

From Preparation to Practice: Supporting the Special Education Workforce

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Dear Readership,

We are pleased to present Volume 21, Issue 4 of the *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*. This issue includes nine articles that examine special education across preparation, practice, systems, and educational outcomes. As we close Volume 21 of the *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*, this issue represents both a conclusion and a beginning. The articles included are the final manuscripts accepted for publication prior to the beginning of our tenure as Co-Editors-in-Chief. With their publication, we complete this transition between editorial teams.

The articles in this issue span a wide range of topics, populations, and methodologies. Although they were accepted through the journal's previous editorial process rather than assembled around a common theme, several important connections emerge across the collection. In particular, the articles ask us to consider how we prepare and sustain the special education workforce, how knowledge moves from research into practice, and how educators respond to the complex and intersecting needs of students with disabilities.

Themes Emerging Across the Issue

Preparing and Sustaining the Workforce

A particularly strong thread across this issue is the preparation, development, and sustainability of the professionals responsible for delivering special education services. Cooper-Duffy and colleagues examine the evaluation of special education teacher candidates through direct observation and self-report, with particular attention to the preparation of teachers working with students with significant

disabilities. Hill and colleagues turn attention to paraeducators, considering self-efficacy and the importance of ongoing professional development for a workforce that plays an increasingly central role in supporting students with disabilities.

Sparks and colleagues extend this conversation into teacher preparation and coaching, examining digiCOACH as a technology-supported approach to providing teacher candidates with formative feedback during field experiences. Ghionis similarly focuses on professional learning, exploring elementary special education teachers' perceptions of autism-specific professional development and their self-efficacy in supporting students with ASD. Deris and DiCarlo bring an important workforce-retention perspective by asking not only how special educators are prepared, but what helps experienced early childhood special educators remain in the profession. Their findings highlight the interconnected roles of supportive relationships, professional purpose, work-life balance, autonomy, seeing children make progress, and continued opportunities for professional learning.

Together, these articles move the workforce conversation beyond recruitment or initial preparation alone. They invite us to consider the full professional continuum, including what organizational conditions allow skilled professionals to remain and grow in the field.

Moving Knowledge into Practice

A second theme concerns the persistent distance between what the field knows and what practitioners can readily access and use. Boquet and colleagues examine this question directly by comparing knowledge dissemination formats and considering how those formats support preservice teachers' knowledge of instructional feedback. Their work asks us to

think not only about the evidence we produce, but also about how its format, usability, and accessibility influence its movement into practice. Babalola approaches the research-to-practice connection from a different direction through a systematic review of assistive technology use and literacy proficiency among undergraduate students with ADHD. By examining emerging literature on assistive technologies for literacy, this work draws attention to both the possibilities of technology-supported learning and the need for a stronger evidence base to guide its use with students with disabilities.

Together, these articles offer an important reminder that producing knowledge is only part of our responsibility as a field. Special education scholarship must also consider whether evidence, interventions, and tools are accessible, usable, and responsive to the people expected to use them.

Responding to the Whole Student

The final theme moves beyond narrowly instructional questions to consider the social, emotional, behavioral, and contextual dimensions of supporting students. Odom and colleagues center secondary teachers' perspectives on supporting students with mental health needs, examining both the challenges teachers encounter and the strategies and interventions they report using in their classrooms. Their work underscores the increasingly complex role educators may occupy as academic, behavioral, and mental health needs intersect within school environments.

Cole and colleagues bring this same attention to context and complexity into early childhood through their examination of Rebound & Recovery, a trauma-informed intervention implemented in a preschool setting. Their study considers how assessment, observation, and educator interpretation interact with curriculum adaptation and instructional decision-making, while also highlighting tensions among standardized assessment, relational and observational knowledge, developmental responsiveness, and the realities of early childhood classrooms.

Across these articles is a recognition that effective special education practice cannot be reduced to the implementation of a discrete intervention or instructional strategy. Students bring strengths, relationships, experiences, environments, and identities into educational spaces, and educators must make decisions within that complexity.

Looking Ahead

The close of Volume 21 also marks an important milestone for JAASEP. When we assumed editorial leadership, a substantial body of work had already completed the journal's previous submission and acceptance process. Over the past several issues, we have worked to honor those existing publication commitments while simultaneously developing the editorial processes and expectations that will guide the journal moving forward. Volume 22 will be the first full volume composed of scholarship that has moved through the submission, peer-review, revision, and editorial processes established under our editorship. As we enter this next phase, we look forward to continuing to strengthen JAASEP as a home for rigorous and transparent scholarship; meaningful connections among research, policy, preparation, and practice; thoughtful attention to language, disability, inclusion, and equity; and work that engages substantively with the questions facing special education professionals today.

We continue to invite submissions that examine the realities of special education across roles and contexts, particularly work that connects research to practice and critically engages questions of access and educational opportunity. Future authors can review the journal's aims, scope, submission requirements, and submission portal at <https://www.aasep.org/about/submissions>. We are particularly interested in scholarship that does more than describe challenges: work that interrogates assumptions, examines the systems and conditions in which special education occurs, centers the experiences and strengths of students with disabilities and their families, and offers meaningful directions for research, policy, preparation, and practice.

As always, none of this work is possible without the authors who entrust JAASEP with their scholarship, the reviewers who contribute their expertise and time, and the readers who carry this work into research, policy, preparation programs, schools, classrooms, and communities. We are grateful to each of you for helping us close Volume 21, and we look forward to welcoming you to **Volume 22**.

Drs. Boquet and Morris

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Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of digiCOACH: Technology-Enhanced Coaching in Special Education Teacher Preparation

Authors: Shannon L. Sparks, D. L. Cote, B. Mawhorter, K. Beckham, & M. Dexter

Abstract: Technology-supported coaching may provide teacher preparation programs with opportunities to deliver timely, individualized feedback during field-based experiences. This descriptive survey study examined special education teacher candidates' perceptions and experiences of digiCOACH, a digital platform used to support observation, feedback, and coaching during student teaching and internship experiences. A survey was distributed to 271 current and former teacher candidates enrolled in special education credential programs at a public university; 30 candidates responded (11% response rate). The six-item survey included questions about candidates' use and perceived helpfulness of supervisor feedback, digiCOACH data, coaching strategies and tips, and the platform overall. Descriptive findings indicated that most respondents perceived supervisor feedback and coaching supports delivered through digiCOACH positively. Open-ended responses similarly highlighted the value of supervisor feedback while identifying challenges related to platform usability, navigation, and the need for additional orientation and training. Findings provide preliminary information about teacher candidates' experiences with technology-supported coaching and suggest considerations for integrating digital feedback platforms into special education teacher preparation. The small sample and low response rate limit the generalizability of the findings and preclude conclusions about effects on instructional practice, student outcomes, or teacher retention.

Effectiveness and Quality of Practitioner Journals on Preservice Teacher Knowledge Growth About the Special Education High-Leverage Practice Instructional Feedback

Authors: Allie Boquet, Renée E. Lastrapes, & Paul Mooney

Abstract: This study examined how three dissemination formats, practitioner journal article, informational video, and textbook chapter, impact preservice teachers' knowledge acquisition and perceptions of quality. Seventy-eight participants were randomly assigned to one format presenting evidence-based content on instructional feedback. While knowledge gains did not significantly differ across groups, participants' ratings of quality, based on Carnine's (1997) trustworthiness, usability, and accessibility framework, varied by format. A practitioner-friendly rating scale was introduced to guide evaluation. Focus group data further explored how participants judged each format's credibility and relevance. Findings suggest that multiple dissemination formats may support preservice teacher learning, although participants differed in their perceptions of format quality, and should be intentionally integrated into teacher preparation programs. This research underscores the importance of offering varied, high-quality dissemination tools to promote evidence-based practice use in special education.

A Systematic Review of Assistive Technology Use and Literacy Proficiency in Students with ADHD

Author: Tofunmi M. Babalola

Abstract: Assistive technology (AT), especially smartphone apps, is increasingly recognized for enhancing literacy skills among students with disabilities. This systematic review evaluates the impact of assistive technology on the reading and writing proficiency of undergraduate/postsecondary students with ADHD. Three databases, ERIC, Education Full Text, and Professional Development Collection, were searched for peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024. The inclusion criteria focused on undergraduate students aged 18 to 25 with ADHD using assistive technology as an intervention for literacy enhancement. Following Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, a narrative synthesis of three selected studies was conducted, using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for quality assessment. Results, limitations, implications, and recommendations are presented for special education specialists, researchers, and policymakers. The findings suggest that assistive technology tools can support literacy-related outcomes for undergraduates with ADHD, though empirical evidence remains limited.

Evaluation of Special Education Teacher Candidates through Direct Observations and Self-Report

Authors: Karena Cooper-Duffy, David L. Westling, Larry B. Fisher, Alexandra Mathis, & Kelly R. Kelley

Abstract: Evaluation of the Teacher Rating and Assessment Instrument for Teachers of Students with Significant Disabilities (TRAIT-SD) was used to measure the impact of an educator preparation program for graduate students who were special education teachers of students with significant disabilities who were master's degree students in a federally funded graduate program participated in this study. Additionally, the correlation of the overall TRAIT-SD scores with the Survey of Practices of Teachers of Students with Significant Disabilities (SPOTS-SD) scores was evaluated. Finally, the interrater agreement between the primary observer and a secondary observer in order to better assure the objectivity of TRAIT-SD observations was evaluated. Results of the ratings on the TRAIT-SD and SPOTS-SD showed significant gains made by the graduate students on teaching

skills. Interrater agreement was also examined for 11 of the 44 pre- and post-intervention observations. TRAIT-SD is an instrument that can be used to evaluate the strengths and areas of development for graduate students teaching students with significant disabilities. It can also be used to evaluate the strengths and areas needed for improvement in an educator preparation program for teacher candidates of students with significant disabilities.

The Power of the Paraprofessional: Investigating Self-Efficacy and the Importance of Ongoing Professional Development

Authors: April Hill, Maria B. Peterson, Randa G. Kelly, & Rachel Harrington

Abstract: The rising number of students with disabilities, along with the decreasing number of teachers, has made the role of the paraeducator increasingly important. Paraeducators enter the workforce with varying degrees of experience and knowledge, making the creation of targeted professional development programming necessary. Often, though, the training needs of paraeducators are found to be inadequate, leaving the provision of training to the teachers who are generally underprepared to work with paraeducators. This lack of preparation and collaboration could result in an ineffective implementation of inclusive support within the general education classroom for students with disabilities and could leave paraeducators feeling disconnected from the school community. A correlation analysis identified strong, positive relationships among the three areas measured by the TSES subscales, indicating that as we provide paraeducators support in one area of self-efficacy, their overall confidence to support students with disabilities in a variety of settings increases. This implies that when paraeducators are included in professional development programming, they are better able to implement instructional and behavior management strategies with high fidelity and have a higher sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Linking Assessment and Trauma-Informed Intervention in Preschool: Exploring the Implementation of Rebound & Recovery

Authors: Tai Z. Cole, Chelsea T. Morris, Rachel A. Christensen, & Raegan Hamilton

Abstract: This pilot study examines how assessment and educator interpretation inform trauma-informed intervention in preschool settings through the implementation of *Rebound & Recovery*, a curriculum-based training designed to support young children's social-emotional development following individual and collective trauma. Using an exploratory pilot design, we investigated how assessment, observation, and educator interpretation intersected with curriculum adaptation and instructional decision-making in a university-based preschool. Primary implementation data included facilitator reflections, implementation surveys, direct observations, and field notes, with child- and teacher-level assessments providing additional contextual information. Analysis illustrates how assessment-informed sensemaking shaped the facilitator's interpretation of children's emotional expression, regulation, and engagement and informed decisions about the pacing, adaptation, and delivery of intervention activities. Findings also highlight tensions among standardized assessment, relational and observational knowledge, developmental responsiveness, and the contextual realities of early childhood classrooms. Rather than positioning assessment as a fixed indicator of child functioning or trauma, this study illustrates its potential role as part of an ongoing, reflective process through which educators interpret children's needs and adapt supports within classroom contexts. Implications emphasize the importance of preparing educators to use multiple sources of information critically and responsively while recognizing that educator interpretation itself is situated and requires reflection.

Factors Supporting Retention of Early Childhood Special Educators: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Authors: Aaron R. Deris & Cynthia F. DiCarlo

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what keeps early childhood special educators in the field, a workforce critical to early intervention and preschool special education but at risk for high turnover. Nine teachers from Minnesota and Louisiana, each with 9–29 years of experience, participated in semi-structured interviews. Using inductive coding and reflexive thematic analysis, six connected themes emerged: (a) supportive relationships with colleagues and administrators, (b) a strong sense of purpose, (c) intentional efforts to maintain work-life balance, (d) professional autonomy and room for creativity, (e) motivation from seeing children make progress, and (f) access to ongoing professional learning. While teachers noted challenges such as paperwork and demanding caseloads, they emphasized that meaningful relationships, personal commitment to the work, and supportive environments play a vital role in staying in the profession. Results suggest that early intervention programs and school systems should pair structural supports with practices that nurture resilience, professional identity, and continued growth. These findings offer direction for preparation programs, administrators, and policymakers who aim to strengthen recruitment and retention in early childhood special education.

Autism Spectrum Disorder Professional Development and Self-Efficacy of Special Education Teachers

Author: Elena Ghionis

Abstract: Special education teachers may receive limited autism-specific preparation despite being responsible for supporting

students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) across a range of learning, behavioral, social, and communication needs. This qualitative descriptive study explored elementary special education teachers' perceptions of ASD professional development and teacher self-efficacy. Data included semi-structured interviews, responses to the Teacher Self-Efficacy for Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Inclusive Classrooms (TSE-ASDI) scale, and synthesized member-checking focus groups. Findings indicated that participants perceived existing ASD professional development as providing basic knowledge but insufficient preparation in several areas, including understanding individual student needs, adapting curriculum and instruction, supporting challenging behavior, and addressing social communication needs. Participants emphasized the need for more targeted and practice-focused professional development to strengthen their competence and confidence in supporting students with ASD. Findings highlight the importance of professional learning that responds to the diverse strengths and support needs of students with ASD and the preparation needs identified by special education teachers.

Supporting Student Mental Health Needs: Teacher Perspectives and Classroom Interventions in Secondary Education

Author: Kate D. Simmons

Abstract: In recent years, there has been an influx of questions regarding mental health in education. This study aimed to investigate the classroom challenges secondary teachers experience while supporting students with mental health needs and to identify strategies and interventions teachers perceive as effective in promoting student success. This study was designed to answer the following questions: What challenges do secondary teachers experience while supporting students with mental health needs in the classroom? What strategies and interventions are secondary teachers using to support students with mental health support needs? Secondary teachers responded to survey questions about the emotional and behavioral needs in classrooms and what instructional strategies or interventions are being used to support students with mental health concerns. Results were analyzed and themes reported, including prevalence and observed student needs related to mental health well-being in the classroom, interventions being utilized, and teacher roles and preparedness to teach mental health supports.