses their specific situation.

Present levels work the same way. They are the diagnosis before the treatment plan. They say here is exactly where this student is, academically and functionally, right now. Here is what they can do, here is what they are working toward, and here is how their disability is affecting their access to the general education curriculum. With that information clearly documented, the rest of the IEP can be built with purpose and precision.

Present levels also serve as the baseline against which progress is measured. When you review a student's IEP at the annual meeting, you compare their current performance to where they were when the present levels were written. If the present levels were vague to begin with, you have no meaningful baseline to compare to, which makes it impossible to determine whether the student has made progress.

What Goes Into Strong Present Levels?

Writing strong present levels is a skill, and like all skills it takes practice to develop. But there are some clear principles that distinguish strong present levels from weak ones.Vague language is one of the most common problems in IEP writing, and it shows up most often in present levels. Statements like "Johnny struggles with reading" or "Maria has difficulty with behavior" are not present levels. They are observations. They do not tell you anything specific enough to build a goal from.

Strong present levels include specific, measurable data. They tell you exactly where a student is performing relative to grade level expectations, using assessment data to back it up. For example, instead of saying "Johnny struggles with reading," a strong

present level might say "According to the most recent Oral Reading Fluency assessment administered in October, Johnny reads 45 words per minute with 82 percent accuracy, which is below the third grade benchmark of 90 words per minute" (National Center on Intensive Intervention, 2023).

See the difference? The second statement gives you something you can actually work with. You know exactly where Johnny is, you know what the expectation is for his grade level, and you have a clear baseline to measure future progress against.

Strong Present Levels Include Both Strengths and Needs

Another common mistake in IEP writing is focusing exclusively on what a student cannot do. Present levels should always begin with strengths. What does this student do well? What are their interests? What strategies or supports help them succeed? This matters for two reasons.

First, strengths are not just feel good additions to a document. They are instructionally relevant information. If you know that a student learns best through visual supports, or that they are highly motivated by topics related to animals, or that they have strong verbal communication skills even though their reading is below grade level, you can use that information to design instruction that plays to those strengths.

Second, leading with strengths sets the tone for how a student is viewed and talked about. An IEP that begins with a laundry list of deficits sends a very different message than one that starts by acknowledging what a student brings to the table. For families who often spend years hearing about everything their child cannot do, a present level that genuinely honors their child's strengths can be a powerful and meaningful experience.

Strong Present Levels Address the Impact of the Disability

Federal law requires that present levels include a statement about how the student's disability affects their involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). This is not just a compliance checkbox. It is an important piece of information that connects the student's disability to their educational needs.

For example, a student with dyslexia might have present levels that describe how their difficulty with phonological processing affects their ability to decode unfamiliar words, which in turn affects their reading fluency and comprehension across all subject areas. That connection between the disability and its educational impact helps the team understand why the student needs the services and supports outlined in the rest of the IEP.

Strong Present Levels Are Written in Plain Language

IEPs are legal documents, but they are also meant to be understood by everyone on the team, including parents who may not have educational backgrounds or familiarity with special education terminology. Strong present levels avoid excessive jargon and are written clearly enough that a parent can read them and recognize their own child.

This does not mean dumbing things down. It means communicating with clarity and respect. If you need to use technical terms, explain them. If you are referencing assessment data, give enough context that a non specialist can understand what the numbers mean.

What Makes a Good IEP Goal?

Once you have solid present levels in place, the next step is to write annual goals. An IEP goal is a statement that describes what a student is expected to achieve within one year, based on their current levels of performance (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Writing a good IEP goal is genuinely one of the most important skills a special education teacher can develop. A well written goal drives everything: the instruction you provide, the data you collect, and the decisions you make about whether a student is making adequate progress. A poorly written goal, on the other hand, gives you nothing to work with. It is impossible to measure, impossible to teach to, and impossible to use as a basis for meaningful decision making.

So what makes a goal good? There are a few key qualities.

A Good Goal Is Connected to the Present Levels

This might seem obvious, but it is worth stating clearly: IEP goals should directly address the needs identified in the present levels. If the present levels identify a deficit in reading fluency, there should be a reading fluency goal. If they identify challenges with written expression, there should be a written expression goal. If the present levels identify significant behavioral needs, there should be behavioral goals.

The connection between present levels and goals is what gives the IEP its coherence. The present levels say here is where the student is. The goals say here is where we expect them to be in one year. That progression should be logical, purposeful, and clearly documented.

A Good Goal Is Ambitious but Realistic

IEP goals should reflect genuine expectations for growth. They should not be so easy that they fail to challenge the student, and they should not be so ambitious that they set the student up for failure. Finding that balance requires knowing the student well, understanding research on typical rates of progress for students with similar needs, and using good professional judgment.

Under IDEA, schools are required to provide students with disabilities with an education that is designed to produce meaningful progress, not just minimal progress (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 2017). The Supreme Court's decision in this case clarified that IEP goals must be appropriately ambitious and must reflect genuine expectations for meaningful growth. This is an important legal standard that every special education teacher should be aware of.

A Good Goal Is Measurable

This is where a lot of IEP goals fall apart. A goal that cannot be measured is not a goal. It is a wish. If you cannot collect data to determine whether a student has achieved a goal, the goal is not specific enough.

Measurability means that the goal includes clear criteria for success, a way to collect data on progress, and a timeframe. It should be possible for any qualified professional to look at a goal and know exactly what data to collect and exactly what achieving the goal would look like.

Writing SMART IEP Goals

One of the most widely used frameworks for writing IEP goals is the SMART framework. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (O'Neill, 2000). Let us break each of these down in the context of IEP writing.

Specific

A specific goal clearly identifies the skill or behavior being targeted, the condition under which the student will demonstrate the skill, and the criteria for success. It leaves no room for ambiguity. A reader should be able to look at the goal and know exactly what the student is expected to do.

Compare these two versions of a goal:

Weak: Johnny will improve his reading skills.

Strong: Given a third grade level reading passage, Johnny will read aloud with at least 90 words per minute and 95 percent accuracy as measured by oral reading fluency probes.

The second version is specific. You know exactly what Johnny is supposed to do, under what conditions, and to what standard.

Measurable

A measurable goal includes clear, observable criteria that allow you to collect data and determine whether the student is making

progress. Words like "improve," "better," and "increase understanding" are not measurable because they mean different things to different people. Words and phrases like "will read 90 words per minute," "will correctly identify," "will independently complete," and "will demonstrate with 80 percent accuracy across three consecutive trials" are measurable because they describe something you can actually observe and count.

Achievable

An achievable goal is one that is realistically attainable within one year given the student's current levels of performance and the supports they will receive. This does not mean setting the bar low. It means setting the bar at a level that challenges the student while remaining within the realm of realistic possibility.

When determining whether a goal is achievable, it helps to look at research on expected rates of growth for students with similar profiles, to consider the intensity and frequency of the services the student will receive, and to use your professional knowledge of the student to make an informed judgment.

Relevant

A relevant goal directly addresses a need identified in the student's present levels and is connected to the general education curriculum or to the student's functional needs. Goals should not exist in isolation. They should be clearly tied to something that matters for the student's educational progress and long term outcomes.

Relevance also means considering what is most important for this student at this point in their educational journey. For a student in first grade, a relevant goal might focus on foundational reading skills. For a student who is sixteen, a relevant goal might focus on transition related skills like time management, self advocacy, or vocational skills. The question to ask is always: what does this student most need to work on right now in order to make meaningful progress?

Timeline

IEP goals are annual goals, which means they describe what a student is expected to achieve within one year. But within that annual timeframe, goals should also include benchmarks or short term objectives that allow you to monitor progress along the way and make adjustments if the student is not on track.

Benchmarks break the annual goal into smaller, measurable steps. If the annual goal is for a student to read 90 words per minute by the end of the year, the benchmarks might describe where the student should be at three months, six months, and nine months. This allows you to catch problems early and make instructional adjustments rather than waiting until the end of the year to discover that the student did not make adequate progress.

Putting It All Together: A SMART Goal Example:

Let us walk through a complete example of how present levels and goals connect to each other.

Imagine a student named Maya. She is a third grader with a specific learning disability in reading. Here is what her present levels might say:

Maya is a creative and enthusiastic learner who loves science and art. She participates actively in class discussions and demonstrates strong verbal reasoning skills. According to the most recent Oral Reading Fluency assessment administered in November, Maya reads 38 words per minute with 79 percent accuracy on second grade level passages. The third grade benchmark is 90 words per minute. Maya's difficulty with phonological processing, a hallmark of her specific learning disability, significantly affects her ability to decode unfamiliar words, which impacts her reading fluency and comprehension across all subject areas.

Now look at how the goal flows directly from those present levels:

By the end of the IEP year, given a second grade level reading passage, Maya will read aloud with at least 70 words per minute and 90 percent accuracy on three consecutive oral reading fluency probes administered by her special education teacher.

Notice how the goal connects directly to the data in the present levels. It starts where Maya is right now, sets a realistic target for one year of growth, specifies the condition under which she will demonstrate the skill, and describes exactly how progress will be measured. That is what a strong IEP goal looks like in practice.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

As you begin thinking about present levels and goal writing, here are some of the most common mistakes that even experienced teachers make.

Writing goals that are impossible to measure is one of the most frequent issues. If you find yourself writing a goal that includes words like "will understand," "will appreciate," or "will demonstrate awareness," stop and ask yourself: how would I collect data on that? If you cannot answer that question clearly, rewrite the goal.

Writing goals that are not connected to the present levels is another common problem. Every goal should trace back to a specific need identified in the present levels. If you cannot draw a clear line from the present level to the goal, something is off.

Writing too many goals is also a pitfall to watch for. More is not always better when it comes to IEP goals. A student with fifteen goals is unlikely to receive meaningful instruction on all of them. It is better to have five strong, well targeted goals that are genuinely addressed in instruction than fifteen goals that exist only on paper.

Copying goals from one student's IEP to another is one of the most serious mistakes a special education teacher can make. Every IEP must be individualized. Copying goals not only violates the spirit and the letter of IDEA, it also fails the student by treating them as interchangeable with someone else rather than as the unique individual they are.

What This Means for Your Practice

As a teacher candidate, you are not expected to write complete IEPs right now. That will come with time, experience, and additional training. But you are expected to begin developing an understanding of what strong present levels and goals look like so that you can recognize them in the IEPs you encounter during fieldwork and begin building toward the skills you will need as a practicing teacher.

As you observe in your fieldwork placement, pay attention to any IEP related instruction you see happening. If a teacher is working with a student on a specific skill, ask yourself what IEP goal that instruction might be connected to. If you have the opportunity to review a student's IEP with your cooperating teacher, look at the present levels and goals and see if you can identify the connection between them. Notice whether the goals are specific and measurable. Notice whether the present levels include both strengths and data.

These observations will not only enrich your fieldwork experience. They will also give you concrete material to draw on as you work on your own IEP writing assignments later in this course.

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7.2: Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

For the Content, Daily Living Skills, and Employability Training Areas

In their discussion of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Rosenberg, O'Shea, and O'Shea (2002) emphasize that "Beginning teachers may be expected to demonstrate knowledge of the federal law from the first day of school," and such demonstration involves "implementing and monitoring measurable annual goals, … and short-term objectives…" Moreover, they emphasize the need for "new teachers to work with other professionals and students' families, using, sharing, processing and joint problem-solving skills to avoid legal injustice" (p. 38).

A measurable range of IEPs is necessary for any student with disabilities, regardless of whether the student is in a special education or an inclusionary classroom; and the obvious basis for this necessity is the global enhancement of each student. However, the legal welfare of both the student and the district may be dependent on clearly defined and singularly interpretable IEPs. Specifically, Dr. Dennis Fair, Pennsylvania Due Process Hearing Officer, reports, "I have been a Due Process Hearing Officer since 1975, and have conducted hundreds of hearings. In my estimation, over 90% of those occur because of inappropriately written IEPs." Hence, measurable IEPs are educational and legal imperatives (Interview, October 12, 2018).

Examples of long-term and the sequential short-term IEP objectives for each of the major content, daily living skills, and vocational training areas are presented in this section. As with the previously presented areas, however, total coverage of every segment of these areas is spatially impossible. Nevertheless, the following examples can serve as models for extrapolation to the other segments.

Increased specificity is the distinguishing factor that separates long- term and short-term objectives. Long-term objectives involve general goals, whereas short-term plans are the measurable means through which these general goals are achieved. When writing long-term objectives, the use of nebulous terms such as "understanding," "comprehension," etc. is permitted, but only when these terms are coupled with performance terms (e.g. "demonstrate") or precursors to performance terms (e.g. "evidence"):

> The student will demonstrate understanding by…;
>
> The student will evidence comprehension of the task by…

With this inclusion of a performance term, the long-term objective sets the tone for the clear, specific, and measurable dictates of the short-term plan objective. In efforts to achieve such precision, some authors (e.g. Kubiszyn and Borich, 2003) recommend that these objectives contain three components:

1. *An observable student behavior;*
2. *The conditions under which the behavior is expected to occur;*
3. *Minimal standards of acceptable performance.*

Example: On a worksheet containing ten, two-digit addition problems (Conditions), the student will solve (Behavior) at least eight (Minimal Standards).

For the most part, conditions are usually important components of short-term objectives. However, observable student behaviors and minimal standards of performance are virtually indispensable components of all short-term objectives because they provide the baseline for determining whether the objectives have been achieved.

Engagement in higher- order thought process is a prerequisite to optimal student learning in both the inclusive and the special education classroom. As assistance to these engagements, several hierarchical models are available, e.g., those of Bloom (1956) and spin offs like Gagne (1985), Krathwohl (1994), Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), and Webb (2002). Hence, we have opted for Bloom's original because of its simplicity and wide-spread familiarity. Bloom's original model will serve as our reference point throughout the book.

Summary of Bloom's Basic Cognitive Domain

1. **KNOWLEDGE**: Recognition or recall of previously learned information; no comprehension or understanding of the information is implied.
2. **COMPREHENSION** The ability to understand or summarize information; translating information from one form or level to another; predicting continuations in trends of data.
3. **APPLICATION** The ability to take information that has previously been acquired and comprehended and use it in concrete situations.
4. **ANALYSIS** The ability to break down a unified whole into its basic parts and understand the relationship among these parts; determining cause and effect relationships; understanding analogies and metaphor; determining classifications.
5. **SYNTHESIS** The assemblage of parts into a new whole; the formulation of a new hypothesis or plan of action; constructing a solution to an unfamiliar problem.
6. **EVALUATION** The ability to judge a phenomenon on the basis of predetermined criteria or internal consistency.

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7.4: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. Why is it important that present levels include both a student's strengths and their areas of need?

a) Federal law requires an equal number of strengths and needs to be listed in every IEP

b) Strengths are instructionally relevant information that can be used to design effective instruction, and leading with strengths honors the student as a whole person

c) Including strengths makes it easier for parents to accept the negative information that follows

d) Strengths are only included to satisfy the parent members of the IEP team

2. Which of the following is an example of a SMART IEP goal?

a) Maria will improve her math skills during the school year

b) By the end of the IEP year, given a second grade math worksheet, Maria will solve two digit addition problems with regrouping with at least 80 percent accuracy across three consecutive probes

c) Maria will work on math with her special education teacher three times per week

d) Maria will demonstrate a better understanding of addition by June

Reflection

3. The chapter uses the analogy of a doctor building a picture of a patient's current health before developing a treatment plan to explain why present levels matter. Do you think that is a good analogy for what present levels do in an IEP? What does the analogy capture well, and where does it fall short? Can you think of a different analogy that might also work?

4. Look at the example of Maya's present levels and goal in this chapter. Using what you learned about SMART goals, evaluate the goal that was written for Maya. Is it specific? Is it measurable? Is it achievable? Is it relevant? Is it time bound? What would you change or strengthen if you were rewriting it?

5. The chapter warns against copying goals from one student's IEP to another. Why is this such a serious problem, both legally and ethically? What does it say about how we view students with disabilities when we treat their IEP goals as interchangeable? How will you make sure your own practice as a special education teacher honors the individuality of every student you serve?

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8: SPECIAL EDUCATION LAWS AND REGULATIONS

Overview

Ah Ah Ah, Put the Phone Down! Yes, You! Here Is Why I Told You To Read This

Learning Objectives: By the end of this chapter students will be able to:

- Summarize the history and key provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and explain its significance as the cornerstone of special education law in the United States.
- Distinguish between IDEA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and explain how each law protects students with disabilities in different ways.
- Define Free Appropriate Public Education and Least Restrictive Environment and explain the legal standard established by the Supreme Court in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District.
- Explain how special education laws collectively protect the rights of students with disabilities and their families and describe the procedural safeguards available to families under IDEA.
- Articulate the responsibility of all members of the school community to uphold special education laws and explain what it means to go beyond the legal minimum in serving students with disabilities.

8.1: The Legal Framework and Purpose

8.2: References

8.3: Review Questions

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8.1: The Legal Framework and Purpose

Setting the Stage

Here is something worth thinking about as you begin this chapter. Every support a student with a disability receives in a public school, every accommodation, every IEP, every related service, every right a parent has to participate in their child's education, none of it would exist without the laws that made it possible.

We talk a lot in special education about best practices, about inclusion, about individualized instruction, about collaboration and family partnerships. And all of those things matter enormously. But underneath all of it is a legal foundation that makes everything else possible. Understanding that foundation is not just an academic exercise. It is a professional responsibility.

This chapter is going to walk you through the landmark laws that govern special education in the United States. We are going to talk about what each law says, why it matters, and how it shows up in real schools and real classrooms. We are also going to talk about what it means for you as a future educator to uphold these laws, not just because you are required to, but because they represent a commitment to equity and justice that is at the heart of why this work matters.

By the end of this chapter you will have a solid understanding of the legal landscape of special education and a clearer sense of your own role and responsibility within it.

Why Laws Matter in Special Education

Before we dive into the specifics, let us take a moment to think about why laws exist in this context in the first place.

For most of American history, students with disabilities had no legal right to a public education. Many were excluded from schools entirely. Others were placed in segregated institutions that provided little to no meaningful instruction. Families had no legal recourse when their children were denied access to education. There were no standards, no accountability, and no framework for ensuring that students with disabilities were treated with dignity and given genuine opportunities to learn.

The laws we are going to discuss in this chapter did not emerge out of nowhere. They were fought for, often over many years and through enormous personal sacrifice, by families, advocates, and people with disabilities themselves who refused to accept a system that excluded and marginalized their community. Understanding this history is important because it reminds us that the rights we are about to discuss are not bureaucratic technicalities. They are hard won victories that changed the lives of millions of people (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

When you sit at an IEP table, when you implement accommodations, when you communicate with a family about their rights, you are participating in a system that exists because people fought for it. That context should inform how you approach your work every single day.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or ***IDEA***, is the cornerstone of special education law in the United States. It is the law we have referenced throughout this entire course, and for good reason. IDEA is the primary federal legislation that governs how states and public schools provide special education and related services to students with disabilities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

IDEA was originally passed in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and it represented a seismic shift in how the United States thought about education and disability. For the first time, students with disabilities had a federal legal right to a free and appropriate public education. Schools could no longer turn students away simply because they had a disability. The door to public education was opened, and it has never closed since (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The law has been revised and strengthened several times since 1975. In 1990 it was renamed IDEA and expanded to include new disability categories. In 1997 it was reauthorized with a stronger emphasis on access to the general education curriculum. The most recent reauthorization in 2004 aligned the law more closely with the No Child Left Behind Act and introduced new

provisions around response to intervention and discipline (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Today IDEA governs virtually every aspect of special education in public schools, from how students are identified and evaluated, to how IEPs are developed and implemented, to how disputes between families and schools are resolved. It is the law you will live and work within every day as a special education teacher, and knowing it well is one of the most important forms of professional preparation you can have.

Core Principles of IDEA That Every Special Education Teacher Needs to Know

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Every student who qualifies for special education under IDEA is entitled to a free appropriate public education, or FAPE. This means that the education provided must be free, meaning no cost to the family, appropriate, meaning designed to meet the student's individual needs, and public, meaning provided within the public school system (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

The word appropriate has been the subject of significant legal interpretation over the years. In 2017 the Supreme Court clarified in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District that an appropriate education means one that is designed to produce meaningful progress, not just minimal progress. This was a landmark ruling that raised the bar for what schools are required to provide, and it is an important standard that every special education teacher should understand (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 2017).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

We have talked about the Least Restrictive Environment, or LRE, throughout this course, but let us revisit it one more time in its legal context. IDEA requires that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs, meaning that to the maximum extent possible they should be educated alongside their non disabled peers (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

The LRE requirement reflects a fundamental value: students with disabilities belong in their school communities. Separating students from their peers based on disability should be the exception, not the rule, and it must always be justified by the student's individual needs. The burden falls on demonstrating why a more restrictive setting is necessary, not on justifying why a student should be included.

This principle has profound implications for how schools are organized and how educators approach their work. Every time a decision is made about where a student will receive their education, the LRE requirement demands that the team ask: are we doing everything we can to keep this student connected to their school community while still meeting their needs?

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

As we discussed in depth in the previous two chapters, IDEA requires that every eligible student have an IEP. The IEP is the primary vehicle through which FAPE is delivered, and it is a legally binding document that outlines the specific services, supports, and goals the student will receive (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Procedural Safeguards

IDEA includes an extensive set of procedural safeguards designed to protect the rights of students and families throughout the special education process. These include the right to prior written notice, the right to participate in IEP meetings, the right to review educational records, the right to an independent educational evaluation, and the right to dispute resolution through mediation or due process (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). We discussed these rights in the previous chapter, and they are worth remembering here as a core component of what IDEA guarantees.

Nondiscriminatory Evaluation

IDEA requires that evaluations used to determine special education eligibility be nondiscriminatory, meaning they must not be racially or culturally biased, they must be administered in the student's native language or other mode of communication, and they must use a variety of assessment tools rather than relying on a single measure (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). This requirement exists because historically students from racial and ethnic minority groups have been disproportionately identified for special education, often based on biased assessments. Nondiscriminatory evaluation is a legal and ethical safeguard against that kind of systemic harm.

Parent and Family Participation

IDEA places enormous emphasis on the role of parents as equal partners in the special education process. Parents must be meaningfully involved in evaluation, IEP development, and placement decisions. Their input must be sought and genuinely considered, not just acknowledged as a formality. This principle of family partnership is not just a legal requirement. It is a reflection of the recognition that parents know their children in ways that schools never fully can, and that the best outcomes for students happen when schools and families work together (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The Americans with Disabilities Act, or ***ADA***, is a broad civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in all areas of public life, including employment, transportation, public accommodations, and education (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

The ADA was signed into law in 1990 and represented one of the most significant civil rights achievements in American history. It was built on the recognition that people with disabilities are a protected class who have the right to full participation in society, and that barriers to that participation, whether physical, attitudinal, or systemic, constitute a form of discrimination.

In the context of education, the ADA has several important implications. It applies to all public schools and most private schools, regardless of whether they receive federal funding. It prohibits schools from discriminating against students with disabilities in any aspect of their programs or activities. And it requires schools to make reasonable accommodations to ensure that students with disabilities can participate on an equal basis with their non disabled peers (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

One of the most visible ways the ADA shows up in schools is in the area of physical accessibility. Ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and other physical modifications to school buildings are required under the ADA to ensure that students and staff with physical disabilities can access all areas of the school. But the ADA's reach goes far beyond physical access. It also covers things like accessible technology, communication supports, and program modifications that ensure students with disabilities can participate fully in school life.

It is also important to understand how the ADA relates to IDEA. While IDEA governs the provision of special education services to students who qualify, the ADA provides broader civil rights protections that apply to all people with disabilities, including those who do not qualify for special education. A student who does not need the specialized instruction provided through an IEP might still be protected by the ADA and entitled to accommodations through a Section 504 plan, which we will discuss shortly.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section ***504*** of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance, which includes virtually all public schools (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

Section 504 is often mentioned in the same breath as IDEA, but it is important to understand how they differ. IDEA is specifically about special education. It applies to students who have a disability that adversely affects their educational performance and who need specially designed instruction to meet their needs. Section 504, on the other hand, is a broader civil rights protection that applies to any student with a disability, defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, who needs accommodations to access their education on an equal basis with their peers (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

In practical terms, this means that students who do not qualify for an IEP under IDEA might still be entitled to a Section 504 plan. A student with ADHD who does not need specially designed instruction but does need extended time on tests, preferential

seating, or frequent breaks might receive those accommodations through a 504 plan. A student with a physical disability that does not affect their academic performance might have a 504 plan that addresses accessibility needs.

Here is a helpful way to think about the relationship between IDEA and Section 504. Every student who qualifies for special education under IDEA is also protected by Section 504. But not every student who qualifies under Section 504 needs the specialized instruction provided through IDEA. Section 504 casts a wider net and provides a less intensive level of support for students whose needs can be met through accommodations rather than specialized instruction.

As a special education teacher, you will primarily work within the IDEA framework. But you will also encounter students with 504 plans, and understanding what those plans are and how they differ from IEPs is an important part of your professional knowledge. You may also be asked to implement 504 accommodations for students in your classroom, and knowing your obligations under this law is essential.

Free Appropriate Public Education: A Deeper Look

We introduced ***FAPE*** earlier in the context of IDEA, but it deserves a closer look because it is one of the most fundamental concepts in special education law and one that shapes everything you will do as a special education teacher.

Free appropriate public education means that every student who qualifies for special education is entitled to an education that is provided at no cost to the family, that is designed to meet their individual needs, and that prepares them for further education, employment, and independent living (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Let us break that down a little further.

The free part seems straightforward, but it has real implications. Families of students with disabilities should never be charged for the special education services their children receive. If a student needs a specialized communication device, an assistive technology assessment, or a specific therapeutic service as part of their IEP, the cost falls on the school district, not the family. This is a significant protection for families who might otherwise be unable to afford the supports their children need.

The appropriate part is where things get more nuanced. As we discussed earlier, the Supreme Court clarified in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District that appropriate means more than minimal. Schools are required to provide students with disabilities an education that is designed to produce meaningful educational benefit, that is genuinely ambitious given the student's individual circumstances, and that reflects a real commitment to helping the student make progress (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 2017).

This standard has important implications for how IEPs are written and implemented. It is not enough to put services in an IEP. Those services must be designed to actually help the student make meaningful progress. And it is not enough to write ambitious goals. Those goals must be backed by instruction and supports that give the student a real chance of achieving them.

The public part of FAPE is also significant. FAPE must be provided within the public school system whenever possible. In cases where a student's needs cannot be met within the public school setting, the district may place the student in a private school or non public setting, but the cost of that placement must be borne by the district, not the family. Students placed in private settings by their district are still entitled to all the rights and protections of IDEA.

Least Restrictive Environment Revisited

We have talked about the Least Restrictive Environment ***(LRE)*** throughout this course, but now that you have a deeper understanding of the legal framework, it is worth revisiting this concept one more time with fresh eyes.

The LRE requirement is one of the most powerful and sometimes most contested principles in special education law. It reflects a clear value judgment: that students with disabilities belong in their school communities alongside their non disabled peers, and that separating them from those communities must always be justified by genuine educational need rather than convenience, cost, or assumption (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

In practice, LRE means that the IEP team must always start from a presumption of inclusion. The question is not whether a student can be included in general education. The question is what supports and services the student needs in order to be included, and whether those supports can be provided in the general education setting. Only when inclusion with appropriate supports is genuinely not possible given the nature or severity of the student's disability should the team consider a more

restrictive placement.

This principle has been reinforced by decades of research showing that students with disabilities who are educated in inclusive settings tend to have better academic, social, and long term outcomes than those educated in more restrictive settings (National Institutes of Health, 2020). Inclusion is not just a legal requirement. It is an evidence based practice that produces better results for students.

It is also worth noting that LRE is not just about where a student receives instruction. It is about access to the full life of the school. Students with disabilities have the right to participate in extracurricular activities, field trips, lunch, recess, and all other aspects of school life alongside their non disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. LRE applies to the entire school day, not just the academic portions.

How These Laws Protect Students and Families

Taken together, IDEA, the ADA, and Section 504 create a powerful framework of legal protections for students with disabilities and their families. Let us think about what those protections look like in practice.

They protect students from being excluded from public education based on disability. Before these laws existed, millions of students with disabilities were turned away from public schools or placed in settings that provided little to no meaningful instruction. These laws ensure that can never happen again.

They protect families by giving them meaningful rights to participate in decisions about their child's education. Parents are not passive recipients of services that schools decide to provide. They are legal partners in the process, with the right to be informed, to participate, to disagree, and to advocate for their child through formal dispute resolution if necessary.

They protect students from discriminatory practices in evaluation and placement. The requirement for nondiscriminatory evaluation, the presumption of inclusion in LRE, and the individualized nature of the IEP process all serve as safeguards against practices that would treat students with disabilities as less than or unworthy of a meaningful education.

They protect students' right to belong. Perhaps most fundamentally, these laws reflect and reinforce the idea that students with disabilities are full members of their school communities who have the right to be educated alongside their peers, to participate in all aspects of school life, and to be treated with dignity and respect.

The School Community's Responsibility to Uphold These Laws

Understanding the law is important. But understanding your responsibility to uphold it is equally important, and it is something that goes beyond simply following rules.

As a future special education teacher, you are going to be one of the primary advocates for your students' legal rights. You will be the person who makes sure IEP accommodations are actually implemented in every classroom. You will be the person who raises concerns when a student is being educated in a more restrictive setting than their needs require. You will be the person who explains to families what their rights are and helps them navigate a system that can feel overwhelming and opaque.

That is a significant responsibility, and it requires more than just knowing the law. It requires a genuine commitment to the values that underlie the law. Knowing that a student is entitled to FAPE is one thing. Being the person who fights to make sure that student actually receives a meaningful education is another. Knowing that LRE requires a presumption of inclusion is one thing. Being the teacher who pushes back when a student is being unnecessarily segregated from their peers is another.

The law sets a floor, not a ceiling. It tells you the minimum that schools are required to provide. Your job as an educator is to go beyond the minimum, to ask not just what are we required to do but what does this student need and deserve, and then to work tirelessly to provide it.

The school community as a whole shares this responsibility. Administrators who understand and prioritize special education law create schools where students with disabilities thrive. General education teachers who take their obligations under IEPs and 504 plans seriously create classrooms where students with disabilities belong. Paraeducators, related service providers, counselors, and support staff who understand the legal framework and their role within it contribute to a school culture that genuinely honors the rights and dignity of every student.

And families are part of this community too. When families understand their rights, when they feel genuinely welcomed and respected at the IEP table, when they trust that the school is working with them rather than around them, the outcomes for students are dramatically better. One of the most important things you can do as a special education teacher is to be the person who makes families feel like partners rather than problems to be managed.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

You have now reached the end of this course's content chapters, and it is worth taking a moment to look back at how far you have come.

You started this course thinking about why people become teachers and what drew you to this field. You explored the history and foundations of special education, learned about the California TPEs and how they guide professional practice, dug into lesson planning and assessment, explored MTSS and the SST process, and spent several chapters building a foundational understanding of the IEP process. And now you have a solid grasp of the legal framework that makes all of it possible.

These are not separate topics that happen to appear in the same course. They are deeply interconnected pieces of a single picture: what it means to be a knowledgeable, skilled, and ethically committed special education teacher.

The laws we discussed in this chapter are not bureaucratic obstacles. They are the foundation of a commitment that this country has made to students with disabilities and their families. Your job, as someone who is choosing to enter this profession, is to understand that commitment deeply, honor it fully, and work every day to make it real for the students in your care.

That is not always easy. Special education is demanding, complicated, emotionally intense work. But it is also among the most meaningful work a person can do. The students you will serve need teachers who know the law, who know their craft, and who show up every single day believing that every student deserves a champion in their corner.

You are on your way to becoming that teacher. Keep going!

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8.2: References

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8.3: Review Questions

Comprehension Check

Multiple Choice

1. What is the key difference between IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act?

a) IDEA applies to all students while Section 504 only applies to students with physical disabilities

b) IDEA governs the provision of special education services to students who need specially designed instruction while Section 504 provides broader civil rights protections for students with disabilities who need accommodations to access their education on an equal basis

c) IDEA is a federal law while Section 504 is a California state law

d) IDEA provides accommodations and modifications while Section 504 provides specialized instruction and related services

2. What did the Supreme Court clarify in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District regarding the meaning of an appropriate education under IDEA?

a) That schools are only required to provide the minimum level of support necessary for a student to pass their classes

b) That the definition of appropriate varies from state to state and cannot be standardized at the federal level

c) That an appropriate education must be designed to produce meaningful progress and must be genuinely ambitious given the student's individual circumstances

d) That parents do not have the right to challenge a school's definition of appropriate education through due process

Reflection

3. The chapter opens by reminding us that the laws protecting students with disabilities were fought for over many years by families, advocates, and people with disabilities themselves. How does knowing that history change the way you think about your legal obligations as a future special education teacher? Does it feel different to uphold a law when you understand the human story behind it?

4. The chapter states that the law sets a floor, not a ceiling, and that your job as an educator is to go beyond the minimum. What do you think that means in practice? Can you think of a situation where a school might be technically following the law but still failing a student with a disability? What would going beyond the minimum look like in that situation?

5. Think about the school community's responsibility to uphold special education laws as described in this chapter. What role do general education teachers, administrators, paraeducators, and support staff play in making sure students with disabilities receive the education they are entitled to? What happens when one member of the school community does not take that responsibility seriously, and what can you do as a special education teacher when that happens?

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