Taking Charge of Your Professional Learning

Tips for Cultivating Special Educator Expertise

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Becoming an expert special educator is no easy task! Even if you have mastered the basic expectations for your job, those expectations are continually evolving, becoming increasingly complex and rigorous. Unfortunately, your efforts to develop the knowledge and skill to effectively meet these expectations and serve students with disabilities are probably not supported by the kinds of meaningful professional learning experiences that you need to grow. Fortunately, you do not have to rely on others to provide you with the knowledge and skills that you need to develop your capacity to effectively teach students with disabilities; you can take charge of your own professional learning. The purpose of this article is to support you in cultivating your own expertise. We first describe the context in which special educators are working, with increasingly complex demands and insufficient professional development opportunities. Next, we outline the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective special educators. Finally, we draw from research on the development of professional expertise to provide specific tips for taking charge of your own professional learning.

Increasing Complexity of Special Educators' Roles

Over the past several decades, the expectations placed on teachers of students with disabilities have become increasingly complex, encompassing more responsibilities with more diverse groups of students (Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). These changes have been driven by accountability policy reform and have resulted in increased demands for special educators to support grade-level instruction (McLaughlin, 2010). Simultaneously, schoolwide systems of support have increased special educators' responsibilities for supporting preventive efforts in general education settings (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010), and the inclusion movement has intensified the need for collaborative relationships with general education colleagues (Brownell et al., 2010).

Teachers of students with disabilities need sophisticated knowledge and skills to address these new responsibilities. Increasing academic expectations for students with disabilities demand that special educators be knowledgeable about the general education curriculum, disabilities, and interventions in specific areas, such as reading and math (Brownell et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2010). To be effective in preventive schoolwide systems of support, special educators need expertise in the assessments and data analysis used in schoolwide screenings and tiered interventions, as well as the skills to collaborate with and support general educators to implement coordinated instruction between tiers (Benedict, Park, Brownell, Lauterbach, & Kiely, 2013; Brownell et al, 2012). Thus, whereas special education teachers' responsibilities once required them to know about different disabilities and select appropriate interventions, special education teachers' responsibilities have expanded to require knowledge of disabilities, specific interventions, timely assessments and student data collection, the general education curriculum, generic pedagogical methods, specific pedagogical methods (including knowledge of technology) for providing equitable access to and mastery of the general education curriculum, and collaboration (Brownell et al., 2010).

Accessing High-Quality Professional Development

Unfortunately, the professional learning opportunities available to many special educators have not kept pace with the

increasing knowledge and skills needed to be an effective special educator (Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Many teachers do not have access to extended, intensive professional development (PD) that helps them develop the knowledge and skill required to enhance their effectiveness. In too many school districts, PD efforts are short in duration, insufficiently aligned with teachers' individual PD needs and content standards, and provided by district or school individuals who may not have the expertise to support teacher learning (Hill, 2009). As a result, teachers often participate in a hodgepodge of poorly coordinated PD efforts that are unlikely to cultivate expertise (Correnti, 2007).

For these reasons, special education teachers must take charge of their professional learning. Special educators who know what it takes to be an effective special educator, who analyze their own teaching, and who have some practical strategies for how to improve can cultivate their own expertise. Research conducted under the auspices of the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, a PD project of the Institute for Education Sciences, and teacher quality leadership grants funded by the Office of Special Education Programs have enabled us to draw some conclusions about the nature of special education teachers' expertise and the strategies that teachers use to become more effective. In this article, we describe the knowledge, dispositions, and actions of effective teachers. Using these attributes and the science of expertise development, we provide practical tips to enable you to support your own professional growth.

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Characteristics of Effective Special Education Teachers

Our research has demonstrated that effective special education teachers have deep and well-integrated knowledge (Bishop, Brownell, Klingner, Leko, & Galman, 2010; Brownell et al., 2013). They understand the content they are teaching, and they can enact instruction that provides students with disabilities engaging access to that content. Moreover, they know how to be responsive to students' needs—correcting students' errors, providing them with specific feedback on what they did well, and supporting them when they see them stumble. Effective special education teachers are also thoughtful about their approach and relentless in their efforts to help students with disabilities. They are able to collaborate with parents and other professionals to enact their knowledge and skills in ways that promote student growth. The following section describes what effective special educators know, do, and believe about educating students with disabilities. Figure 1 portrays a summarized conceptual framework that has served as a guide for this article, aiming to illustrate the multiple dimensions that influence special education teacher quality and illuminate what actions special educators can do to cultivate their personal expertise.

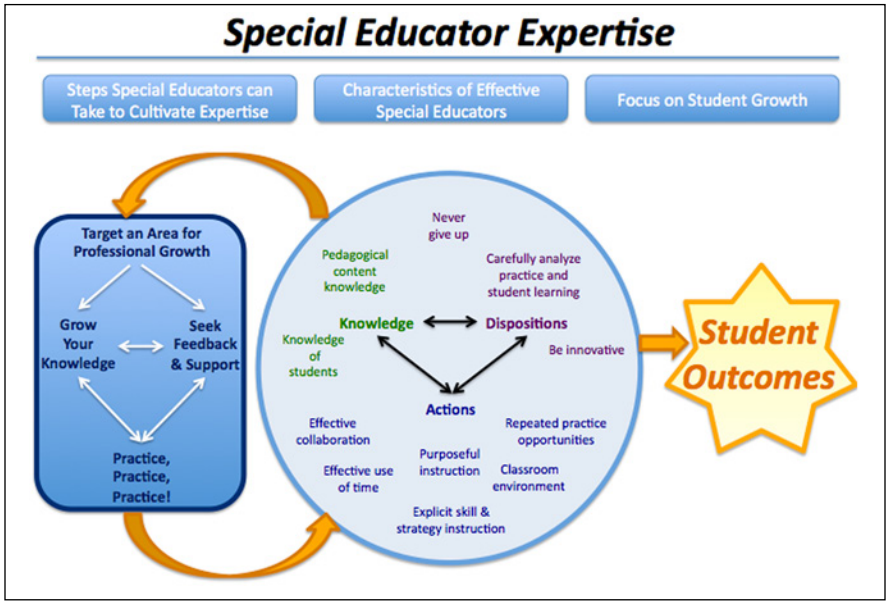
What Effective Special Educators Know

Effective special educators have specialized knowledge needed to provide meaningful instruction to students with learning difficulties. This knowledge includes a deep understanding of students with disabilities' developmental and learning needs, knowledge of content, and knowledge for teaching (see Table 1). This integrated knowledge is called *pedagogical content knowledge*, and it enables them to design effective instruction tailored to students' individual learning goals.

Knowledge of students. Effective special educators' know about their students' varying exceptionalities and how those exceptionalities influence the ways in which they are learning content or managing their behavior (Bishop et al., 2010; Seo, Brownell, Bishop, & Dingle, 2008). When we have interviewed effective special education teachers, they can talk at length and in great detail about their students' needs. These teachers know their students, which is important given the diverse learning, emotional, and behavioral needs and challenges that their students confront. They frequently collect data to anchor their instructional decisions about their students, and they are careful observers of student behavior (Bishop et al., 2010; Brownell et al., 2013). They are always watching and listening to see if individual students need additional supports to better master content.

Pedagogical content knowledge. Effective special educators also have knowledge of academic content, curricular resources, and how to engage students meaningfully in learning content (Seo et al., 2008). This well-integrated knowledge, otherwise known as pedagogical content knowledge, supports effective special educators in breaking down academic content (e.g., reading, math, science) into meaningful learning units and employing the appropriate resources and effective instructional strategies to help students with disabilities access and achieve learning mastery of that content (Shulman, 1987). Effective special education teachers' extensive knowledge of the content allows them to easily represent that knowledge in concrete ways for students with disabilities. In our research, we have noticed that these teachers know more about the content of reading instruction, but they also seem to have more knowledge about effective instruction, evidence-based reading strategies, and ways to engage students in the reading process (Brownell et al., 2013; Seo et al., 2008). Effective special education teachers also enhance students' learning by connecting conceptual ideas from academic content to students' daily lives, helping students develop concrete representations of abstract concepts, and linking new instructional content to

Figure 1. Characteristics of Effective Special Educators and What Special Educators Can Do to Cultivate Personal Expertise



what students already know (Bottage, Heinrichs, Mehta, & Hung, 2002).

What Effective Special Educators Do

Effective special educators take specific actions to ensure that their students' learning experiences are maximized (see Table 2). These actions begin during planning, when effective special educators design meaningful instruction that is aligned with the students' individualized education programs, and they extend throughout the students' school day. The actions that these teachers take to enhance the quality of their students' learning experiences are not confined to the walls of their own classrooms; on the contrary, effective special educators are expert collaborators, and they work diligently with students' families and other educational professionals to coordinate meaningful learning experiences for students with disabilities across instructional settings.

Purposeful instruction. Effective special educators' instruction reflects their commitment to providing students with meaningful and productive learning experiences throughout their instructional day. They provide goal-focused, explicit, highly engaging, and responsive instruction that reflects their knowledge of the content, their knowledge of effective practice, and their deep knowledge of their students. Our observations of the most effective special education reading teachers show them engaging students in instruction in which all activities are aligned to achieve a particular purpose (Brownell et al., 2009). These teachers explicitly articulate what they want their students to learn through clear explanations, modeling, questions, and multiple activities that are linked.

Effective use of time. Effective special education teachers maximize instructional time with students, operating from the philosophy that every minute that they have with their students matters. They use multiple strategies for keeping students engaged, such as having them write responses, asking them to turn to a partner and complete a task, or asking them manipulate objects such as letter tiles in response to a question. Transitions are routinized, and effective classroom management enables them to focus on instruction. Everything that they do seems well orchestrated; it is clear that they have thought in detail about how instruction will unfold and that they have prepared materials and procedures to efficiently use their time with students.

Repeated practice opportunities. Effective special education teachers also know how to engage students in repeated practice and are responsive to students' performance. One of our most effective teachers used five or six activities in one lesson just to help students master the *-ong, -ang,* and *-ing* sounds. Most impressively, she accomplished all these activities within a 25- to 30-minute time span. Effective special educators also embed individualized supports within these practice opportunities. For instance, another effective special educator used error correction and more explicit instruction with a child in her group who had extensive decoding problems. While other students were completing a task with letter tiles, she said each sound of a word slowly for that child, holding one finger up to note each sound. She was also quick to support students when they made a mistake, pointing out what the students did and how they might correct their error (e.g., "You wrote /e/ but I said /i/").

Explicit skill and strategy instruction. At the secondary level, effective special education teachers also provide explicit skill and strategy-based instruction, but they do so in a way that they help students acquire more knowledge of the content in which they are operating. During an interview, one effective secondary special education teacher shared how he carefully designed his instruction to develop his students' broader literacy skills while supporting students in learning the English curriculum (Lauterbach, 2013). Because these teachers have deep knowledge of both the content and the skills necessary to access that content, they provide instruction that scaffolds students' capacity to use these skills while learning the content.

Table 1. What Effective Special Educators Should Know

Knowledge	Ask yourself
Students	Do I understand my students well enough to tailor instruction to their needs? • Can I describe the nature of my students' disabilities? • Can I describe how disabilities affect students' learning processes in different content areas, and can I implement effective strategies for supporting their learning? • Can I describe students' individual strengths, weaknesses, interests, and goals and incorporate these into instruction? • Can I develop accommodations to enable my student to access instruction and support general education teachers to provide such accommodations?
Content and pedagogy	Do I understand the content that I am teaching at a deep level? • Can I explain how and why students should master a particular skill? • Can I elaborate on explanations using multiple examples and relate explanations to something concrete in students' lives? • Can I explain exceptions to rules and why they are exceptions? • Can I anticipate student misconceptions or errors? • Can I develop multiple activities and ways to engage students with content? • Can I explain the criteria used to evaluate students' mastery of content? • Can I describe resources available to teach content and their value?

Classroom environment. Effective special educators create safe environments for students to learn. They use respectful language with students, creating a classroom community by encouraging students to provide help to their peers and be helpful to one another. They create well-structured peer learning activities in which all students can actively participate. They effectively maintain students' participation in these activities with minimal or no reprimands. They are firm but respectful, avoiding power struggles with students. We observed one special educator use a brilliant move with a student who had significant emotional problems (Seo et al., 2008). When the student entered the room, he was angry and did not want to engage in the work. The teacher encouraged him to get one of the academic games in the room and start to play it. She said that she would be over to help him as soon as she got the other students started. Before we knew it, the student was working productively.

Effective collaborators. Effective special educators work well with others to coordinate instruction and services for students. This coordination is especially important in response-to-intervention frameworks, where teachers have to create tiered instruction that aligns with core instruction (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006; Wonder-McDowell, Reutzel, & Smith, 2011). In one of our PD studies aimed at helping teachers coordinate reading instruction across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 instruction, we found that special educators who planned collaboratively with their general education co-teachers were better able to implement strategy instruction that was consistent across tiers, reducing students' confusion and extending students' opportunities to practice the target skill (Benedict, 2012).

Dispositions of Effective Special Education Teachers

In addition to specialized knowledge and skills, effective special educators possess certain attitudes and beliefs that set them apart from other teachers (Table 3). These teachers' sense of determination, careful reflection of the impact of their instruction on student learning, and ability to be innovative allow them to powerfully affect the academic and emotional growth of the students with whom they work.

Never give up. Effective special education teachers have dispositions that allow them to succeed—relentlessly, reflectively, and resourcefully working to support students' learning (Bishop et al., 2010). Even though they realize that students may have many significant learning issues and, sometimes, insufficient resources at home, effective special educators are relentless; they still believe that there is a strategy or strategies that they can try to help their students learn (Bishop et al., 2010; Seo et al., 2008). During an interview, one effective special education teacher shared how she noticed that students were often burdened by frustration they experienced outside school. She realized that her students needed a psychological and emotional outlet to release this stress, to support them in focusing on their reading skills. To support students in dealing with this stress, she created a classwide forum for students to share their concerns, enabling them to better focus on learning. Rather than give up and conclude that this issue was someone else's problem, she demonstrated a relentless drive to address whatever barriers were standing in the way of her students' learning.

Table 2. What Effective Special Educators Should Do

Action	Ask yourself
Provide purposeful instruction	Do I provide purposeful learning opportunities for my students? • Can I clearly articulate the purpose of my lesson and how each activity supports this objective? • Can I explain why the activities occurred in a particular order and how this order supported the objective? • Are students engaged, and do they enjoy in the instructional activities? • Do student data reflect mastery of the content I am teaching?
Use time effectively	Am I using my time with students effectively? • What proportion of my time with students is spent in purposeful instruction, transition, making small talk, organizing materials, or engaging in discipline? • Are my materials organized such that my students and I can easily access them? • Are common tasks routinized in my class?
Provide repeated practice	Do I create sufficient meaningful opportunities for students to master skills? • Do I provide multiple ways for my students to practice new skills? • Do I monitor my students' performance on practice activities and provide explicit feedback about what they have done correctly and incorrectly? • Do I provide opportunities for students to engage in skill maintenance?
Provide explicit skill and strategy instruction	Do I explicitly teach the skills and strategies needed to master new content? • Can I identify the skills and strategies that students need to use to master new content (e.g., a social studies or science lesson)? • Do I explicitly teach and model these skills and strategies, provide students guided practices opportunities with these skills and strategies, and create opportunities for students to independently apply the learned skills and strategies?
Nurture a caring classroom environment	Do I create an environment in which students feel safe and cared for? • Do I treat all of my students with kindness and respect and take time to connect with every student on a personal level? • Do I listen to my students' concerns and address them seriously? • Do I focus on my students' strengths and help them identify their own strengths? • When students are unkind to one another, do I address it effectively? • Do I praise students at least four times for every time that I reprimand them? • Do my students feel comfortable asking for help? • Do students look forward to coming to my class?
Collaborate effectively	Do I work closely with other educators to support my students' learning? • Do I have regularly scheduled meetings with other professionals who support my students' learning (e.g., general educators, paraprofessionals)? • When a colleague is responsible for implementing an aspect of a student's plan, do I ensure that he or she has sufficient training and support to do so? • Do I incorporate feedback from my colleagues and students' parents into my instruction? • Do I work with other educators to ensure that the instruction that students receive is coordinated across all instructional settings?

Carefully analyze practice and student learning. Effective special education teachers are reflective about their instruction and how that instruction is connected to their students' learning needs, always analyzing what they are doing and always thinking about how their instruction could be more effective. Two effective beginning teachers whom we studied captured this when they discussed trying to improve their understanding of students' learning disabilities by attempting "to see learning through their eyes" and identify the "academic triggers" that were leading to behavior difficulties (Bishop et al., 2010, p. 82). In our PD studies, we noticed that the most effective teachers were the most careful critics of their instruction, identifying areas to improve upon and then making changes to their practice based on their analysis (Brownell et al., 2013).

Be innovative. Effective special education teachers are also resourceful, drawing from multiple resources to

Table 3. Dispositions of Effective Special Educators

Disposition	Ask yourself
Persistence	Do I believe that all of my students can excel and that I can teach them to do so? • Do believe that I have the power to ensure that my students are learning well? • When I encounter a barrier to instruction, do I seek a way to remove it? • Do I advocate for my students effectively and relentlessly?
Analytical	Do I analyze and critique my own practice? • Do I think about what went well and what could have gone better every day? • Do I use students' data to determine where my instruction is unsuccessful? • Do I seek opportunities to improve? • Do I seek out feedback on my instruction from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators, and when I receive feedback, do I address it? • Do I celebrate improvement while setting new goals for continued growth?
Innovative	Am I willing to try new ideas? • Do I make use of all the personal, technological, and material resources available to me to support students' learning? • Do I adopt, adapt, or create the materials necessary to support my students' learning?

improve instruction (Bishop et al., 2010). We have found that the teachers are not limited by the materials and procedures that they have been handed; rather, they beg, borrow, and invent resources to most effectively enact new knowledge in the service of their students. Where other teachers might find barriers to implementing new practices, these teachers find solutions, enabling themselves to infuse the content and strategies learned from the PD into their own curriculum.

Become an Independent Professional Learner

The effective special education teachers whom we have met are committed learners (Brownell et al., 2013). They learn about themselves, their practices, and their students. In many ways, they are just like other experts who become highly effective in their professions: They always recognize the need to improve (Mayer, 2009), and they seek out assistance for doing so. Like other experts, they continually strive to go beyond the boundaries of their knowledge, repeatedly and deliberately practicing new ideas and skills to improve their practice and seeking out corrective feedback to grow (Ericsson, 2009). In PD efforts, they are the ones either asking multiple questions about how to implement a strategy or sharing their struggles and asking for feedback. They are quick to recognize their limitations as teachers, and they are willing to do something to remedy those limitations (Brownell et al., 2013). These teachers are knowledge seekers. When learning opportunities come their way, they take advantage, particularly when they can access concrete strategies for improving their practice and when new ideas have evidence behind them. In PD groups, they are often the first to implement a new idea (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006) and return to the group with questions about implementation.

Developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of an effective special educator is not an easy task, but with the right tools, you have the skills to cultivate expertise in these areas independently. Expertise is the result of dedicated commitment toward improvement that can be developed through repeated practice and change in response to feedback (Ericsson, 2009). Based on our experiences with effective special educators, the following sections provide practical tips that special educators can use to cultivate their expertise.

Developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of an effective special educator is not an easy task, but with the right tools, you have the skills to cultivate expertise in these areas independently.

Identify an Area to Target for Growth

The most effective teachers whom we know focus on aspects of their instruction that they want to improve, and they systematically work at developing knowledge and skill in a particular area (Brownell et al., 2013; Lauterbach, 2013). Thus, the first step toward developing your expertise is identifying an area to target for improvement. You may decide to focus on enhancing your understanding of a content area, a specific pedagogical practice, or how your students' disabilities influence their learning and behavior. There are a number of resources available to help you identify an area for improvement. Student data can support you in identifying an area to target for professional growth. For example, if you notice that students are

struggling to comprehend, use assessments or your observations to determine why. Is it that they require more background knowledge? Is it that they do not employ effective comprehension strategies? Are you using texts that are too challenging? Once you understand the problem, then you can start think about how your instruction should improve. One of the effective teachers whom we studied used a simple phonics survey with students, which helped her identify the students' most immediate learning needs and what she could do to address them (Brownell et al., 2013).

Video observations are also a useful way to identify areas of instruction to target for improvement. In another study, teachers who analyzed their teaching through video found that it was an effective tool for fostering change (Osipova, Prichard, Boardman, Kiely, & Carroll, 2011). Although it may be more comfortable to remain focused on your strengths, especially within high-stakes teacher evaluation systems, the best way to improve is to identify and focus on an area of weakness. Keep in mind that teaching is a dynamic, complex task, especially when providing instruction to students with disabilities. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be an expert in every aspect of your job. Even special educators with sophisticated knowledge in one area may find themselves in novel situations, which are made even more challenging by the complexities of making on-the-spot decisions in response to students' needs. Be kind to yourself and allow yourself to be a learner.

What You Can Do

- Begin by analyzing your teaching. Video-record yourself teaching, or ask a competent peer to watch you teach. Analyze specific practices that are indicators of effective special education instruction, such as how explicit your instruction was; whether or not you provided clear, focused, and engaging practice opportunities for students; how students were responding to the instruction; and so on.
- Analyze the daily feedback that your students give you. Assess their learning and evaluate the data. Observe their behavior, their attitudes toward class, and their interactions with one another.
- Consider your comfort level with the subject matter. The depth at which you analyze your knowledge and skills will support you in identifying an area to target for growth.
- Consult your administrator about areas in which you can improve. Use feedback received from your administrator during a formal evaluation as a starting point for identifying an area to target for professional growth.

Build Your Knowledge

Effective special education teachers—and all experts, for that matter—have considerable knowledge at their fingertips, and they can access that knowledge quickly (Feldon, 2007). To become an expert, you have to be relentless in your efforts to develop deeper content knowledge and learn new pedagogical methods for helping students master that content. You have to become a scholar of teaching. In one study, we learned that the most expert secondary special education teachers conceptualized themselves as students of their students (Lauterbach, 2013). Although these teachers possessed in-depth knowledge of their content and their students' learning needs, they never stopped seeking out new knowledge, resources, and strategies so that they could better meet their students' learning needs.

Curriculum can also be a very useful tool for teacher learning, particularly when the curriculum is targeted toward students who struggle. In one study, beginning middle school special education teachers who had access to a more structured literacy curriculum began to see how the features of the curriculum (e.g., direct instruction, repetition) were beneficial to student learning (Kamman, 2009). Over time, these teachers were able to enact these effective practices while teaching, even when not using the curriculum.

Collaboratively planning instruction with peers and then observing their implementation of these plans can also support you in developing well-integrated knowledge of new practices. In our research, we found that upper elementary school teachers who collaboratively planned word study lessons and then observed and analyzed the effectiveness of these lessons as a team deepened their understanding of effective literacy instruction for struggling readers (Benedict, 2012; Benedict, Park, Brownell, Lauterbach, & Kiely, 2013).

Table 4. Web-Based Resources to Support You in Becoming a Scholar of Your Instruction

Resource and address	Why it is useful
Council for Exceptional Children, https://www.cec.sped.org/	Provides access to upcoming professional development, policy briefs, and resources to support teachers in meeting the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Teachers can participate in the CECommunity (http://community.cec.sped.org/Home/), a virtual forum where special educators share ideas, collaborate, and receive support.
Intervention Central, http://www.interventioncentral.org/	Offers support to teachers in selecting interventions based on students' academic and behavioral needs. Free access to many useful reading and math measures provided.
National Center on Response to Intervention, http://www.rti4success.org/	Gives teachers information about resources, progress monitoring tools, and professional learning opportunities regarding intervention in reading, writing, and math for students who struggle.
Reading Rockets, http://www.readingrockets.org/	Designed to support teachers in providing effective literacy instruction to all learners. Resources include access to effective strategy instruction, supporting struggling readers, and much more.
Iris Center–Vanderbilt Peabody College, http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/	Has information and resources on a variety of topics (e.g., disability, accommodations, differentiating instruction, learning strategies) designed for the use of teachers providing instruction to students with disabilities of all age groups.
National Council on Learning Disabilities, http://www.ncld.org/	Provides information to parents and educators about types of learning disabilities, as well as resources to support effective instruction for students with learning disabilities.
Current Practice Alerts–What Works Clearinghouse, http://teachingld.org/alerts	Provides information and resources on effective instructional and cognitive strategies that are established using solid empirical research evidence for teaching students with learning disabilities.

In addition, planning with their peers supported these teachers in integrating new ideas and resources into their everyday instructional repertoire. By growing your knowledge, you can develop the deep understanding of content, pedagogy, and students that you need to effectively meet your students' learning needs.

What You Can Do

- Analyze available curriculum. By analyzing and implementing a strong curriculum, you can learn why content is being taught in a particular way, and you can consider how it might be adapted to help your students.
- Consume the professional literature. Read articles in *TEACHING Exceptional Children* and other teacher-friendly journals that address strategies or ideas that you want to learn more about. Find books that help teachers apply research-based practices in the classroom.
- Many web-based resources can improve your knowledge of how to teach content and manage student behavior. The web-based resources that we have included in Table 4 show the many options available.
- Start a teacher study group, or combine your teacher study group with collaborative planning and peer observation. Learning, planning, and analyzing instruction with other teachers can be a powerful tool if you incorporate information about evidence-based practice into your study sessions.
- Attend PD, or take a class at your local university or online. Select PD sessions or a substantive course that focuses on topics you have targeted for yourself.

Practice, Practice, and Practice!

Becoming an expert special education teacher takes time. Research shows that the development of professional expertise requires hundreds and thousands of hours of practice with feedback for a period of 10 or more years (Ericsson, 2006). Extended practice allows special educators to learn how to apply newly acquired knowledge in their classrooms and develop automaticity with instructional routines, freeing up working memory so that they can be more strategic in solving problems and responding to students' immediate needs (Feldon, 2007).

Through our PD research, we have learned that mastering effective teaching practices takes time, even for the most

experienced teachers. This means that to make the most powerful improvements in instruction, special educators must continually integrate new knowledge or skills into their instruction. In one of our studies (Benedict, Brownell, Bettini, Lauterbach, & Park, 2013), we learned that teachers who most effectively integrated the knowledge and skills from a PD also had students who talked about their learning experiences in the most sophisticated ways. Some of the students' talk was so closely aligned with our PD content that it seemed as if the students themselves had participated in the PD alongside their teachers! We interpreted this close alignment between the teachers' instructional practices and the students' talk about their learning to be evidence that these teachers were making authentic and consistent efforts to integrate the knowledge and skills that they acquired from our PD into their instructional repertoire—even on days that we were not present to formally observe (Benedict, Park, et al., 2013). Making time to practice will provide you opportunities to strengthen your knowledge and skills and will boost your confidence, better enabling you to best meet your students' learning needs. Also, the more you consistently implement a practice, the more opportunities you have to learn it, improving students' learning as well.

What You Can Do

- Rather than expecting to integrate new practices or ideas easily within your instruction, realize that it will take time to feel comfortable implementing the new skill with effectiveness. Keep in mind that after attending a training on a new curriculum or after learning a new skill or strategy, your first attempts to implement it may not go so smoothly.
- Stick with it! Despite the initial challenges that you may experience, you should not abandon the practice, nor should you forge ahead blindly. Instead, continue to integrate the skill within your instructional routine while seeking feedback and problem-solving support to improve your effectiveness with the practice.
- When possible, practice your new strategies before you use them with students. You can do this by practicing with colleagues or mentally rehearsing the strategies while you develop a very thorough lesson plan.

Seek Feedback and Problem-Solving Support

Simply having opportunities to practice new instructional routines and strategies will not help you to acquire the well-integrated knowledge that effective special educators have. Both the quality and the quantity of practice is essential for developing expertise (Guest, Regehr, & Tiberius, 2001). Expertise is acquired through focused, sustained practice, coupled with problem-solving support and corrective feedback. The most useful feedback is specific, detailed, and focused on what went well as well as what could be improved (Thurlings, Vermeulen, Kreijns, Bastiaens, & Stijnen, 2012).

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When a new skill is being implemented, feedback is helpful in ensuring that the new skill is utilized effectively. Just as students are a valuable source of information when one is selecting an area to target for growth, students can also provide feedback about the implementation of new practices. They can provide information about how they feel a new instructional routine helped them or whether or not they understood a new idea. For this reason, it is important to closely examine students' data. If an instructional practice is supposed to improve students' ability to do a task (e.g., read more fluently), then collecting data on the development of students' oral reading and examining students' struggles can provide insights into aspects of instruction that can be improved.

Other teachers can also help you to implement the practice effectively. In our PD research, we learned that teachers who received problem-solving support through coaching, teacher learning teams, or other forums for collaborative planning and observation were able to make the greatest changes to their instructional practices (e.g., Benedict, 2012; Benedict, Brownell, et al., 2013; Brownell et al., 2007). However, not all teachers have access to these structures for problem-solving support; therefore, they must seek it out independently. Feedback—whether it comes from students, data, colleagues, or yourself—can allow you to continually refine your new knowledge and your capacity to be responsive to student needs.

What You Can Do

- Pay attention to your students' responses to the instruction and to their data. If they are not responding as expected, use your observations to consider in what ways you may improve the practice that you are implementing, and make changes accordingly.
- Seek an expert colleague to observe while you implement new knowledge, and ask for advice in how to improve. Alternatively, work with a group of teachers to implement new knowledge, and collaboratively discuss the barriers and successes that you encounter.
- Get the right kind of feedback. If the feedback that you receive is not detailed and focused on both strengths and weaknesses, explain what you need from the person giving you the feedback, or seek another source of feedback.
- Reflect on videos of your instruction. This may be especially useful if you use a rubric to assess your success. As you reflect on your implementation, consider how your actions align with what you know about the practice and why it is supposed to be effective.

Final Thoughts

It takes work, motivation, and access to knowledge to improve one's practice. Not all special education teachers have access to the same professional learning

opportunities, and it is important to recognize that not every teacher is in the same position to learn new ideas. For instance, beginning teachers may be trying to enhance their professional skills while struggling with other issues, such as how to balance the many demands of their job. If you are overwhelmed with new knowledge, it helps to focus on implementing one idea at a time. Try to implement ideas that are less challenging at first. If you experience success initially, you will be more encouraged to try other new ideas. Also, set aside time to learn and reflect on your practice. Every teacher can get caught up in the daily grind of the job, but taking time to read professional literature and talk with colleagues can aid you in achieving your professional learning goals and renewing your enthusiasm for this important work. Be patient with your learning. Keep in mind that with sustained, deliberate practice and feedback, every special education teacher has the capacity to develop his or her personal expertise. Although the process of becoming an expert is time-consuming, commitment to this process can enable special educators to take charge of their professional learning experiences and make the job of teaching students with disabilities a rewarding one. This type of commitment, coupled with a sensation of joy and motivation to engage in this type of work, can support you in a career of lifelong learning as you develop your expertise for teaching students with disabilities.

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