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## Assessment in Special Education Teacher Preparation: An Examination of Practices

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# Assessment in Special Education Teacher Preparation: An Examination of Practices

## Abstract

There have been significant changes in special education and assessment over the past four decades. These changes have affected how university-based educator preparation programs train preservice special educators to address assessment in their professional practices to ensure that they enter classrooms with specialized assessment expertise and practice aligned with the Council for Exceptional Children's preparation standards. This study identified specific preparation practices that special education teacher educators use with their candidates to develop understandings of assessment. Qualitative data were analyzed using a dual-level systematic coding scheme; findings revealed strengths in teacher training and highlighted opportunities for growth. Implications for special education teacher educators were discussed.

## Keywords

assessment, preservice special educator, special education, teacher educator, teacher training

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# Assessment in Special Education Teacher Preparation: An Examination of Practices

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## **Introduction**

In the early 2000s, reauthorized federal laws, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), introduced new assessment systems in PreK-12 schools that held schools accountable for student achievement (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; McCall, McHatton, & Shealy, 2014; Rice & Drame, 2017; Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). Although it is a widely accepted notion that teachers are “intricately linked to the success of their students” (Bouck, 2005, p. 125), linking teacher quality directly to student achievement has become a highly charged topic (Goldhaber, 2016). The substantial changes in PreK-12 education have also had a great impact on teacher education, particularly in the field of special education. The roles of teacher educators and obligations of educator preparation programs

(EPPs) continually evolve to address the “living organism” known as special education teacher education (Dukes, Darling & Doan, 2014, p. 11).

### **Overview of Special Education Teacher Education**

Similar to PreK-12 schools, EPPs grapple with balancing the delivery of impactful learning experiences and accountability expectations for undergraduate and graduate students. The pressure placed on EPPs that train special educators is even greater due to pervasive shortages of special education teacher educators (Robb, Smith & Montrosse, 2012; West & Hardman, 2012) and the demand of fully qualified special educators in PreK-12 schools (Tyler, Montrosse & Smith, 2012). To assist special education EPPs with ensuring they develop and implement high-quality programs, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2015) released the following set of six preparation standards:

- Standard 1: Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences
- Standard 2: Learning Environments
- Standard 3: Curricular Content Knowledge
- Standard 4: Assessment
- Standard 5: Instructional Planning Strategies
- Standard 6: Professional Learning and Ethical Practice

Within each standard, key elements defined the specialized expertise required among novice special educators. The CEC’s standards provide EPPs an invaluable guide with which to develop and evaluate their programs’ requirements.

In an era of accountability, training future special educators to use assessment information as a driver for making decisions is central to special education teacher education. As such, the focus of the present study was on Standard 4: Assessment (CEC, 2015). Four key elements are associated with this standard and convey the requisite behaviors, knowledge, and skills for novice special educators for assessment. Specifically, novice special educators who work with students with disabilities must (a) know how to select and administer a wide range of assessments that minimize bias, (b) understand and rely upon assessment practices and principles to make informed decisions based on assessment results, (c) engage in effective collaborations with colleagues and families that use assessment results to make informed decisions, and (d) provide guided feedback that promotes student learning.

Research has shown that PreK-12 special educators contend with increased assessment responsibilities and educational decision making for students with disabilities (Dukes et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2010; Tyler et al., 2012). Significant growth in the emerging number of multilingual students in U.S. schools requires that special educators and evaluators have the skills necessary to

minimize bias, distinguish cultural and linguistic difference from disability, and implement needed services to students with disabilities (Chen & Lindo, 2018). Thus, special education teacher educators must use preparation practices that ensure novice PreK–12 special educators enter schools well-equipped with requisite behaviors, knowledge, and skills to address assessment effectively. At the time of the current study, only two studies were located that examined special educator preparedness in relation to the CEC's (2015) preparation standards. However, these studies were quantitative analyses that ascertained views of preparedness among preservice (Lombardo-Graves, 2017) and practicing special educators (Gavish, Bar-On, & Shein-Kahalon, 2016). No known studies were located that elicited the views of those who prepare special educators or identified specific ways in which they address the CEC's (2015) preparation standards.

To address the research gap in this area of teacher education, the current study posed the following question to special education teacher educators in a Southern state: Specifically, how do you promote preservice special educators' understandings of assessment? Findings in the current study have provided a preliminary glimpse of specific preparation practices that special education teacher educators use to develop preservice special educators' competency with assessment. Considering these practices in relation to the CEC's (2015) preparation standards, the study has also highlighted areas of strength and opportunities for growth in teacher training.

### **Methods**

The researchers in the current study were colleagues affiliated with the same teacher preparation program located in the Southern United States. One of the researchers (i.e., the first author) was a certified educational diagnostician and had eleven years of experiences as a special educator in public-school districts and a university-based teacher preparation program working with students with disabilities and their families. The other researcher (i.e., the second author) had eight years of experiences as a teacher educator in two different university-based teacher preparation programs and five years of experiences as a 4th and 5th grade classroom teacher in two different public-school districts. Throughout the research process, the researchers regularly discussed the impact of their personal characteristics and professional experiences on their positionality and used reflexivity to monitor their involvement and detachment (Berger, 2015).

To collect data from respondents located across a wide geographic area, the researchers created an electronic questionnaire in Google Forms. The questionnaire included: (a) closed-ended items to collect demographic information for respondents, (b) Likert-type items for respondents to indicate their viewpoints of preservice special educators' preparedness for each of the key elements associated with the CEC's (2015) preparation standards, and (c) open-

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ended items for respondents to describe in their own words specific preparation practices they use to develop preservice special educators' understandings with each of the CEC's standards. As shown in the Appendix, the questionnaire included five Likert-type items and one open-ended item concerning assessment.

Due to nuances associated with teacher licensure, the researchers limited their analysis to the state in which their teacher preparation program was located. The researchers created a research sample of special education teacher educators by accessing the state education agency's website to identify state-accredited, university-based EPPs that prepare special educators. At the time of the current study, there were 55 EPPs. Among these EPPs, the researchers searched for publicly available information on their respective university's website, such as class schedules and departmental faculty listings, to create a participant pool of 283 special education teacher educators. For each potential member, the researchers collected their name and email address and stored all information in a password-protected Google Sheet that was not accessible to others.

The researchers kept the survey period open for three months. When the survey period opened, an initial email was sent to all participant pool members that explained the purpose of the study, provided information concerning their rights as research participants, and invited them to participate via a hyperlink to the electronic survey. When participant pool members elected to participate, they were required to provide consent before gaining access to the survey questions. The researchers tracked survey participation in the Google Sheet and sent two monthly reminders by email encouraging non-respondents to participate.

When the survey period closed, 46 respondents participated and submitted a survey. The researchers filtered through submitted surveys to retrieve qualitative data related to specific preparation practices that special education teacher educators use to develop preservice special educators' competency with assessment. The researchers analyzed data using a dual-level systematic coding scheme (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the first level, open coding was used to label initial concepts present in the data. In the second level, axial coding was used to confirm the accuracy of codes, group similar codes into categories, and identify the presence of any sub-categories by making constant comparisons between data and emerging categories. During each level of coding, each researcher coded independently and made analytic memos to document questions, reflections, and understandings (Saldaña, 2016). After the researchers completed their independent analyses, they held a virtual team meeting to share and discuss their findings until they reached complete agreement. The researchers also maintained a codebook to store all codes they agreed upon.

### Results

Of the 46 respondents, 34 respondents identified specific preparation practices they use to develop preservice special educators' competency with assessment. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents were female, over 40 years of age, and had multiple years of experience with preparing special educators. The researchers analyzed a total of 815 words, which produced the following two categories: Assessment Learning Experiences during Coursework and Assessment Learning Experiences during Field Experiences. Below is a summary of each category, along with verbatim excerpts from respondents.

| Characteristic             | <i>n</i> |
|----------------------------|----------|
| <b>Gender</b>              |          |
| Female                     | 26       |
| Male                       | 8        |
| <b>Age</b>                 |          |
| 30-39 years                | 4        |
| 40-49 years                | 9        |
| 50-59 years                | 8        |
| 60-69 years                | 11       |
| 70-79 years                | 2        |
| <b>Teaching Experience</b> |          |
| Less than 1 year           | 1        |
| 2-4 years                  | 3        |
| 5-7 years                  | 6        |
| 8-10 years                 | 8        |
| More than 10 years         | 16       |

#### **Assessment Learning Experiences during Coursework**

Within this category, respondents referenced learning experiences that occur during university-based coursework to enhance preservice special educators' understandings of assessment. Respondents acknowledged that they provide learning experiences that are "assessment-based" and "data-driven." Respondents stated the following were learning experiences that developed preservice special educators' competence with assessment:

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- development of “authentic assessments;”
- construction of “reliable and valid curriculum-based measurement (CBM) tools;”
- analysis of data yielded from hypothetical “norm- and criterion-referenced” assessments;
- review of “normative samples” from “standardized assessments;”
- evaluation of assessment tools and academic interventions through the use of “professional resources” (i.e., research databases);
- use of “informal [assessment] measures” to compare students with disabilities to similar-aged or similar grade-level peers;
- composition of data-based individual education plan (IEP) goals, present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) statements, and IEP transition plans for high school students; and
- participation in mock standardized assessment using sample testing materials released by the state education agency.

Respondents also referenced the qualifications and credentials of instructors who teach courses that include assessment-based learning experiences. Respondents emphasized that these courses were designed and taught by individuals who were psychoeducational assessment experts and held appropriate state certification certificates or state licensures.

### **Assessment Learning Experiences during Field Experiences**

Within this category, respondents referred to learning experiences that occur during field experiences to enhance preservice special educators’ understandings of assessment. Respondents affirmed that they provide preservice special educators with “exposure, practice, role play, and more practice.” According to respondents, learning activities during field experiences included “linking texts and research to field-based experiences,” “modeling,” “working with mentor teachers in classrooms,” and “interviewing” and “observing” practicing teachers in PreK-12 schools.

Respondents recognized great value in providing preservice special educators with regular access to actual students in authentic school contexts. As such, respondents felt that designing assessment-related courses with corresponding field experiences was an optimal way to address assessment during teacher training. For example, one respondent explained that they require preservice special educators to “complete assessments based on real-life case scenarios and then develop a student IEP aligned to the assessment data.” Similarly, another respondent described how they require preservice special educators to learn about the IEP planning process during field experiences:



[Special education teacher educators] break down the ARD [Admission, Review and Dismissal] process step-by-step and arrange for [preservice special educators] to observe meetings in school districts. [Special education teacher educators] also work through the IEP Model Form [provided by the state education agency] that includes writing the PLAAFP, IEP goals, and objectives.

Respondents further explained that learning experiences during field experiences provided preservice special educators with opportunities to practice analyzing assessment data to make instructional decisions for students with disabilities.

During field experiences, respondents also reported ways in which they promote preservice special educators' competence with collaboration.

Respondents noted the importance of partnering "with families, as well as teachers and other related service providers" to make educational decisions for students with disabilities. Thus, respondents implemented learning experiences that required preservice special educators to practice collaboration during IEP planning processes and case study assignments.

### **Discussion**

Given the prominent position of accountability and assessment in PreK-12 schools, it is essential that special education teacher educators use preparation practices that promote preservice special educators' understandings with assessment. More importantly, preparation practices must address the components delineated in the CEC's (2015) preparation standards. Since no known studies have examined how special education teacher educators address the CEC's (2015) preparation standards during teacher training, findings from the current study provided a preliminary glimpse of special education teacher preparation in relation to assessment.

Closer analysis of findings revealed that respondents demonstrated awareness of the CEC's (2015) preparation standard for assessment. Respondents implement a notable quantity of learning activities during university-based coursework and field experiences conducted in PreK-12 schools with which to develop preservice special educators' competence with selecting and administering a wide range of assessments, understanding and relying upon assessment practices and principles to make informed decisions based on assessment results, and engaging in effective collaborations with colleagues and families that use assessment results to make informed decisions. Furthermore, respondents viewed Pre-K-12 schools as rich venues for preservice special educators to learn about assessment in real-world settings. Education researchers have made strong assertions that close alignment of course-based learning activities with field experiences in authentic school settings yields the greatest

positive outcomes for novice special educators. (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Dukes et. al, 2014).

Findings in the current study also pointed to two opportunities for growth in this area of teacher training for special educators. It was not clear how respondents introduced preservice special educators with strategies for minimizing bias. When assessing a student with disabilities, special educators must consider any cultural, learning, linguistic, or social factors that may affect their assessment results and take appropriate measures to reduce potential biases (CEC, 2015). Special educators must also know how to maintain objectivity throughout the assessment process. It was also unclear how respondents trained preservice special educators to provide guided feedback that promotes student learning. Feedback has a strong influence on student performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and special educators must know effective ways to provide students with nonverbal and verbal feedback about their achievement, behavior, environment, and learning (CEC, 2015). To provide students with meaningful feedback “requires much skill,” by teachers, including “high proficiency in developing a classroom climate, the ability to deal with the complexities of multiple judgements, and deep understandings of the subject matter” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 103). These findings suggest a need for special education teacher educators to conduct comprehensive program reviews to ensure that required coursework and field experiences address all components delineated in the CEC’s (2015) preparation standards.

Special educators in PreK-12 schools face accountability and are responsible for assessment on a daily basis. As such, findings in the current study are important given the relevance of assessment. However, there were methodological limitations that pose constraints on generalizability. For example, the current study achieved a low survey response rate of only 16% despite attempts to remedy nonresponse bias. Additionally, information obtained in the survey was self-reported and limited to respondents’ interpretations of the questions. These limitations could be addressed in future research studies that employ more rigorous methodologies to determine specific preparation practices special education teacher educators use to develop preservice special educators’ understandings with assessment. Moreover, future research studies should examine how these practices promote the generalization of requisite behaviors, knowledge, and skills for assessment among novice special educators.

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Appendix

Questionnaire items for assessment

After completing your educator preparation program, how prepared are special education teaching professionals with.

|  | Not At All Prepared   | Slightly Prepared     | Somewhat Prepared     | Very Prepared         | Extremely Prepared    |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Selecting and using technically sound formal and informal assessments that minimize bias?  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Using knowledge of measurement principles and practices to interpret assessment results and guide educational decisions for individuals with exceptionalities?   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Using multiple types of assessment information in making decisions about individuals with exceptionalities in collaboration with colleagues and families?  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Engaging individuals with exceptionalities to work toward quality learning and performance and provide feedback to guide them?   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Understanding of the special education teacher's role in the ARD/IEP process in collecting information from various parties, writing PLAAFP statements, writing draft goals and objectives, and collaborating with students, parents, and staff to develop an IEP? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Specifically, how do you promote special education teaching professionals' understandings with assessment?