

# Beyond the IEP: Preparing Teachers for Authentic Special Education Work

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Preparing teachers for the work, not just the paperwork, is a professional obligation the field can no longer afford to ignore.

## ABSTRACT

New special educators consistently report feeling underprepared for the instructional, relational, and decision-making demands of teaching students with disabilities, suggesting gaps between what preparation programs teach and what classroom practice requires. Drawing on frameworks of practice-based teacher education, pedagogies of enactment, and adaptive expertise, this article presents a model that embeds authentic professional tasks within coursework, enabling preservice teachers to rehearse the complex, integrated work of special education before entering the field. Four signature assignments address documented areas of novice teacher difficulty: navigating difficult family communication, designing individualized instruction under real constraints, building functional accommodation toolboxes, and developing relationship-building as visible pedagogy. Each assignment is grounded in research on special educator preparation gaps and aligned with pedagogies supporting professional judgment. Implementation guidance is provided in condensed figures, with complete materials in appendices. The article offers teacher educators a theoretically grounded, practically oriented approach to shifting preparation toward enactment-centered instruction.

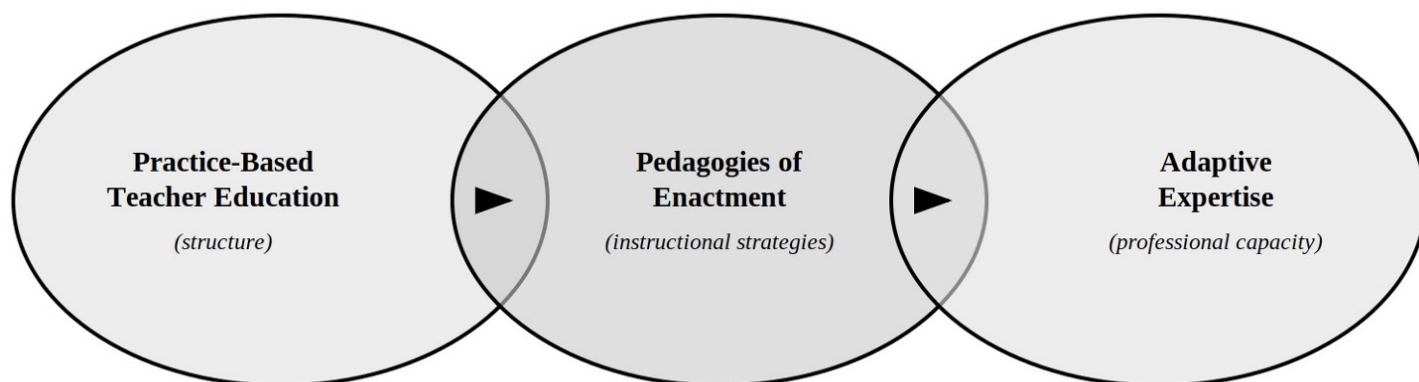
## KEYWORDS

**Adaptive expertise, practice-based teacher education, preservice teachers, special education, teacher preparation**

When preservice special education teachers are asked what worries them most, their concerns center less on technical tasks like writing individualized education programs (IEPs), a skill practiced extensively in coursework, and more on the enacted, relational, and improvisational demands of teaching: responding to angry parents, managing students with widely varying needs, reaching children who have already been failed by schools (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Brownell et al., 2010). These concerns reflect the authentic complexity of special education practice rather than a lack of preparation or commitment.

Research consistently documents that early-career special educators report feeling underprepared for the instructional, behavioral, and relational demands of the role, a mismatch associated with elevated attrition rates within the first 5 years of teaching (Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Brownell et al., 2010). Recent analyses indicate that working conditions, including demands that exceed available resources, significantly contribute to burnout and attrition (Billingsley et al., 2020; Brunsting et al., 2025). Although foundational knowledge of disability categories, legal requirements, and IEP procedures remains essential, these procedural competencies represent only a fraction of what special educators do daily. Studies of special education teacher effectiveness have long called for preparation that addresses not only what teachers should know but what they should be able to do under realistic conditions (Brownell et al., 2010; Leko et al., 2015).

In this article, I present a practice-forward approach to special education teacher preparation grounded in three interconnected theoretical frameworks: practice-based teacher education, pedagogies of enactment, and adaptive expertise. Drawing on these frameworks, I describe four signature assignments designed to address doc-

**FIGURE 1:** Conceptual Framework for Practice-Forward Special Education Teacher Preparation

umented areas of novice teacher difficulty. Each assignment is presented with a theoretical rationale, evidence of need, and condensed implementation guidance. The goal is to provide teacher educators with resources for shifting preparation from procedural instruction toward a practice-forward approach.

## **PRACTICE-FORWARD APPROACH TO TEACHER EDUCATION**

A practice-forward approach to teacher education guides the recommendations made in this article. This approach is a combination of frameworks for teacher education.

### **Practice-Based Teacher Education**

Practice-based teacher education represents a significant shift in how teacher preparation is conceptualized and enacted. Rather than treating coursework as primarily information delivery with practice reserved for field placements, practice-based approaches position the rehearsal of authentic professional tasks as central to learning throughout the preparation program (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009; McDonald et al., 2013). This approach emerged from recognition that traditional preparation often fails to bridge the gap between knowing about teaching and being

able to teach effectively. For example, rather than lecturing about IEP writing, a practice-based approach might have candidates draft IEP goals for a simulated student case, receive feedback, and revise before encountering actual IEPs in the field.

In special education specifically, Leko et al. (2015) argued that personnel preparation must move beyond isolated skill development toward integrated, practice-embedded learning experiences. Their vision of standards-based preparation emphasized that candidates need opportunities to enact complex professional practices, not merely demonstrate knowledge of them. Practice-based approaches address what Grossman and McDonald (2008) identified as a persistent weakness in teacher education research: the disconnect between program experiences and classroom performance.

### **Pedagogies of Enactment**

Grossman et al. (2009) proposed a framework of pedagogies of enactment organized around three key concepts: representations of practice (artifacts, videos, and cases that make teaching visible), decomposition of practice (breaking complex practices into component parts for focused instruction), and approximations of practice (opportunities to rehearse teaching in

settings of reduced complexity). This framework provides concrete guidance for how teacher educators can structure learning experiences that bridge theory and practice. As an example, viewing a video of a skilled teacher de-escalating a student's outburst is representation; analyzing the specific words or phrases the teacher used and why those words worked is decomposition; and role-playing the same scenario with a peer is approximation.

Approximations of practice are particularly relevant to special education preparation. Because special educators face emotionally charged, legally complex, and instructionally demanding situations from their first day in schools, opportunities to rehearse these challenges before encountering them in high-stakes contexts can build both competence and confidence. McDonald et al. (2013) called for teacher education to develop shared language and pedagogical approaches around core practices, arguing that such coherence would strengthen the profession's capacity to prepare effective educators.

### **Adaptive Expertise**

Special educators work in environments characterized by unpredictability, complexity, and continuous change. Students' needs shift, families present unexpected challenges, and instructional

**TABLE 1:** Comparison of Traditional and Practice-Forward Preparation Models

DIMENSION	TRADITIONAL PREPARATION	PRACTICE-FORWARD PREPARATION
Primary focus	What teachers must know and do	How teachers enact knowledge under realistic conditions
Competency organization	Isolated skills in separate courses	Integrated competencies practiced simultaneously
Communication skills	Assumed as innate trait	Explicitly taught and rehearsed
Individualization	Abstract strategies applied across contexts	Prioritized decision-making under constraints
Accommodations	Provisions listed in IEP documents	Concrete tools assembled and applied
Relationship-building	Develops naturally over time	Visible pedagogy grounded in practitioner wisdom
Professional judgment	Acquired on the job	Developed through structured rehearsal

plans require constant adjustment. This reality demands not just routine expertise but adaptive expertise: the capacity to respond flexibly to novel situations while drawing on established professional knowledge (Hammerness et al., 2005; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986). A teacher with routine expertise implements accommodations as written; a teacher with adaptive expertise recognizes when a listed accommodation is not working for a particular student and problem-solves an alternative approach on the spot.

De Arment et al. (2013) applied the concept of adaptive expertise specifically to special educator preparation, proposing a framework that emphasizes cognitive skills, metacognitive skills, and adaptive dispositions. They argued that preparation programs must intentionally develop candidates' capacity for innovation alongside efficiency, enabling teachers to respond effectively when familiar routines prove insufficient. This framework suggests that preparation should not aim to provide answers to every situation teachers will face but rather to develop the professional judgment needed to navigate situations that cannot be fully anticipated.

These three frameworks operate together in a practice-forward approach: practice-based teacher education provides the structure for embedding professional tasks in coursework, pedagogies of enactment offer specific in-

structional strategies for designing those tasks, and adaptive expertise describes the professional capacity candidates develop through repeated engagement with authentic challenges. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among these frameworks.

Practice-forward preparation, as conceptualized here, positions rehearsal of authentic professional tasks as central to coursework rather than reserving enactment for field placements. This approach differs from traditional preparation in several key dimensions. Where traditional preparation often isolates professional competencies into discrete courses, practice-forward preparation emphasizes integrated decision-making that mirrors classroom realities. Where traditional preparation may treat communication, behavior management, and instructional planning as separate skill sets, practice-forward preparation designs tasks that require candidates to coordinate these competencies simultaneously.

This model is conceptually distinct from flipped classroom instruction, though the two may co-occur. Flipped approaches address how content is delivered; practice-forward preparation addresses what students are asked to do with that content (Letchworth, 2025). A flipped classroom could emphasize procedural tasks, while a traditional lecture could introduce authentic profes-

sional challenges. The defining feature of practice-forward preparation is not instructional format, but the nature of professional work candidates rehearse.

### ADDRESSING AREAS OF NOVICE TEACHER DIFFICULTY

Using a practice-forward approach, the four assignments presented in this article were designed to address specific areas where there are often gaps between preparation and practice. Each assignment targets a domain that beginning special educators consistently identify as challenging and that existing research suggests is inadequately addressed in traditional preparation (Billingsley et al., 2020): (a) family communication, (b) individualization, (c) accommodations, and (d) relationship building. These assignments are offered as illustrative examples rather than prescriptive protocols. Teacher educators can adapt them to fit their institutional contexts, course structures, and candidate needs. The specific scenarios, materials, and timelines can and should be modified; what matters is that candidates have structured opportunities to rehearse authentic professional challenges before encountering them in the field.

The four assignments function as what Grossman et al. (2009) termed approximations of practice: structured opportunities to rehearse professional work in

contexts of reduced complexity. Each assignment surfaces the cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of special education teaching. When candidates encounter professional dilemmas during preparation, supported by structured reflection and feedback, they develop adaptive expertise that enables effective responses to similar challenges in the field. Table 1 summarizes key differences between traditional preparation and the practice-forward model.

### **ASSIGNMENT 1: DIFFICULT COMMUNICATION AS PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

Communication with families is among the most emotionally charged and legally significant responsibilities special educators face, yet research suggests it is often treated as an innate interpersonal trait rather than a teachable professional skill (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Studies of novice teacher concerns consistently identify family communication, particularly when involving conflict or complaint, as a major source of anxiety. When preparation programs fail to provide structured opportunities to practice difficult communication, new teachers must develop these skills through trial and error during high-stakes interactions.

Before this assignment, candidates should have completed readings on family-school partnerships and IDEA procedural safeguards, establishing foundational knowledge about why family communication matters legally and relationally. This assignment addresses family communication as a teachable professional competency rather than an innate interpersonal trait. Candidates receive a simulated hostile email from a parent alleging instructional incompetence and threatening formal complaint. The scenario reflects authentic features of high-stakes family communication: emotional intensity, imprecise allegations, implicit legal pressure, and time

urgency.

Candidates craft written responses independently, then engage in collaborative analysis examining how tone, word choice, and structure influence conflict trajectory. The goal is not to produce a single correct response but to develop deliberate communicative choices under pressure and with emotion, which makes this more difficult. Through revision and reflection, candidates learn to validate family concerns while maintaining professional boundaries and legal awareness.

This assignment exemplifies pedagogies of enactment by providing an approximation of practice in a context of reduced stakes. Candidates can make mistakes, receive feedback, and revise without damaging actual family relationships. The collaborative analysis component develops adaptive expertise by exposing candidates to multiple viable approaches rather than prescribing a single correct response.

#### **Facilitating the Collaborative Analysis**

The collaborative analysis session is where the real learning happens, and facilitation choices shape its effectiveness. The instructor begins by displaying three to four anonymous candidate responses, selected to represent a range of approaches: one that is defensive, one that is overly apologetic, one that validates emotion effectively, and one that is professional but cold. Rather than evaluating these responses, the instructor poses analytical questions: What is the parent likely to feel after reading this? What does this phrase communicate about who is responsible for the problem? Where do you see the teacher protecting themselves versus centering the child?

Candidates work in small groups to analyze one response, using a protocol that asks them to identify the strongest element of the response, the element

most likely to escalate conflict, and one specific revision they would make. Groups then share their analyses with the whole class, and the instructor highlights patterns: defensive language tends to appear in opening sentences; vague promises often replace concrete next steps; legal language can sound threatening even when accurate. The instructor also names what candidates may not yet see, such as how the phrase “I follow the IEP” can read as dismissive, even when factually true.

Throughout the session, the instructor maintains a stance of genuine inquiry rather than evaluation, asking questions like: What would you need to know before responding? What is this parent actually asking for underneath the anger? When candidates offer suggestions, the instructor presses for specificity: Instead of saying you would “be more empathetic,” show me what that would look like in the first sentence. This facilitation approach models the professional reasoning candidates are developing.

#### **Example Responses**

The following excerpts illustrate typical candidate development through the assignment process.

##### ***Initial response (before collaborative analysis):***

I am sorry you feel that way about my teaching. I do follow the IEP and give your child all required accommodations. Perhaps we can meet to discuss your concerns.

##### ***Revised response (after analysis and reflection):***

Thank you for reaching out about your concerns for [Student]. I can hear how worried you are, and I want to work together to support their success. I would welcome the opportunity to meet this week to share what I am seeing in the classroom and learn more about what is happening at home. Would Thursday at

**FIGURE 2:** Assignment 1: Difficult Communication Implementation Guide

### **Assignment 1: Difficult Communication as Professional Practice**

**Learning Objectives:** Craft professional responses balancing empathy, legal awareness, and instructional integrity; identify language patterns that validate emotion without conceding fault; recognize how tone influences conflict trajectory.

**Materials:** Simulated hostile parent email (Appendix A); response evaluation protocol; exemplar responses showing varied approaches.

**Prerequisite Reading:** Family-school partnership frameworks; IDEA procedural safeguards overview.

**Implementation:** Week 3-5: Distribute email; candidates draft responses (24-48 hours). Collaborative Analysis (60-75 min): Display anonymous responses; examine language choices. Revision: Candidates revise; written reflection on changes.

**Facilitation Guidance:** Select 3-4 responses representing varied approaches. Use analytical questions rather than evaluation. Press for specific language revisions, not general suggestions.

**Assessment:** Quality of reasoning; ability to identify multiple approaches; awareness of boundaries.

**Adaptations:** Online: asynchronous peer analysis; Large courses: small groups with different scenarios.

**Time:** Candidate 1-2 hours; Faculty 2-3 hours; In-class 60-75 minutes.

3:30 work for you?

The revised response demonstrates growth in several dimensions: acknowledging parental emotion without defensiveness, centering the student rather than the teacher, proposing collaborative problem-solving, and offering specific next steps. This type of professional reasoning develops through structured practice and feedback rather than through content delivery alone. Figure 2 provides condensed implementation guidance; complete materials appear in Appendix A (see supplemental file).

### **ASSIGNMENT 2: INSTRUCTIONAL INDIVIDUALIZATION UNDER CONSTRAINT**

Special educators routinely teach students whose instructional needs span multiple grade levels within a single classroom. Research on beginning teacher challenges highlights the difficulty of planning and delivering instruction that meaningfully addresses widely varying student profiles simultaneously (Brownell et al., 2010). Traditional preparation often presents individualiza-

tion as a set of strategies to be applied rather than as complex instructional design requiring professional judgment about priorities, trade-offs, and feasibility.

Candidates approach this assignment after learning foundational lesson planning structures and reviewing research on effective instruction for students with high-incidence disabilities. This assignment addresses individualized instruction as complex design work requiring professional judgment about priorities and trade-offs. Candidates receive a simulated classroom roster of eight students with distinct IEPs, reading levels spanning pre-kindergarten to fourth grade, and varying behavioral, attentional, and processing needs. The task is to design a single 30-minute lesson that meaningfully addresses all learners.

The emphasis is on prioritization rather than perfection. Candidates determine which goals can reasonably be addressed within the lesson, which require alternate structures, and how to allocate instructional time without defaulting to unrealistic expectations. Class discussion centers on questions rarely ad-

dressed in traditional preparation: What does meaningful access look like when instructional levels differ widely? When does accommodation become dilution?

In practice, candidates often submit initial drafts that attempt to address every IEP goal simultaneously, resulting in lessons that are either impossibly fragmented or unrealistically ambitious. The peer review session surfaces these tensions. Candidates exchange lesson plans and evaluate them using guiding questions: Could this actually be implemented in 30 minutes? Which students might be left waiting while others receive instruction? What trade-offs were made, and were they justified? Through this analysis, candidates begin to recognize that effective individualization requires strategic prioritization rather than comprehensive coverage.

This assignment develops adaptive expertise by requiring candidates to make defensible decisions under authentic constraints rather than applying strategies to idealized scenarios. The peer review process exposes candidates to multiple approaches to the same problem, building the flexible thinking

**FIGURE 3:** Assignment 2: Instructional Individualization Implementation Guide

### **Assignment 2: Instructional Individualization Under Constraint**

**Learning Objectives:** Design coherent instruction addressing varied needs; articulate priorities and trade-offs; distinguish meaningful access from task dilution.

**Materials:** Simulated roster with 8 students (Appendix B); IEP summaries; lesson plan template requiring rationale.

**Prerequisite Knowledge:** Foundational lesson planning structures; research on effective instruction for students with high-incidence disabilities.

**Implementation:** Week 5-7: Distribute roster 3-4 days before planning. Lesson Design (4-6 hours): ONE 30–40-minute lesson with objectives, activities, grouping rationale. Peer Review (60-90 min): Focus on feasibility and reasoning. Revision and Discussion.

**Peer Review Protocol:** Exchange plans; evaluate using guiding questions about feasibility, wait time, and justified trade-offs.

**Assessment:** Feasibility; coherence; quality of justification. Do not evaluate whether every IEP goal is addressed.

**Time:** Candidate 4-6 hours; Faculty 3-4 hours; In-class 90-135 minutes.

characteristic of adaptive experts. Figure 3 provides implementation guidance; complete roster materials appear in Appendix B (see supplemental file).

### **ASSIGNMENT 3: BUILDING AN ACCOMMODATION TOOLBOX**

While preservice teachers typically learn to identify appropriate accommodations, research suggests many struggle to translate IEP provisions into concrete classroom practices (McLeskey et al., 2004). The gap between knowing that a student needs extended time and implementing that accommodation effectively within the constraints of real instruction requires practical knowledge that preparation programs often assume will develop through experience.

This assignment transforms accommodations from abstract IEP provisions into concrete, implementable instructional

tools. The toolbox focuses specifically on accommodations, which provide access to grade-level content without changing what students are expected to learn, rather than modifications, which alter the learning expectations themselves. This distinction matters because accommodations are what general education teachers most frequently implement, and many struggle to translate IEP language into daily practice. Rather than listing accommodation types, candidates construct a physical or digital toolbox composed of specific materials, technologies, and strategies ready for immediate classroom use: graphic organizers, visual schedules, timers, alternative response formats, and communication supports.

Each tool requires an accompanying rationale explaining what instructional barrier it addresses, when and why it would be used, and what limitations apply. The assignment unfolds across

several weeks with staged checkpoints, scenario-based application, and peer sharing. Through this iterative process, accommodations are reframed as dynamic instructional supports requiring professional judgment rather than static compliance requirements.

Candidates organize their toolboxes digitally, typically using a shared folder structure with subfolders for each accommodation category (presentation, response, setting, timing, behavioral). Each tool entry includes the material itself, such as a graphic organizer template or visual timer link, along with a one-page rationale document explaining the access barrier addressed, implementation guidance, and limitations. This format ensures candidates leave the program with usable resources rather than abstract knowledge.

This assignment reflects practice-based teacher education principles

**FIGURE 4:** Assignment 3: Accommodation Toolbox Implementation Guide

### **Assignment 3: Building an Accommodation Toolbox**

**Learning Objectives:** Assemble concrete tools translating IEP accommodations into practice; articulate rationale for tools; distinguish access supports from inappropriate task reduction.

**Materials:** Format requirements; common IEP accommodation list; scenario-based prompts.

**Toolbox Format:** Digital shared folder with subfolders by category. Each tool includes the material itself plus a one-page rationale (barrier addressed, implementation guidance, limitations).

**Scope:** Accommodations only (access to grade-level content), not modifications (altered expectations). This distinction is addressed explicitly in class.

**Implementation:** Ongoing (3-4 weeks) with checkpoints (Week 3: 5 tools; Week 5: 10 tools; Week 7: complete). Required for each: tool, description, rationale, guidance, limitations. Scenario Application (60 min). Peer Sharing (45-60 min).

**Categories:** Presentation (visual supports); Response (graphic organizers, speech-to-text); Setting (flexible seating); Timing (timers, break cards); Behavioral (coping strategies).

**Time:** Candidate 6-8 hours across semester; Faculty 3-4 hours; In-class 105-120 minutes

by having candidates create artifacts they can actually use in field placements and first-year teaching. The scenario application component provides approximations of practice where candidates must select and justify tools for specific student situations. Figure 4 provides implementation guidance.

#### **ASSIGNMENT 4: RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING AS VISIBLE PEDAGOGY**

For students who are nonverbal, trauma-impacted, behaviorally dysregulated, or resistant to schooling, access to learning is inseparable from trust. However, relationship-building is frequently treated in preparation as important but intangible, something that develops naturally over time or emerges from personal disposition. Research on effective special educators suggests that relational competence is a professional skill that can be intentionally developed (Billingsley et al., 2020).

This assignment is paired with readings on trauma-informed practice and research linking teacher-student relation-

ships to academic outcomes for students with disabilities. This assignment makes relationship-building explicit and teachable rather than treating it as an intangible quality that develops naturally. Candidates interview experienced special educators about how they build trust with students who have been repeatedly failed by schools. Interview prompts focus on concrete practices: establishing safety with nonverbal students, connecting with students whose behavior communicates avoidance or fear, and maintaining relationships when progress is slow.

Following interviews, candidates synthesize strategies and share findings with peers, identifying patterns across practitioners while noting contextual variations. Class discussion examines how relational practices create conditions for instructional engagement and reduce behavioral escalation. Rather than framing relationships as emotional labor separate from teaching, the assignment positions relational competence as pedagogical practice with instructional consequences.

During collaborative analysis, the

instructor listens for strategies that are concrete and replicable versus those that are vague or dispositional. When candidates share findings like “she said she just really cares about her students,” the instructor probes for specificity: What does caring look like in her first interaction with a new student? How would an observer know she cares? The instructor also watches for responses that may conflict with ethical practice or current research, such as strategies that rely on extrinsic rewards for compliance or that position relationship-building as contingent on student behavior. When these arise, the instructor names the tension directly: That is one approach some teachers use. What does the research on trauma-informed practice suggest about making relationships contingent on behavior? This approach maintains respect for practitioner knowledge while developing candidates’ critical analysis skills.

This assignment develops adaptive expertise by grounding professional knowledge in practitioner wisdom rather than prescriptive rules. Candidates

**FIGURE 5:** Assignment 4: Relationship-Building Implementation Guide

### **Assignment 4: Relationship-Building as Visible Pedagogy**

**Learning Objectives:** Identify concrete strategies for building trust; distinguish relationship-building as pedagogy from emotional labor; articulate how relational competence supports instruction.

**Materials:** Interview protocol (Appendix C); synthesis framework; sharing protocol.

**Prerequisite Reading:** Trauma-informed practice foundations; research on teacher-student relationships and academic outcomes.

**Implementation:** Week 6-8: Provide protocol; candidates schedule interview. Interview (30-45 min): Focus on HOW, not just WHY. Synthesis (2-3 hours): Written analysis. Collaborative Analysis (60-75 min): Identify patterns. Personal Repertoire: 3-5 strategies with indicators.

**Facilitation Focus:** Press for concrete, replicable strategies. When practitioners offer vague responses, probe for observable behaviors. Address strategies conflicting with ethical practice or research by naming tensions directly.

**Common Strategies:** Predictable routines; shared control; sensory attention; noncontingent interaction; interest-based connections; repair after conflict; low-stakes successes.

**Time:** Candidate 3-5 hours; Faculty 2-3 hours; In-class 90-120 minutes

learn that effective relationship-building varies across contexts and students, requiring ongoing judgment rather than formula application. Figure 5 provides implementation guidance; the complete interview protocol appears in Appendix C (see supplemental file).

### **IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS**

These assignments gain power when distributed strategically across a preparation program rather than concentrated in a single course. Assignment placement should align with course content while ensuring candidates encounter key concepts multiple times in varied contexts.

#### **Assignment Integration Across Courses**

The difficult communication assignment fits naturally in courses addressing special education law, where candidates learn that responses must remain legally sound while validating family concerns under IDEA. The same assignment can reappear in field experience courses with variations: responding to service provid-

ers, communicating with administrators, or navigating disagreements during Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings. This repeated exposure across courses builds fluency in professional communication before candidates face these situations independently.

The instructional individualization assignment aligns with content methods courses in reading and mathematics, where candidates are already learning to design subject-specific instruction. Embedding this assignment within methods coursework allows candidates to apply individualization principles to authentic content rather than treating lesson design and individualization as separate skills.

The accommodation toolbox develops most effectively in instructional planning courses, where candidates learn to translate IEP requirements into classroom practice. Connections to assistive technology coursework can expand candidates' repertoires to include technology-based supports. The iterative, semester-long structure allows candidates to refine tools based on feedback before entering field placements.

The relationship-building assignment is particularly effective during initial field experiences, when candidates have access to practicing educators for interviews while simultaneously observing relationship-building in action. Placement in courses addressing behavioral disorders provides conceptual grounding for understanding why relational approaches matter for students whose behavior communicates distrust or fear.

#### **Addressing Implementation Challenges**

Teacher educators may have concerns about implementing practice-forward approaches. Time and course overload represent common worries, yet these assignments often reduce preparation burden when they replace less effective activities. Questions about online delivery are also frequent; all four assignments have been implemented successfully in asynchronous formats. Concerns about candidate readiness typically diminish once instructors recognize that these assignments are often most effective before extended field placements, providing frameworks for observation

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and analysis once candidates enter classrooms.

Assessment of professional judgment may seem less straightforward than scoring procedural tasks, but practice-forward assignments often clarify evaluation criteria. Assessment shifts from determining whether candidates selected the correct answers to examining reasoning quality: Can candidates articulate rationales for their decisions? Can they identify multiple viable approaches?

## CONCLUSION

Teacher attrition in special education remains persistently higher than in general education, with stress, workload, and perceived unpreparedness consistently cited as primary contributors (Billingsley, 2004; Brunsting et al., 2014). When new teachers enter classrooms equipped primarily for procedural tasks rather than professional judgment, they experience early difficulty, not because they lack commitment but because they lack preparation for the work they are actually asked to do.

The practice-forward model presented in this article addresses these challenges by grounding special education teacher preparation in established frameworks of practice-based teacher education, pedagogies of enactment, and adaptive expertise. The four signature assignments operationalize these frameworks by providing structured opportunities to rehearse authentic professional work in contexts of reduced complexity. These are illustrative examples, not an exhaustive set; countless other assignments could achieve similar goals.

Special education teacher preparation must confront an uncomfortable truth: training teachers to complete documentation without preparing them to enact instruction is insufficient. Legal compliance matters; it protects rights, structures services, and holds systems accountable. However, compliance alone is not the

work of special education. The work is far messier and far more human: responding to a parent who is angry because they are afraid, designing instruction that works for eight learners at once, deciding how to proceed when what a student needs does not align with what the system demands.

These decisions require professional judgment, instructional expertise, and ethical clarity. Such capacities do not emerge automatically through experience but must be taught deliberately. Documentation can be learned on the job; professional judgment cannot. Preparing teachers for the work, not just the paperwork, is a professional obligation the field can no longer afford to ignore. Future research should examine how candidates who complete practice-forward assignments perform during field placements and in their early years of teaching, providing longitudinal evidence for the effectiveness of this approach.

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