Fifty Years and the Evolving Role of Special Education Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of special education and the changing role of special education teachers. Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, federal legislation, judicial rulings, and advances in research have expanded expectations from ensuring access to public education to promoting meaningful participation, progress, and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. This article traces key historical, legal, and scholarly developments that have shaped special education across the past five decades and examines how these changes have transformed the work of special education teachers. Building on contemporary perspectives of the profession, we describe nine interconnected roles of modern special educators: collaborator, instructor, advocate, scientific practitioner, role model, classroom manager, leader, peer mentor, and teacher technologist. We discuss the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions needed to fulfill these roles and highlight how adaptive expertise enables teachers to integrate them in response to diverse student needs and educational contexts. Implications for teacher preparation, research, and practice are explored, with particular attention to the importance of practice-based learning, reflection, feedback, and field experiences. As IDEA enters its next half-century, preparing special educators who can adapt to emerging technologies, evolving policies, and changing educational demands will be essential. We conclude by celebrating the progress achieved during IDEA's first fifty years while emphasizing the continued responsibility of the profession to expand opportunities and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

KEYWORDS

Evidence-based practices, high-leverage practices, special education teacher roles

More than fifty years ago, the United States made a promise to children with disabilities and their families. Through landmark federal legislation, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the nation committed to ensuring that every student with a disability would have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). This promise was established in federal law with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which created a nationwide right to public education for children with disabilities. Over the decades that followed, the law continued to evolve, becoming the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990 and undergoing significant amendments in 1997 and 2004. With each change came expanded expectations for how schools educate and support students with disabilities. Today, more than 15% of public school students, roughly one in every seven students, receive special education and related services under IDEA, representing nearly 8 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). These numbers make IDEA one of the most significant civil rights protections shaping educational opportunities for millions of students.

The earliest focus of federal special education law was ensuring that students with disabilities had access to public schools. Over the last 50 years, however, expecta-

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tions have expanded well beyond simply gaining access to the schoolhouse door. Today, IDEA reflects a broader commitment to ensuring that students with disabilities not only attend school, but also participate in rigorous learning environments, access the general education curriculum, and make meaningful progress toward academic and functional goals. As these expectations have expanded, the professional role of special education teachers has evolved as well (Bettini & Billingsley, 2019; McLeskey & Brownell, 2015; Rock et al., 2017). Early special educators worked to implement newly established legal protections while providing individualized instruction to students with disabilities, often in separate educational settings. Today, special education teachers work across classrooms and school systems, serving as instructors, collaborators, advocates, data-informed decision makers, and leaders within inclusive educational environments. Their responsibilities extend beyond direct instruction to coordinating services, interpreting policy, mentoring and supporting colleagues, and ensuring that students with disabilities have meaningful opportunities to make progress toward their individual goals.

In this article, we examine how the role of special education teachers has evolved over the past fifty years. We begin by reviewing key historical milestones that established and expanded educational opportunities for students with disabilities. We then examine nine roles that reflect the increasingly complex work of special education teachers today, highlighting the knowledge and skills needed to fulfill each role. Finally, we discuss implications for research and practice and offer recommendations to guide the preparation of special education teachers for the next fifty years.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND FOUNDATIONAL MILESTONES

Efforts to expand educational opportunities for students with disabilities have evolved over several decades through a series of legislative actions, court decisions, and policy initiatives that collectively established the foundation of modern special education. Understanding this historical progression is essential for appreciating how the role of special education teachers has changed over time. While contemporary special educators operate in complex instructional and collaborative environments, the profession emerged from a period when many students with disabilities were denied access to public education altogether. Prior to the 1970s, educational opportunities for students with disabilities were limited and inconsistent across the United States (Yell, 2026). Many children with disabilities were excluded from public schools entirely, while others were placed in segregated classrooms or institutions that provided minimal academic instruction. Families often had few legal protections or avenues for challenging educational decisions made by school systems. As a result, access to education for students with disabilities depended largely on local policies and available resources rather than enforceable rights (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

During the mid-twentieth century, people with disabilities, their families, and advocates increasingly challenged the exclusion and segregation of individuals with disabilities from public schools and other institutions. Parents of children with disabilities played a particularly important role in advocating for educational opportunities and legal protections for their children. Willowbrook State School in New York provides a powerful example of these advocacy efforts. Parents, facility employees, and civil rights attorneys called attention to the overcrowding, neglect, and abuse experienced by children and adults with intellectual disabilities living at Willowbrook. Their continued advocacy eventually gained the attention of both political leaders and the media. U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy publicly condemned conditions at the institution following a visit in 1965, and investigative journalist Geraldo Rivera's 1972 reporting later brought the conditions at Willowbrook to a much broader national audience (Rivera, 1972). These advocacy efforts occurred during a period of substantial social change in the United States, when the successes of the broader civil rights movement had created momentum for challenging discriminatory policies and expanding educational opportunities for marginalized groups.

Growing momentum for change was increasingly reflected in federal education policy and the courts. The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 marked a substantial federal investment in educa-

tion and reflected growing recognition that the federal government had a role to play in addressing educational inequities. Although ESEA initially focused on supporting students from low-income communities, subsequent amendments expanded funding to support educational services for students with disabilities. At the same time, a series of landmark court decisions began to establish legal protections for students with disabilities. Two particularly influential cases, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972), challenged the exclusion of students with disabilities from public schools. In these cases, federal courts ruled that students with disabilities could not be denied access to education and were entitled to due process protections when educational decisions were made. These rulings established the principle that public schools have a responsibility to provide educational services to all students, regardless of disability (Yell, 2026).

These legal developments culminated in the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142). This landmark legislation guaranteed that children with disabilities would have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and introduced several foundational provisions that continue to shape special education practices today. Among the most important were the requirement that students receive individualized education programs (IEPs), procedural safeguards designed to protect the rights of families, and the mandate that students be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) appropriate to their needs. The passage of Public Law 94-142 dramatically increased access to public education for students with disabilities and established the systems necessary to deliver specialized services. However, early implementation of the law focused primarily on ensuring that students could attend school and receive individualized services. Instructional expectations for students with disabilities varied widely, and many students continued to receive instruction in separate classrooms or specialized programs.

Over time, federal education policy increasingly emphasized educational quality and accountability for students with disabilities. The 1986 reauthorization expanded services for young children with disabilities and their families, laying the foundation for the early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities. The reauthorization of the law in 1990 renamed the legislation the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and expanded expectations for transition planning to support students' transition from school to postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Subsequent amendments to IDEA in 1997 strengthened requirements for participation in the general education curriculum and emphasized the importance of including students with disabilities in state and district accountability systems. The 2004 IDEA reauthorization further strengthened expectations for accountability and the use of evidence-based educational practices. Today, IDEA provides protections and services from birth through age 21. Part C addresses early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families, while Part B governs special education and related services for children beginning at age 3. Together, these changes expanded the promise of IDEA well beyond access to public education.

The focus on educational outcomes for students with disabilities continued to grow through broader federal education policy and judicial interpretation of IDEA. Federal education policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and later the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) reinforced accountability by requiring schools to report academic outcomes for students with disabilities and by holding schools accountable for the performance of student subgroups (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). The U.S. Supreme Court further clarified expectations for educational progress in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017). Before the case reached the Supreme Court, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals had applied a standard requiring educational benefit that was "merely more than de minimis," essentially requiring a student to make something more than trivial progress. Writing for a unanimous Supreme Court, Chief Justice John Roberts rejected this low standard, explaining simply, "The IDEA demands more" (*Endrew F.*, 2017, p. 14). The Court held in an 8–0 decision that an IEP must be reasonably calculated to enable a student to make appropriate progress in light of the student's circumstances (*Endrew F.*, 2017).

Together, these legislative, judicial, and policy developments illustrate the gradual expansion of expectations for the education of students with disabilities over the past five decades. What began as a fight to ensure that children with disabilities had access to public schooling has evolved into a broader commitment to educational excellence and meaningful outcomes for students with disabilities. As the promise of IDEA expanded, so too did the responsibilities of the professionals tasked with implementing the law in schools. Special education teachers are central to translating policy into practice, and the evolving expectations of IDEA have substantially reshaped the work they perform each day. Understanding this historical progression provides important context for examining how the role of special education teachers has changed over time and why the profes-

sion now encompasses a wide range of instructional, collaborative, and leadership responsibilities.

Intellectual and Scholarly Foundations of Special Education

Alongside these legal and policy developments, researchers and scholars shaped the intellectual foundations of special education by advancing knowledge across disability areas, instructional approaches, and service delivery models. The individuals highlighted in this section represent only a small sample of the many leaders whose noteworthy contributions have advanced the field across the past fifty years. To illustrate the continued evolution of this work, we trace several of these lines of scholarship from foundational contributions to contemporary developments in research, policy, and practice. As part of this progression, we also recognize the senior scholars contributing to this special issue, whose work both builds upon these foundations and continues to shape the preparation and work of special education teachers.

Early pioneers helped establish special education as a developing field through advances in service delivery and teacher preparation (e.g., Maynard Reynolds), behavioral and instructional approaches (e.g., Norris Haring), and the formalization and dissemination of a professional knowledge base (e.g., Daniel Hallahan and James Kauffman). As educational rights for students with disabilities expanded, scholarship increasingly helped educators, families, and schools understand what those rights required in practice. Important contributions included scholarship on IDEA, case law, and procedural safeguards (e.g., Mitchell Yell); disability rights, family-professional partnerships, and person-centered planning (e.g., Rud Turnbull III and Ann Turnbull); and the translation of complex legal requirements into accessible guidance for families and practitioners (e.g., Peter Wright and Pamela Darr Wright). David Bateman and Yell carry this legal and policy tradition forward in the special issue by examining the legal landmarks that transformed exclusion from public education into enforceable educational rights and continue to shape the responsibilities of special education teachers today.

As access to public education expanded, researchers increasingly turned their attention to what and how students with disabilities should be taught. Major developments included the conceptualization of learning disabilities (e.g., Samuel Kirk), evidence-based reading interventions for students with persistent reading difficulties (e.g., Sharon Vaughn), direct, explicit, and systematic approaches to instruction (e.g., Siegfried Engelmann, Douglas Carnine, Anita Archer, and Charles Hughes), inclusive education and access to the general education curriculum (e.g., Lou Brown and James McLeskey), and Universal Design for Learning (e.g., David Rose and Anne Meyer). These advances provide important foundations for the work of Margaret Weiss and John Wills Lloyd in this special issue as they examine the evolution of curriculum, specially designed instruction, and effective instructional practice for students with disabilities.

As the field developed a stronger instructional knowledge base, researchers also confronted a critical question: How do we know what works? Efforts to establish standards for evaluating research quality and identifying evidence-based practices (e.g., Robert Horner and Russell Gersten) strengthened the methodological foundation necessary to distinguish promising approaches from practices supported by rigorous research. The field subsequently faced the equally important challenge of translating a growing research base into practices educators could use effectively in classrooms. Bryan Cook and Michael Kennedy carry this history forward in the special issue through their examination of the development and complementary roles of evidence-based practices and high-leverage practices in contemporary special education.

Assessment likewise evolved from a primary emphasis on determining eligibility and documenting compliance toward an increasingly important role in understanding student needs, monitoring progress, and guiding instruction. Advances in curriculum-based measurement, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making (e.g., Stanley Deno, Doug Fuchs, and Lynn Fuchs) strengthened the connection between assessment and instruction. Margaret Kamman and Erica McCray carry this evolution forward in the special issue by examining the expanding role of assessment and meaningful instructional data in special education, reflecting a broader shift toward using assessment not simply to identify students or satisfy procedural requirements, but to determine whether instruction is working and guide what educators do next.

The field's understanding of behavior and classroom support also changed substantially across IDEA's first fifty years. Research in applied behavior analysis and functional analysis (e.g., Brian Iwata) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (e.g., George Sugai) helped move the field toward increasingly preventive, positive, and data-informed approaches to supporting student behavior. Shanna Hirsch and Brandi Simonsen extend this history in the special issue through their examination of the evolution of classroom and behavior support and the positive and proactive approaches now central to creating supportive learning environments.

Expanded access to general education also changed expectations for

how special educators work with other professionals and families. Scholarship on collaboration and co-teaching (e.g., Marilyn Friend) helped establish shared responsibility for educating students with disabilities as an increasingly important dimension of special education practice. Wendy Murawski and Bryan Thornton carry this work forward in the special issue by examining the evolution of collaboration and co-teaching and their increasingly important place in contemporary special education.

Perhaps nowhere is the distance traveled across IDEA's first fifty years more apparent than in the education of students with extensive support needs. Scholarship emphasizing quality of life and individualized supports (e.g., Robert Schalock) and self-determination and autonomy (e.g., Michael Wehmeyer) helped expand expectations beyond access toward meaningful participation and outcomes. Fred Spooner, Belva Collins, and Martin Agran continue this work by examining fifty years of changes in curriculum, instruction, placement, and educational expectations for students with extensive support needs. This evolution underscores one of the most important developments across IDEA's history: increasing expectations that opportunities for effective instruction and meaningful participation extend to all students with disabilities.

The scope of special education also expanded beyond traditional school-age services. At the beginning of the educational continuum, early childhood special education and early intervention developed into distinct areas of research and practice through the work of numerous leaders (e.g., Merle Karnes and Diane Bricker), followed by advances in recommended practices and the evidence base for serving young children with disabilities and their families (e.g., Mary McLean and Samuel Odom). Christan Pankiewicz and Erin Barton carry this history forward in the special issue by examining the evolution of early childhood special education and early intervention and the field's increasing attention to quality and accountability. At the other end of the educational continuum, scholarship on transition planning and post-school outcomes (e.g., Paula Kohler) strengthened attention to students' movement into postsecondary education, employment, community participation, and adult life. Together, these developments helped extend the responsibilities of the field across a much broader developmental continuum, from the earliest years of life through preparation for adulthood.

Technology has influenced special education through developments in both assistive and instructional technologies. Important advances included early work establishing special education technology as an area of research and personnel preparation (e.g., Michael Behrmann), frameworks for assistive technology decision making and implementation (e.g., Joy Zabala), and efforts to strengthen the research and evidence base surrounding special education technology (e.g., Dave Edyburn). These foundations have expanded with advances in digital technologies, simulation, virtual environments, and other emerging tools. Lisa Dieker, Sarah Howorth, Eleazar Vasquez III, Matthew Marino, and James Basham carry this work forward in the special issue by examining the evolution of educational technology and innovation and its implications for the preparation and future work of special education teachers.

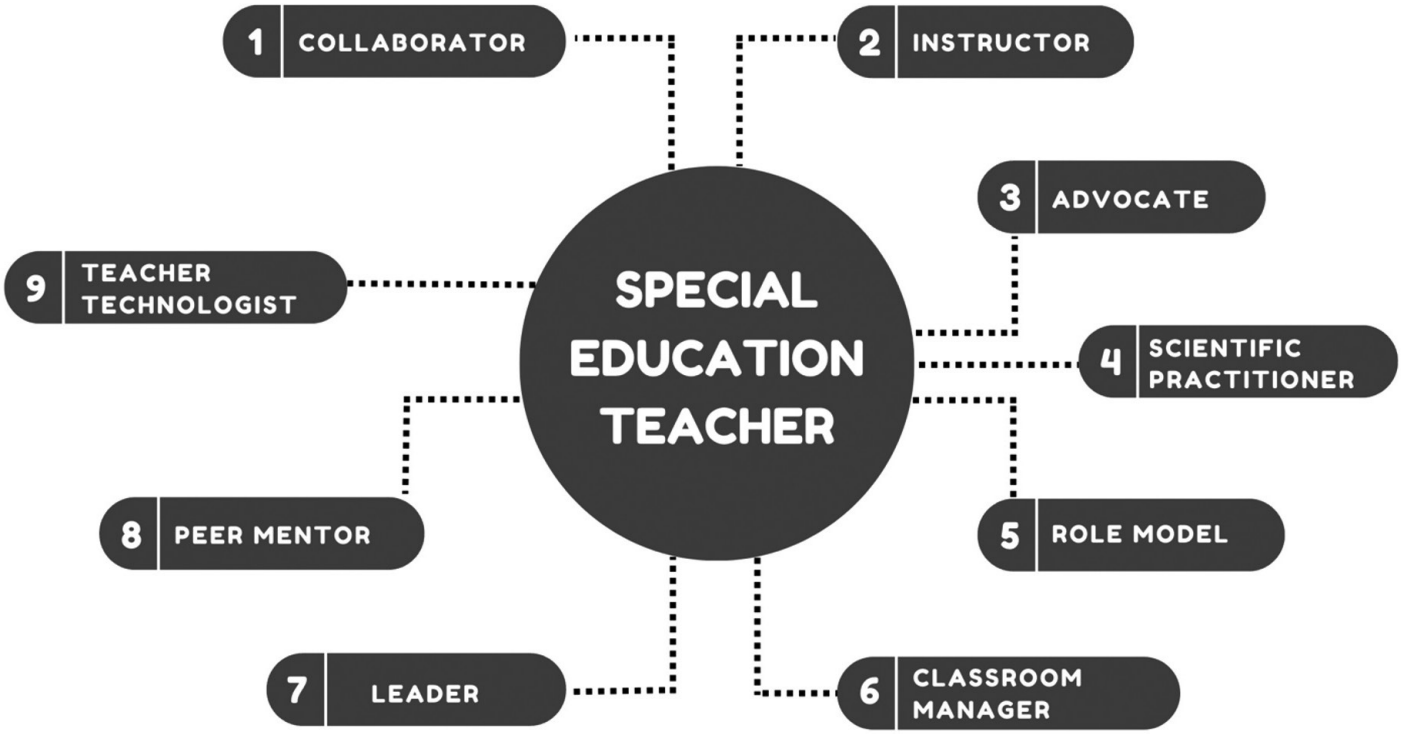
The continued expansion of the special educator's responsibilities has also raised persistent questions about how the field can prepare and sustain a workforce capable of meeting these expectations. Research has documented enduring workforce challenges, including teacher supply and demand (e.g., Erling Boe and Paul Sindelar), certification and alternative preparation pathways (e.g., Michael Rosenberg), the doctoral and faculty pipeline (e.g., Deborah Deutsch Smith), and teacher working conditions and retention (e.g., Bonnie Billingsley). Melinda Leko, Mary Brownell, Lisa Morin, and Maggie Bethea carry this work forward in the final article of the special issue by examining the evolution of clinical preparation and practice-based approaches to teacher development. Their work provides an appropriate culmination to the issue, emphasizing the need to prepare special educators not only for the demands of today's classrooms but also for a profession that will continue to evolve.

Together, the scholars recognized here represent only a portion of the many researchers, advocates, professional leaders, teacher educators, and practitioners who have built the knowledge base of special education. Across these lines of scholarship, the field has developed increasingly sophisticated understandings of effective instruction, evidence, assessment, behavior, collaboration, inclusion, preparation, and meaningful outcomes for students with disabilities. The senior scholars contributing to this special issue build upon that legacy by examining both how these areas have evolved across the first fifty years of IDEA and how they must continue to develop across the next fifty. As the knowledge base and expectations of special education have expanded, so too has the role of the special education teacher, providing a foundation for examining the multiple roles special educators now assume in practice.

MAJOR ADVANCES IN THE EVOLUTION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHING

The expanding scope of special education teaching can be understood through a framework of profession-

FIGURE 1: Roles of a Special Education Teacher



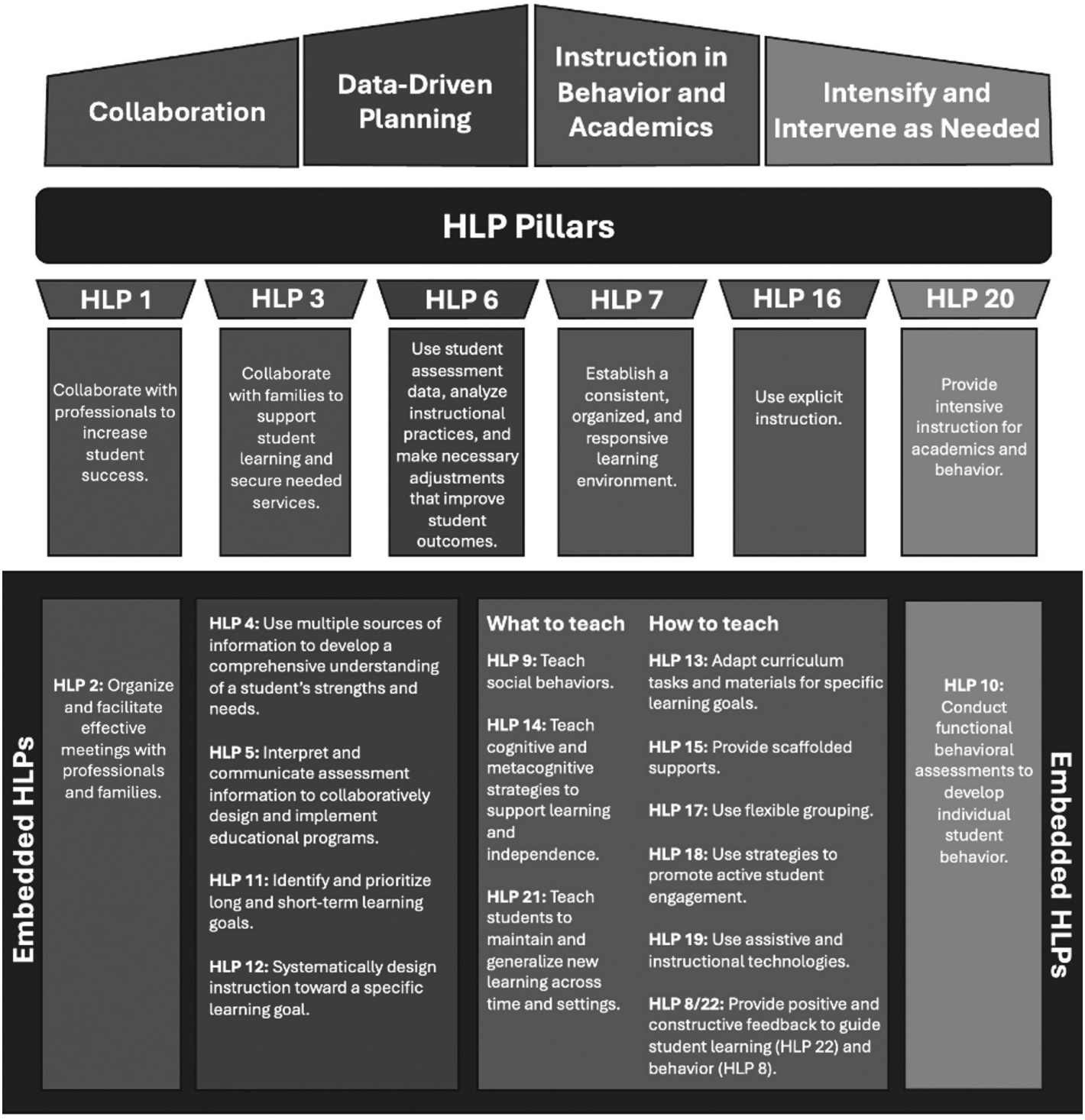
al roles that capture how teachers operationalize the goals of IDEA in practice. Markelz and Elliott (2025) describe nine interconnected roles that characterize the work of modern special education teachers (see Figure 1). These roles reflect the evolution of special education and illustrate how teachers translate legal requirements and instructional goals into their daily work. Although presented individually, the roles often occur simultaneously and interact with one another as special educators support students across instructional contexts. Together, they provide a framework for examining the multifaceted work of special education teachers and how it contributes to effective instruction, collaboration, and advocacy for students with disabilities. For readers interested in further exploration, at the end of the article Table 1 provides a targeted reading for each role.

Collaborator

Collaboration is a foundational practice in special education. It is not simply "teamwork" but a structured interaction that involves shared responsibilities, resources, and accountability among educators, families, and related service providers (Friend & Cook, 2020). Research consistently shows that effective collaboration improves academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes for students (Smith et al., 2020). Legal mandates such as IDEA require meaningful collaboration during processes such as IEP development and implementation (IDEA, 2004; Popp et al., 2022). Without effective collaboration, families may feel marginalized, and students risk being denied appropriate services. Thus, collaboration is both a legal and ethical imperative for special education teachers as they work to create inclusive environments and uphold students' rights (Jenkins & Murawski, 2024).

To be effective collaborators, special education teachers need strong communication skills, contextual competence, and the ability to build trust. Although limited planning time, competing responsibilities, and differing perspectives can create barriers to collaboration, dedicated planning time, shared goals for student success, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and open communication can help create the conditions necessary for effective collaboration (Friend & Cook, 2020; Karten & Murawski, 2020). Communication requires active listening, clear verbal and nonverbal communication, and adaptability to different audiences (Murawski & Spencer, 2011). Teachers can support students and families from differing backgrounds, including those who may be navigating the U.S. education system for the first time, by establishing and maintaining reciprocal school-family partnerships (Francis et

FIGURE 2: High-Leverage Practices in Special Education (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024)



al., 2017). Building trust is particularly important because collaboration often involves emotional discussions about a child's future and requires transparency, consistency, and empathy (Sears et al., 2021). Educators also need skills in problem-solving and resource-sharing across collaborative contexts such as IEP meetings, co-teaching, and advocacy efforts (Kurth et al., 2020; Karten & Murawski, 2020). Together, these conditions and competencies enable special education teachers to bring together the people, expertise, and resources needed to support students with disabilities across educational contexts.

Instructor

Special education teachers who provide high-quality instruction positively impact the academic, behavioral, and social success of students with disabilities. Good intentions alone are insufficient; teachers must rely on scientifically validated practices to address complex learning needs. Contemporary research has documented the lack of empirical support for approaches such as teaching to presumed "learning styles" (Newton & Salvi, 2020) and whole language instruction (Ehri et al., 2001), yet these practices persist in education. When ineffective approaches displace evidence-based instruction, students miss out on valuable opportunities to learn. In contrast, evidence-based practices (EBPs) and high-leverage practices (HLPs) provide a research-driven framework for improving student outcomes. These practices support instruction that is systematic, data-driven, and responsive to individual needs, which is essential for meeting legal and ethical obligations in special education (Cook et al., 2020; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

Effective special education teachers draw upon both EBPs and HLPs to guide instructional decision making. EBPs, such as explicit instruction, constructive feedback, and video modeling, have demonstrated effectiveness across multiple studies (Archer & Hughes, 2010; Bellini & Akullian, 2007). HLPs serve as foundational practices that special educators use routinely, including collaborating with families and professionals, using assessment data, and establishing organized learning environments (McLeskey et al., 2017; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; see Figure 2). Effective instruction, however, requires more than implementing individual practices in isolation; it requires adaptive expertise. Adaptive expertise refers to a special educator's ability to integrate professional knowledge, evidence-based practices, student data, and contextual information to select, adapt, and evaluate instruction in response to students' changing needs and instructional conditions (Nagro et al., 2025). For example, a special educator may collaborate with colleagues, analyze student data, and use that information to plan explicit instruction within a structured learning environment. When student progress is insufficient, the special educator draws upon those same sources of knowledge to intensify or individualize instruction while evaluating whether the adaptation improves student outcomes. In this way, adaptive expertise allows special educators to translate professional knowledge into responsive, individualized action that supports meaningful progress for students with disabilities.

Advocate

Advocacy is a foundational role for special education teachers because it underpins many of their other responsibilities, including implementing IEPs, collaborating with colleagues, and ensuring students have access to appropriate educational opportunities. Historically, individuals with disabilities faced discrimination and exclusion from public education, making advocacy essential to securing educational rights and opportunities (Markelz & Bateman, 2026; Martin & Rodriguez, 2022). Landmark legislation such as IDEA emerged in large part through advocacy efforts and established enforceable educational rights for students with disabilities. Today, advocacy remains critical as special education teachers navigate challenges such as resource shortages, policies and practices that may not adequately address student needs, and evolving educational demands. By advocating for students, families, and themselves, special education teachers help ensure that students receive the services, supports, and educational opportunities they need to be successful (Markelz et al., 2023).

Effective advocacy requires knowledge, interpersonal skills, and strategic action. Teachers who understand legal frameworks, including statutory, regulatory, and case law, are better prepared to navigate systems and advocate for appropriate services and supports (Markelz & Bateman, 2026). Strong communication and collaboration skills also enable teachers to engage stakeholders and build consensus around potential solutions (Nilsson et al., 2011). A practical framework for advocacy involves three steps: (1) identify and understand the problem, (2) invite stakeholders to listen, and (3) determine potential solutions (Markelz et al., 2023). Using this framework, special education teachers can approach challenges strategically and leverage their professional expertise to effect meaningful change. Ultimately, effective advocacy helps protect the educational rights of students with disabilities while also helping teachers secure the resources and support necessary to carry out their responsibilities effectively (Nagro et al., 2023).

Scientific Practitioner

The role of the scientific practitioner is essential for special education teachers

because it ensures that instructional decisions are grounded in evidence rather than intuition or tradition. Special education teachers have an ethical responsibility to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs) to provide effective services for students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2022). Students cannot benefit from EBPs they do not receive, making the translation of research into practice critical for improving academic, behavioral, and social outcomes (Wahman et al., 2023). Yet, despite a growing research base, a persistent research-to-practice gap remains, often influenced by inadequate training, limited resources, and ineffective professional development (Markelz & Riden, 2024). Scientific practitioners help bridge this gap by understanding the evidence underlying effective practices, implementing EBPs with fidelity, and using data to determine whether those practices are producing the intended outcomes for students.

To succeed as scientific practitioners, profession-ready special education teachers develop competencies in five key areas: recognizing ethical responsibility, consuming evidence-aligned information, implementing EBPs, disseminating practices, and engaging in reflection (Markelz & Riden, 2024). Teachers need to know how to locate and evaluate credible information, including peer-reviewed research and research-based professional resources such as the IRIS Center (Scheibel, 2023). Translating that evidence into practice requires intentional implementation, including setting measurable goals, implementing practices with fidelity, and collecting progress data to evaluate student response. Scientific practitioners also disseminate effective practices and support colleagues in translating knowledge into practice, including through coaching and performance-based feedback (Cornelius et al., 2020; Scheeler et al., 2004). Finally, reflection brings these competencies together as teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their practices, identify barriers to implementation, and use evidence and student response to determine whether practices should be maintained, adapted, or intensified.

Role Model

Acting as a role model is a critical, though often implicit, responsibility for special education teachers because their behaviors, attitudes, and expectations influence students, families, and colleagues. Although modeling is a cornerstone of explicit instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2010), role modeling extends beyond academics to how teachers communicate respect, acceptance, and high expectations for individuals with disabilities (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024). Students and peers observe how teachers interact with individuals with disabilities, which can shape their own attitudes and behaviors toward inclusion. Positive role modeling can foster belonging and acceptance, while negative modeling can perpetuate stereotypes and exclusion (Zee et al., 2020). Given the increased inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, special education teachers have an important opportunity to model how students with disabilities are valued, supported, and included within the school community.

To be effective role models, special education teachers demonstrate positive personal traits, inclusive behaviors, and a commitment to improving educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Traits such as empathy, patience, and compassion can be strengthened through reflection and intentional practice (Bleidorn et al., 2019). Teachers model their commitments through the relationships they build, the expectations they communicate, and the instructional decisions they make, including designing accessible instruction through Universal Design for Learning and using strengths-based approaches (CAST, n.d.; Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2019). Presuming competence, maintaining high expectations, and fostering a sense of belonging communicate to students and colleagues that disability does not diminish a student's capacity to learn, participate, and contribute (Pantić & Florian, 2015). Reflecting on their beliefs and actions through personal experience, student perspectives, and research can help teachers consider whether their everyday practices align with these commitments (Brookfield, 2017). Through these daily interactions and decisions, special education teachers model the respect, expectations, and sense of belonging they seek to foster throughout the school community.

Classroom Manager

Effective classroom managers influence students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success. Research emphasizes the importance of teacher-student relationships and proactive strategies for creating positive learning environments (Collins & Landrum, 2023). Yet teachers often report feeling unprepared to address challenging behavior, which can contribute to reliance on punitive practices that negatively affect student outcomes and relationships (Moore et al., 2017). Classroom management can be further complicated when teachers do not fully understand the backgrounds, experiences, communication, or individual needs students bring to the classroom, making authentic relationships and a sense of belonging more difficult to establish. For students with disabilities, ineffective classroom management can contribute to exclusion from general education settings and other long-term negative consequences (Riden et al., 2022). Effective classroom management is therefore essential for creating learning environments in which

students are supported academically, behaviorally, and socially.

To succeed as classroom managers, special education teachers use proactive, evidence-based practices that prevent behavioral challenges while teaching and reinforcing appropriate behavior. Key skills include understanding behavioral principles such as reinforcement and punishment, identifying the functions of behavior, and implementing interventions that teach appropriate behaviors rather than relying on punitive measures (Cooper et al., 2020). Teachers should also be prepared to use frameworks such as Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS), which emphasize prevention, data-based decision making, and tiered supports (Center on PBIS, 2024). At the classroom level, establishing clear expectations and routines, reinforcing appropriate behavior, and designing accessible and engaging instruction can create predictable environments that maximize opportunities to learn (Myers et al., 2020). Effective classroom managers pair these evidence-based practices with strong relationships, empathy, and high expectations, creating classrooms in which students know what is expected, receive the support needed to be successful, and have meaningful opportunities to learn.

Leader

Being a leader is an important role for special education teachers because their expertise can influence student success, instructional practice, and the broader school community. Historically, teacher leaders have contributed to major advancements in disability rights and inclusive education, including the development and implementation of IDEA (Bagley & Tang, 2018; Maggin et al., 2020). Today, special education teachers often serve as formal and informal leaders because of their specialized knowledge of special education law, instruction, and the needs of students with disabilities (Pazey & Cole, 2013). They collaborate with administrators, guide instructional practices, mentor colleagues, and help schools develop effective supports for students with disabilities (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Leadership therefore extends the influence of special education teachers beyond the students they directly serve, allowing their expertise to strengthen practices across classrooms and schools.

Effective special education teacher leaders combine instructional expertise with skills in collaboration, advocacy, ethical decision making, communication, mentoring, and data-informed practice (Bagley & Tang, 2018; Council for Exceptional Children, 2015; McLeskey et al., 2017; Zarate et al., 2023). Teacher leadership also occurs within a broader school system, making productive partnerships with administrators particularly important because principals play a critical role in establishing the conditions necessary for effective special education services (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Boscardin, 2005). By sharing expertise, supporting colleagues, contributing to school-level decisions, and advocating for effective practices, special education teachers can influence the quality of services students receive well beyond their own classrooms.

Peer Mentor

Peer mentorship plays a vital role in supporting novice special education teachers and reducing attrition in the field. The early years of teaching are often marked by feelings of isolation, overwhelming responsibilities, and uncertainty in instructional practice, which can contribute to burnout (Billingsley et al., 2019). Peer mentors provide professional guidance and emotional support, helping novice teachers develop confidence and competence in areas such as classroom management, instructional practices, and compliance with special education law (Youngs et al., 2011). This collaborative relationship can foster self-efficacy and a sense of belonging, which are important for teacher retention and professional growth. Given persistent special education teacher shortages and increasingly varied pathways into the profession, effective mentorship is particularly important for helping novice teachers develop and apply the knowledge and skills needed to serve students effectively.

Successful peer mentors possess both technical expertise and strong interpersonal skills. Effective mentors are knowledgeable and experienced special educators who are approachable, non-evaluative, and genuinely invested in supporting their colleagues (Marshall et al., 2013). Active listening, empathy, patience, flexibility, and problem-solving help mentors build trust and supportive professional relationships (Nagro et al., 2025; Tong & Kram, 2012). Mentorship must also move beyond providing advice to helping novice teachers apply what they are learning in practice. Strategies such as modeling, coaching, guided practice, and performance feedback within a structured mentoring cycle can support the transition from knowledge acquisition to classroom implementation (Archer & Hughes, 2010; Coogle et al., 2024; Kunemund et al., 2022). Through this combination of professional expertise, relational support, and practice-based guidance, peer mentors can strengthen novice teachers' development while contributing to greater instructional effectiveness and persistence in the profession (Coogle et al., 2024; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Teacher Technologist

Technology has expanded the tools available to special education teachers

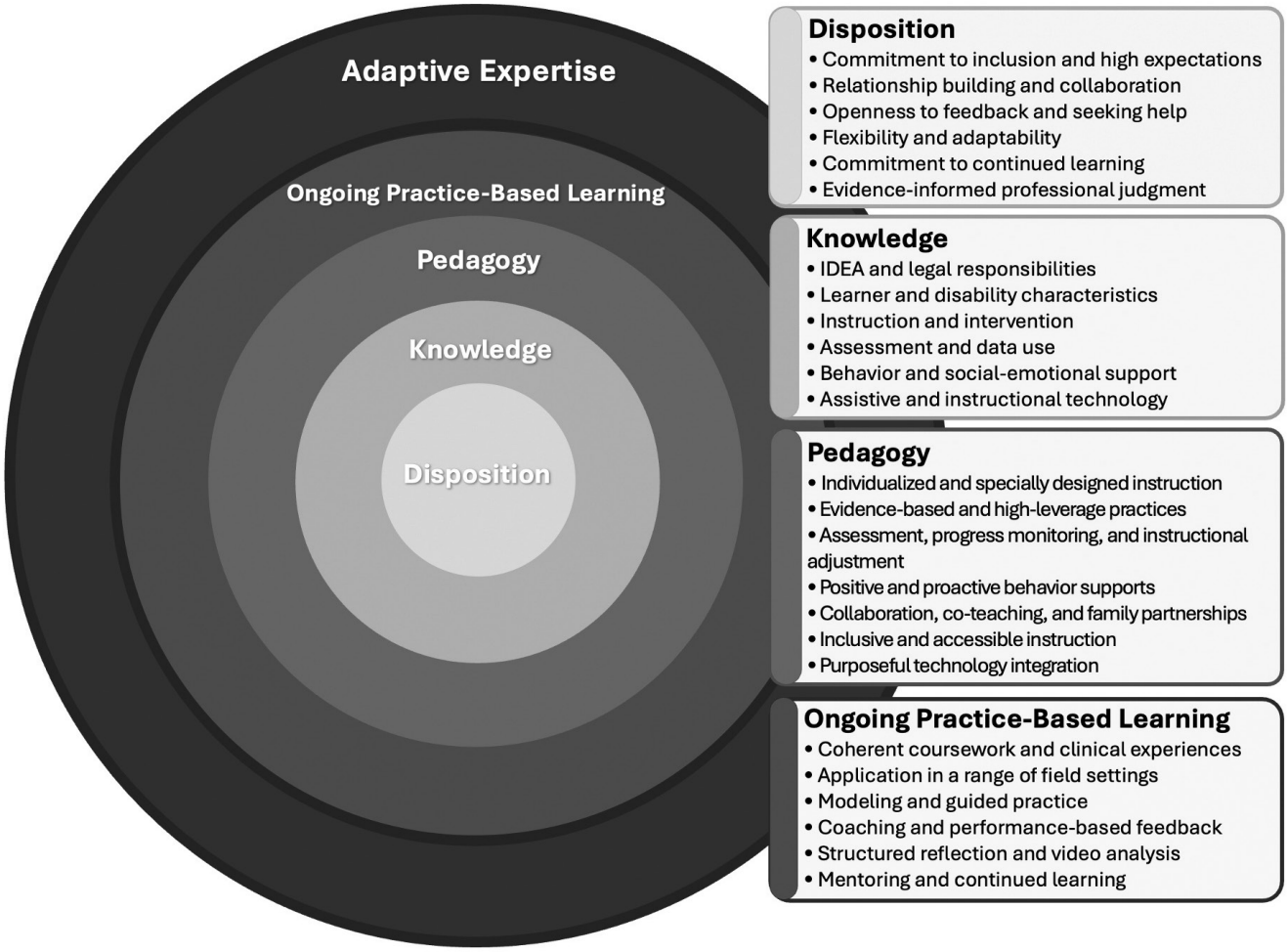
TABLE 1: Targeted Readings to Learn More About the Roles of Special Educators

Roles	Suggested Readings
Collaborator	Zarate, K., Williams, C. S., & Ostrosky, M. M. (2025). Let's collaborate! Strategies to improve inclusion of students with extensive support needs. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, *58*(1), 34–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599241256585
Instructor	Szocik, K., Wade, C., Walter, H. L., Coogle, C. G., Stegenga, S. M., & Nagro, S. A. (2024). Innovative approaches to teacher preparation improving use of evidence-based practices in EI/ECSE. *Journal of Special Education Preparation*, *4*(1), 24–34. https://doi.org/10.33043/d69746qb
Advocate	Stegenga, S. M., Skubel, A., Corr, C., & Nagro, S. A. (2022). Your voice matters: A practitioner's guide for engaging in policy through advocacy. *Young Exceptional Children*, *25*(1), 42–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250620950311
Scientific Practitioner	Scheibel, G. (2023). Addressing barriers to evidence-based practice. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 56*(6), 492–501. https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599221143471
Role Model	Hymel, S., & Katz, J. (2019). Designing classrooms for diversity: Fostering social inclusion. *Educational Psychologist*, *54*(4), 331–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1652098
Classroom Manager	Nagro, S. A., Fraser, D. W., & Hooks, S. (2019). Lesson planning with engagement in mind: Proactive classroom management strategies for curriculum instruction. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 54*(3), 131–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451218767905
Leader	Zarate, K., Hughes, M., & Maggin, D. M. (2023). Special education teacher leadership: Toward a teacher leadership framework for professional development. *Exceptionality*, *31*(2), 149–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2022.2100393
Peer Mentor	Cornelius, K. E., Rosenberg, M. S., & Sandmel, K. N. (2020). Examining the impact of professional development and coaching on mentoring of novice special educators. *Action in Teacher Education*, *42*(3), 253-270. https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2019.1638847
Teacher Technologist	Kaczorowski, T., McMahon, D., Gardiner-Walsh, S., & Hollingshead, A. (2023). Designing an inclusive future: Including diversity and equity with innovations in special education technology. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, *55*(5), 376–383. https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599221090506

to increase access, support instruction, and respond to individual student needs. Effective technology integration can provide students with alternative ways to access content, demonstrate learning, communicate, and participate in instruction, including through frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (CAST, n.d.). For special education teachers, technology may serve an assistive function by increasing a student's access or independence or an instructional function by enhancing how content is taught, practiced, assessed, or reinforced. The teacher technologist role therefore requires more than simply using technology; it requires selecting and using tools purposefully to improve teaching and learning.

In today's classrooms, special education teachers need proficiency in evaluating, selecting, and integrating technologies that range from low-tech tools such as graphic organizers to high-tech applications such as virtual simulations and artificial intelligence (AI)-based platforms (Marino et al., 2023). Because the availability of a technology does not necessarily mean that it is effective or appropriate, teacher technologists must consider the evidence supporting a tool, its alignment with student and instructional needs, accessibility, privacy, and whether it provides meaningful benefit over existing approaches. As technologies continue to evolve, ongoing professional learning and collaboration with colleagues can help teachers remain informed about emerging tools and their applications (Foulger et al., 2017). Ultimately, effective teacher technologists use professional judgment to determine when technology adds value, which tools best support the intended

FIGURE 3: Developing Adaptive Expertise to Effectively Educate Students with Disabilities



outcome, and when technology may not be the best solution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The expanding roles of special education teachers have important implications for how educators are prepared for the profession. As illustrated throughout this article, special educators assume multiple, interconnected roles that require specialized knowledge, skills, and professional judgment. Professional standards, including those developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), provide an important foundation for defining what profession-ready special educators should know and be able to do and for guiding the design of preparation programs. However, preparing teachers for increasingly complex roles requires more than introducing these competencies individually. Teacher candidates need structured opportunities to integrate and apply their knowledge, make instructional decisions, receive feedback, and reflect on the effectiveness of their practice.

Strong preparation programs provide a progression of coursework and applied experiences through which candidates can develop these competencies and learn to use them together in practice (Leko et al., 2024). Across the articles in this special issue, the knowledge, practices, dispositions, and learning opportunities that support effective special education teaching emerge as interdependent rather than discrete. Figure 3 extends the adaptive expertise framework described by Nagro et al. (2025) by integrating themes developed across this special issue. As represented in the figure, special educators draw upon professional knowledge and dispositions, enact responsive pedagogical practices, and continue developing through practice-based learning, reflection, collaboration, and feedback. Adaptive expertise develops through the ongoing integration of these domains rather than through mastery of any single competency in isolation.

Reflection is an important part of this developmental process because it helps

Preparing special educators for the future therefore requires more than preparing them for the classrooms of today; it requires developing the knowledge, professional judgment, adaptability, and commitment to continued learning needed to respond to what comes next.

teacher candidates move beyond simply experiencing instruction to systematically examining and learning from it. Reflective practitioners consider their instructional decisions, examine how those decisions influence student learning, and identify ways to strengthen future practice (Brookfield, 2020). Preparation programs can develop these skills through structured reflection embedded within coursework and clinical experiences. For example, video-based reflection allows candidates to revisit their own instruction and examine aspects of their practice that may be difficult to recognize while teaching (e.g., Nagro, 2020). With guidance and feedback, candidates can move beyond recalling what occurred during a lesson to analyzing how their instructional choices influenced student learning (Coogle et al., 2024) and considering how their perceptions of disability and special education evolve through experience (Szocik et al., 2021). Reflection coupled with meaningful feedback provides candidates with a mechanism for using experience to improve subsequent practice rather than simply accumulating experience over time.

Field experiences provide the authentic context in which these developing competencies can be brought together. Working directly with students with disabilities allows teacher candidates to connect coursework with practice, apply instructional approaches, make decisions in real time, and increasingly assume the responsibilities of a special educator (Leko et al., 2024; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017). Importantly, field experiences also provide opportunities for candidates to receive coaching and feedback from mentors and supervisors as they refine their practice (O'Brien et al., 2024). For research and practice, the challenge is therefore not simply to identify what future special educators should know and do, but to understand how coursework, reflection, feedback, and clinical experiences can be intentionally designed and connected so that candidates learn to integrate professional knowledge into effective practice. Continued research examining which preparation experiences produce meaningful changes in teacher practice, and ultimately outcomes for students with disabilities, can help strengthen the preparation of future special educators.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE FUTURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHING

The promise of IDEA began as a commitment to access, ensuring that students with disabilities would not be excluded from public education. Over the past fifty years, that promise has expanded to include not only access, but meaningful participation, opportunity, and progress. As expectations for students with disabilities have evolved, so too has the work of the special education teacher. What was once a role more narrowly defined by compliance and service delivery has developed into a dynamic and multifaceted profession requiring expertise across instruction, collaboration, advocacy, leadership, and other interconnected areas of practice. The roles described throughout this article provide a lens for understanding this evolution. Effective special educators do not simply perform these roles independently; they learn to integrate and adapt their knowledge and skills in response to students, families, colleagues, and changing classroom contexts (Leko et al., 2024). For those entering the profession, this complexity represents an extraordinary opportunity to grow into a dynamic and consequential career. Special education teachers develop expertise across multiple areas of practice and, over time, learn to integrate that knowledge with professional judgment to respond to the students, families, colleagues, and communities they serve. Expertise is not developed all at once; it grows through preparation, experience, reflection, collaboration, and continued learning across a career. In this way, becoming a special educator is not about mastering a fixed set of responsibilities, but about continually developing the knowledge, skills, and judgment needed to make a meaningful difference in the lives of students with disabilities.

Looking ahead, the profession will continue to evolve. New technologies, advances in research, changing student needs, and evolving policies and educational systems will create possibilities that cannot yet be fully anticipated. Preparing special educators for the future therefore requires more than preparing them for the classrooms of today; it requires developing the knowledge, professional judgment, adaptability, and commitment to continued learning needed to respond to what comes next. Yet even as the profession changes, its fundamental purpose remains—ensuring that students with disabilities receive high-quality educational experiences that allow them to learn, participate, grow, and pursue meaningful futures. The next generation of special educators will have opportunities not only to

implement what the field already knows, but also to question existing practices, embrace new evidence and innovations, contribute their own expertise, and help shape what effective special education can become.

Fifty years after the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, there is much to celebrate in how far special education has come and much still to imagine about where it can go. The progress described throughout this article was made possible by students and families, advocates, educators, researchers, policymakers, and professional leaders who challenged what existed and envisioned something better for individuals with disabilities. The next fifty years will be shaped by those entering and leading the profession today. By learning from those who came before them, drawing upon an ever-growing evidence base, and bringing their own knowledge, creativity, commitment, and professional judgment to the work, special educators have an extraordinary opportunity to carry forward the promise of IDEA while continuing to expand what is possible for students with disabilities.

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