

The Role of High-Leverage Practices in Special Education Teacher Preparation

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Executive Summary

High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) have been defined as “a set of practices that are fundamental to support K–12 student learning, and that can be taught, learned, and implemented by those entering the profession” (Windschitl, Thompson, Braaten, & Stroupe, 2012, p. 880). To develop teacher candidates who are prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities, teacher educators should be knowledgeable about HLPs for special education teachers and how to integrate them into coursework and clinical experiences in teacher preparation programs. In this brief, we provide background information about the development of the HLPs for special education teachers, and how they might be used in preparation programs.

HLPs are “so important that skillfully executing them is fundamental to effective teaching.”

—McLeskey et al.,
2017, p. 9

Aim & Background

Teacher educators are currently engaged in “a major shift toward specifying teaching practices” (McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanaugh, 2013, p. 378), and ensuring that candidates are systematically prepared to use these practices in classrooms (McLeskey, Billingsley, Brownell, Maheady, & Lewis, in press). The practices that are identified should have high leverage for improving P–12 student outcomes either directly (i.e., effective instructional and behavioral practices) or indirectly (i.e., collaboration and assessment), and also should be frequently used in classrooms and broadly applicable across content areas (McLeskey, Maheady, Billingsley, Brownell, & Lewis, 2019). Across disciplines (e.g., mathematics, science, foreign language, elementary education), teacher educators have identified High-Leverage Practices that form the core curriculum of practice-based teacher preparation programs (Benedict, Holdheide, Brownell, & Foley, 2016; McDonald et al., 2013).

In 2017, a work group supported by Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform (CEEDAR) Center published a list of 22 High-Leverage Practices for special educators (McLeskey et al., 2017). These practices (see Figure 1) are grouped into four domains: collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/ behavioral, and instruction. Among the countless day-to-day activities special education teachers engage in to support their students, these 22 HLPs are “so important that skillfully executing them is fundamental to effective teaching” (McLeskey et al., 2017, p. 9).

Findings, Implications & Recommendations

Teacher educators can view the *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education* (McLeskey et al., 2017) publication to review the list and descriptions of the HLPs, as well as a rationale and brief evidence base for each practice. Knowing what the HLPs are and how they relate to P–12 student learning is an essential first step for teacher educators who are planning to integrate these practices into their preparation programs.

Teacher educators have taken different approaches when integrating HLPs into their preparation programs. Some have restructured their programs to use HLPs as a core curriculum (McDonald et al., 2013). For example, at SUNY Buffalo State, faculty revised their dual certification (general and special education) program by developing a set of program-specific HLPs that borrowed from published general and special education HLP lists and focused on meeting the needs of all learners in inclusive settings (Maheady, Patti, Rafferty, & del Prado Hill, in press). In the revised program, the HLPs were mapped across coursework and clinical experiences to ensure that candidates have multiple opportunities to gain fluency in the use of the practices.

HLPs can provide common language, cohesiveness, and an increased emphasis on what teachers do over what teachers know.”

Since restructuring programs is a substantial undertaking, some teacher educators have started by considering how to integrate a limited group of selected HLPs into existing coursework and clinical experiences. For example, at Kent State University, faculty integrated several HLPs (e.g., CEC HLP 8: Feedback, CEC HLP 18: Engagement) into coursework and field experiences focusing on ensuring candidates gained fluency related to certain aspects of classroom management (Barber & McLeskey, 2019). As another example, teacher candidates could be guided to use explicit instruction (CEC HLP 16) and provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning (CEC HLP 22) when designing and implementing lesson plans. Framing a course or clinical experience around one or two HLPs can bring focus and purpose to teacher candidates' development during these experiences.

No matter the approach taken, when integrating HLPs, teacher educators should strive to go beyond simply *covering* the HLPs, ensuring that candidates are supported in gaining deep knowledge and have many opportunities to gain proficiency in *using* the HLPs. Initial activities related to HLPs may include readings, in-class discussions, reflection, case studies, and simulations. However, as candidates progress, it is critical for them to have more complex and authentic opportunities for application of the HLPs. Ultimately, candidates need to engage in the practices in classrooms with real students and receive feedback on their performance. This can be achieved through a range of clinical experiences including practicums and student teaching (see Benedict et al., 2016, for examples). Concurrently, teacher educators should plan to assess candidate skill with HLPs to ensure sufficient fluency has been met upon program completion and entering the teaching profession.

As teacher educators consider the role of HLPs in teacher preparation, they can make use of an ever-expanding array of resources that support candidates in developing deep knowledge, as well as providing opportunities to learn to use the HLPs. A brief description of a few key resources for teacher educators and others engaged in professional learning activities related to the HLPs—including books, websites, and other tools—can be found in Figure 2.

Conclusion

In light of the shift toward practice-based teacher preparation, HLPs can provide common language, cohesiveness, and an increased emphasis on what teachers *do* over what teachers *know*. Within special education teacher preparation programs, using HLPs can provide focus to ensure that teacher candidates becoming fluent in the most critical day-to-day teaching practices. Ultimately, the goal is to develop highly skilled special educators who are poised to improve outcomes for P–12 students with disabilities.

References

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Figure 1. HLPs in Special Education

Collaboration	
HLP 1	Collaborate with professionals to increase student success.
HLP 2	Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.
HLP 3	Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.
Assessment	
HLP 4	Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student’s strengths and needs.
HLP 5	Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs.
HLP 6	Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.
Social/Emotional/Behavioral	
HLP 7	Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment.
HLP 8	Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior. (behavior focus)
HLP 9	Teach social behaviors.
HLP 10	Conduct functional behavioral assessments to develop individual student behavior support plans.
Instruction	
HLP 11	Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals.
HLP 12	Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.
HLP 13	Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.
HLP 14	Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.
HLP 15	Provide scaffolded supports.
HLP 16	Use explicit instruction.
HLP 17	Use flexible grouping.
HLP 18	Use strategies to promote active student engagement.
HLP 19	Use assistive and instructional technologies.
HLP 20	Provide intensive instruction.
HLP 21	Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.
HLP 22	Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior. (learning focus)

Figure 2. Resources to Learn More about the Instructional HLPs and Integrating Them into Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs

Resource and URL	Description
<p>High-Leverage Practices in Special Education https://highleveragepractices.org/</p>	<p>Developed in partnership between the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the CEEDAR Center, this webpage includes a variety of resources to help promote the understanding and use of HLPs (e.g., webinars, videos of HLPs in practice, resource links, and professional development guides).</p>
<p>Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center. (2019). <i>Introducing high-leverage practices in special education: A professional development guide for school leaders</i>. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center. https://highleveragepractices.org/a-professional-development-guide-for-school-leaders/</p>	<p>This guide, designed for school leaders, provides explanations of HLPs in special education, along with tools for professional development on HLPs.</p>
<p>IRIS Center: HLP Resources https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources/high-leverage-practices/</p>	<p>CEC and the CEEDAR Center partnered with the IRIS Center to develop an interactive tool to help users identify IRIS resources that provide information on HLPs.</p>
<p>High-Leverage Practices in Elementary Education, Teaching Works, University of Michigan http://www.teachingworks.org/work-of-teaching/high-leverage-practices</p>	<p>This site describes 19 high-leverage practices developed for K-5 <i>general education</i> teachers. Brief descriptions of each HLP and other resource materials are provided.</p>
<p><i>Teachingworks: High-Leverage Practices</i> http://www.teachingworks.org/work-of-teaching/high-leverage-practices</p>	<p>This website, created by the University of Michigan, includes a list and description of the 19 general education HLPs from University of Michigan’s Teaching Works.</p>
<p>McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy, M., ...Ziegler, D. (2017). <i>High-leverage practices in special education</i>. Arlington, VA: CEC and CEEDAR Center. http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/high-leverage-practices/</p>	<p>This book is the final report of the special education HLP writing team which includes the 22 HLPs in special education with descriptions, rationales, and research support.</p>