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Zeroing in on Providing Student Feedback as a Core Practice: A Study of its Potential Impact on Special Education Teacher Candidates

Xiuwen Wu, Kate Zilla, Kathy Kotel, and Diane Salmon

Abstract

Twenty-two high leverage practices (HLPs) specific to special educators have been identified by CEEDAR/CEC. We surveyed multiple stakeholders to determine which HLPs were most critical for preservice teachers to learn. Findings indicated overlap among stakeholders. The two most consistently endorsed HLPs were collaboration among professionals and establishing the learning environment.

Project Overview

Core practices are defined as “identifiable components (fundamental to teaching and grounded in disciplinary goals) that teachers enact to support learning. Core practices consist of research-based strategies, routines, and moves that can be unpacked and learned by teachers” (Grossman, 2018, p. 4) and occur with high frequency in teaching.

Feedback has been identified as a high-leverage practice by Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) (<https://highleveragepractices.org/>) and Collaboration for Effective Educator, Development, Accountability, and Reform Center (CEEDAR) :

The purpose of feedback is to guide student learning and behavior and increase student motivation, engagement, and independence, leading to improved student learning and behavior. ... Feedback may be verbal, nonverbal, or written, and should be timely, contingent, genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and at rates commensurate with task and phase of learning (i.e., acquisition, fluency, maintenance). Teachers should provide ongoing feedback until learners reach their established learning goals (McLeskey, Barringer, Billingsley, Brownell, Jackson, Kennedy, Lewis, Maheady, Rodriguez, Scheeler, Winn, & Ziegler, 2017, p.21).

Providing effective feedback, particularly immediate, positive and/or corrective feedback, is a research-based practice that helps ensure high rates of success for students who are at risk, including those who have disabilities (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). For all special education teachers, being able to provide positive and corrective feedback is an evidence-based practice that is critical for exerting a powerful influence on student success (Hattie, 2008; O'Brien, Cumming, & Bettini, 2018).

Providing effective feedback is also the foundation of formative assessment (Brookhart & Lazarus, 2017). With appropriate feedback, students are provided with useful information about where they are going, how they are going, and where to next (O'Brien, Cumming, & Bettini, 2018).

Therefore, it is essential that teacher candidates gain the knowledge in providing effective feedback in the teacher education program. They need to build their skills in providing feedback through approximations of this practice as well as specific feedback from preparation program instructors and supervisors on their performances (Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009; Lane, 2014).

Research Questions

This faculty research residency project aims to address the ultimate question of how to implement a practice-based teaching model (PBT) in the special education teacher preparation curriculum through a pilot implementation of the feedback core practice in the coursework. For this project, we sought to address the following questions:

1. In order for our SPE MAT teacher candidates and recent graduates to become successful as first year teachers, which High Leverage Practices (HLPs) are most important to master by completion of their SPE Master of Arts program, from the perspectives of a Community of Special Educators?
2. How do our teacher candidates perceive the benefits and/or challenges of instructional and coaching activities related to learning the HLP of Providing Effective Feedback (HLP22)?

Participants

The project involved a community of special educators, including current teacher candidates enrolled in Practicum II and student teaching, SPE current and emeriti faculty, adjuncts, university supervisors, cooperating teachers, hiring administrators, alumni (within the past two years). These related groups combine to provide critical information and insight on key special education HLPs and focused training on one HLP - Providing Effective Feedback - as positioned in selective university coursework, i.e., through learning about and practicing giving feedback in a math methods course and video annotation and other activities particularly in SPE 576 Practicum II.

Data Collection and Analysis

Questions	Data Source
RQ1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Leverage Practices Survey
RQ2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Survey on Feedback (Math methods course Fall 2019) • Student Survey on Feedback (Advanced Practicum Course (winter 2020) • Student Teaching Exit Survey (spring 2020)

RQ1. The High Leverage Practices Survey targeted four groups of special educators: 1) the special education alumni in the past two years at the time of the study, 2) faculty and field supervisors, 3) cooperating teachers, and 4) administrators. The survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to explore feedback from the wider community of special education educators and to discern how different groups participating in the survey offered perspectives regarding the importance of specific high leverage practices.

RQ2. Course survey data was collected to investigate the teacher candidates' perceptions of the benefits and/or challenges of instructional and coaching activities related to learning the HLP of Providing Effective Feedback. The surveys were administered in the three consecutive courses that these candidates took during this project: math methods course, advanced practicum course, and student teaching seminar.

Besides the descriptive data, the surveys also provided us with valuable qualitative data which was read repeatedly and analyzed for themes and patterns regarding the HLPs in general and feedback practice in particular.

Findings

The HLP survey

In this 2019-2020 FRR project, we designed and conducted a High-Leverage Practices Survey involving thirty-nine special educators that represented various roles including administrators, cooperating teachers, recent alumni, supervisors, and university faculty.

For each of the following 22 HLPs from the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) & CEEDAR, the respondents are asked to rate how important each of the HLPs is for special education teachers just entering the field after initial preparation. Please rate each HLP on a scale of 1-6 (1 being not important, 6 being highly important). You can find out the details of the HLPs by opening this link:

<http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CEC-HLP-Web.pdf>

Results showed that respondents in all roles valued most of the HLPs highly. In particular. Most perceived the provision of effective feedback as very critical for first year teachers. However, an interesting and related finding is that for the alumni and cooperating teachers, the practice of giving effective feedback did not make it into one of their top five most important HLPs for beginning special education teachers. None of the four groups of survey respondents chose HLP 5 (Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders) and HLP 19 (Use assistive and instructional technologies) as their top five HLPs.

Table 1

Four Categories of High-Leverage Practices (HLPs)

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

For all the twenty-two HLPs, the survey participants were asked to rate how important each of the HLPs is for special education teachers just entering the field after initial preparation on a scale of 1-6 (1 being not important, 6 being highly important). The chart below revealed the pattern of ratings provided by thirty-nine respondents, which suggests an overall high rating (scores of 4, 5, and 6) given to all the HLPs.

HLPs Ratings by All Respondents

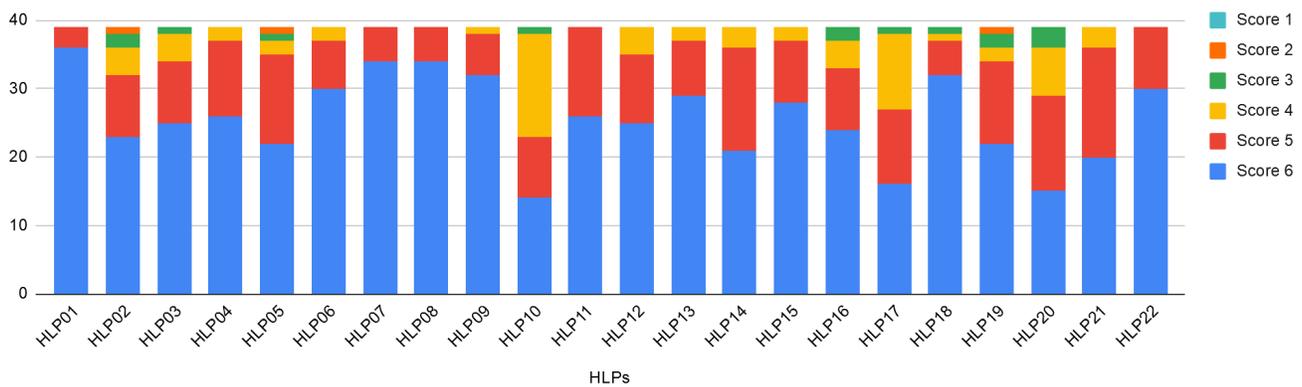


Figure 1
HLPs Receiving High Ratings

We can further examine this data by focusing on the total number of respondents who gave the highest scores of 5 and 6 to the HLPs, which led to the top five HLPs: 1, 7, 8, 11, and 22, corresponding to the following five practices:

- Collaborate with professionals to increase student success (HLP1);
- Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment (HLP7);
- Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior (HLP8);
- Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals (HLP11);
- Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior (HLP22).

HLP1 belongs to the Collaboration category in the set of 22 HLPs. HLPs 7 and 8 are grouped under the Social/Emotional/Behavioral category. HLPs 11 and 22 are practices under Instruction.

On the survey, we included a question asking the respondents to type in their top five HLPs that beginning teachers should know and effectively implement in order to be successful first-year teachers. The chart below shows the results of the choices.

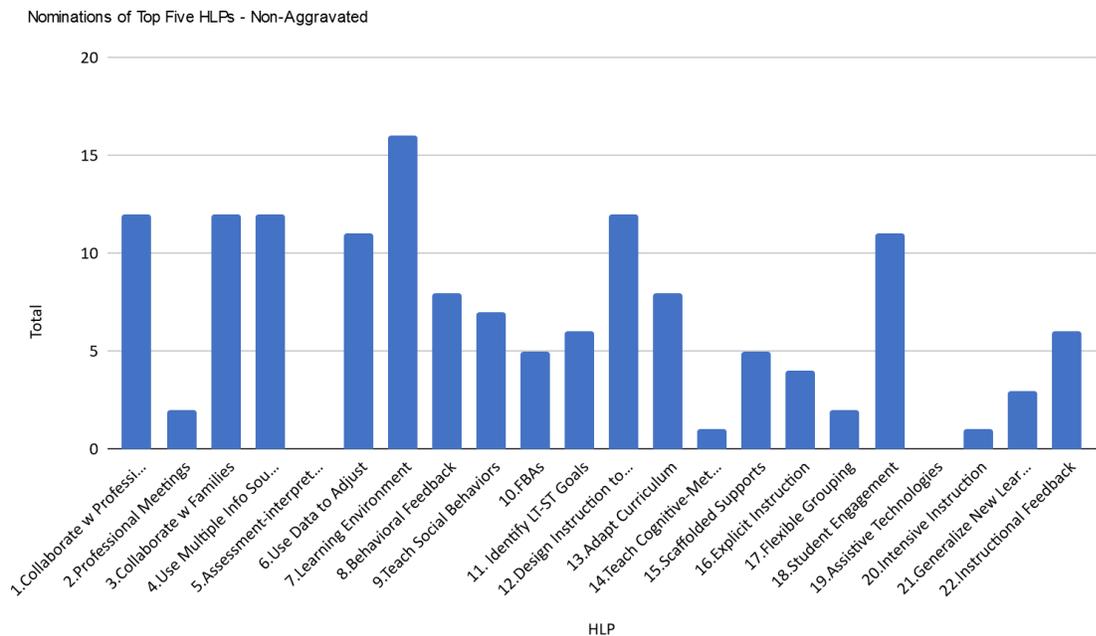


Figure 2
Selection of Top Five HLPs

Table 2 further organizes the above data by grouping the HLPs into three categories according to the number of nominations they made into the top five HLPs based on the respondents' choices.

Table 2
Respondents' Selections of Top Five HLPs

Importance	Nominations by respondents	Selected HLPs
High	Above 11 nominations (33%)	1, 3, 4, 7, 12
Medium	6 - 11 nominations (15-33%)	6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 18, 22
Low	0 - 5 nominations (15%)	2, 5, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21

As mentioned earlier in the report, we designed two questions in the survey pertaining to the respondents' perceptions of the importance of the HLPs. The first question invited the respondents to judge the importance of each one of the 22 HLPs is for special education teachers just entering the field after initial preparation by rating them on a

scale of 1-6 (1 being not important, 6 being highly important). The result indicated that the highest scores fell upon the following five practices: HLPs 1, 7, 8, 11, and 22.

The second question is an open-ended question allowing the respondents to choose the top five HLPs that “beginning teachers should know and effectively implement in order to be successful first-year teachers.” The top HLPs generated by this question are: HLPs 1, 3, 4, 7, and 12. The combined results revealed two commonalities: HLP 1 “Collaborate with professionals to increase student success”, and HLP 7 “Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment”.

Although HLPs 8, 11, and 12 did not make into the high-importance group, when taking into consideration the medium importance category, we can see that HLPs 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 18, 22 received 6 to 11 nominations as their top five HLPs, accounting for about 15-33% of the respondents’ choices.

The Math Methods Course

The great majority of the teacher candidates who received feedback-related training in the math methods course agreed that the course had been very helpful for them to learn about effective teacher feedback in math instruction, develop a clear understanding, and become intentional with use of instructional feedback. Over 77.8% of the candidates in one cohort and 87.9% in the other said that they felt more prepared for the feedback-related part of the edTPA assessment.

Prompts pertaining to feedback were intentionally embedded into the various course assignments, including math lesson observation, video analysis, and math lesson plan and micro-teaching projects.

The lesson observations provided the candidates with authentic representations of effective use of different types of feedback in a variety of real classroom settings where students with both high- and low-incidence disabilities were educated.

The candidates reported in their reflective narratives TCs’ narratives their observations and critiques of the function of teacher feedback, students’ responses to teacher feedback, feedback strategies, opportunities for students to use feedback, and etc.

The lesson plans and commentaries with feedback prompts also enabled the candidates to provide constructive feedback for one another, including their use of feedback during micro-teaching. Data analysis of the peer feedback revealed the following six categories: Materials and Resources; Accommodations/Adaptations, Instructional Strategies, Explanation of Content/Communication/Pacing; Student Engagement and UDL, and Feedback Use.

Two figures (Figure 3 and 4) illustrate the candidates’ ratings of the feedback-related class activities in two cohorts.

Usefulness of Feedback Activities

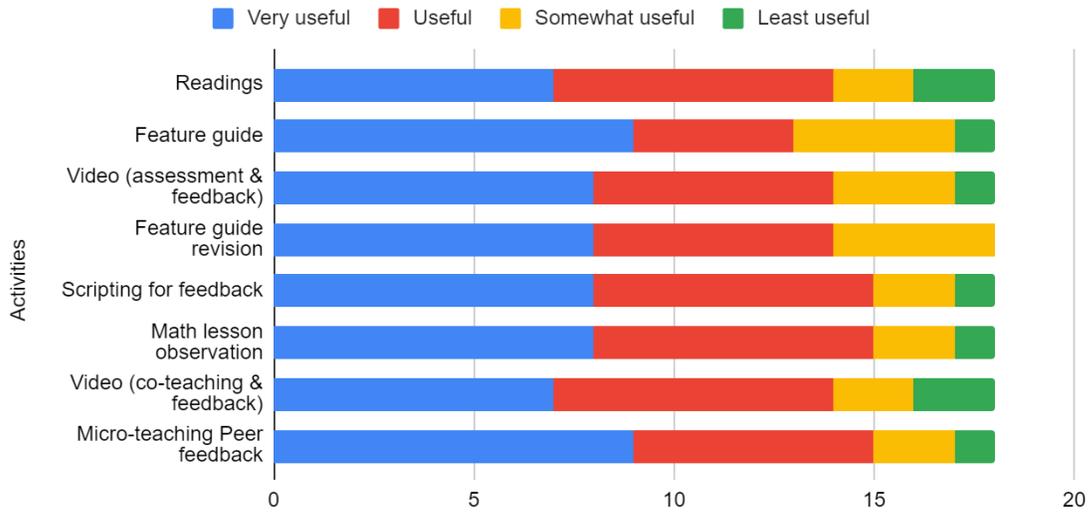


Figure 3
Cohort 1 Usefulness of Feedback Related Activities

Usefulness of Feedback Activities

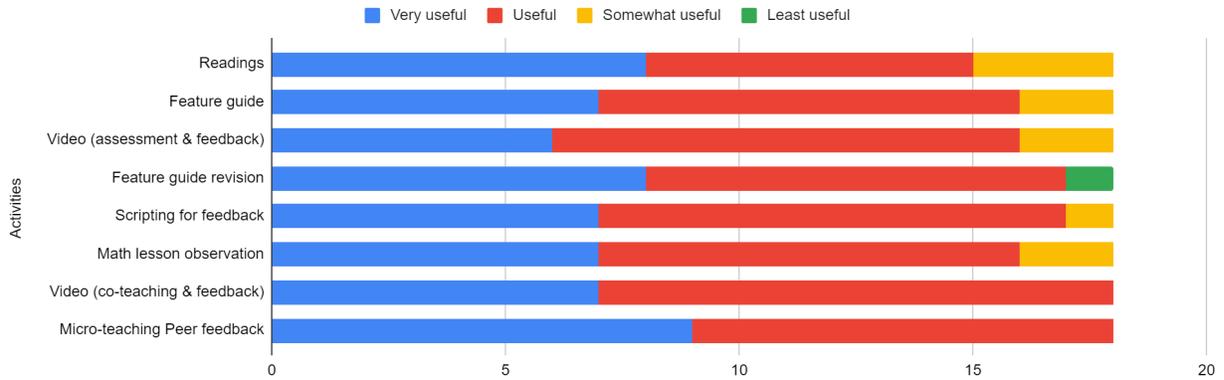


Figure 4
Cohort 2 Usefulness of Feedback Related Activities

Practicum II

After the special education candidates took the math methods course, they moved into the practicum II course, which had a 20-hour practicum requirement. In this course, one of the project members Kathy, who taught this course, incorporated opportunities to further their study related to the HLP of providing effective feedback. Besides readings on this topic, Kathy elicited the candidates' opinions on what they felt they could benefit from in this course, after having had the opportunities to learn and practice giving feedback in the math methods course in the previous quarter. Based on the needs analysis, Kathy created a mini-lesson assignment, in which the candidates planned mini-lessons, taught the lessons to their peers in small groups, watched the lessons that were videotaped, and reflected on the mini lessons and peer feedback.

In addition, two other major assignments were built in this course to help the candidates be more familiar and comfortable with planning for and implementing feedback in lessons. These activities included: video annotations with coach/supervisor feedback and unit planning.

The chart in Figure 4 illustrates the teacher candidates' perceptions about the usefulness of these activities in response to the multiple choice survey question "I have benefited from the following activities related to feedback in this course (please choose all that apply and rank the usefulness of these activities from very useful to least useful).

The activities being rated are: Readings; Feature guide on feedback; Videos; Mini Lesson: Practice providing feedback in a mini lesson prior to the video annotation assignment; Peer Feedback: Feedback from peers about the feedback you provided in your mini lesson implementation; Video Annotation Assignment: Practice teaching the lesson and providing student feedback; Video Annotation Assignment: Reflective bubbles; Video Annotation Assignment: Feedback provided to you by your supervisor in Livetext; Plans for Providing Feedback Lesson Plan Component.

I have benefited from the following activities related to feedback in this course (please choose all that apply and rank the usefulness of these activities from very useful to least useful):

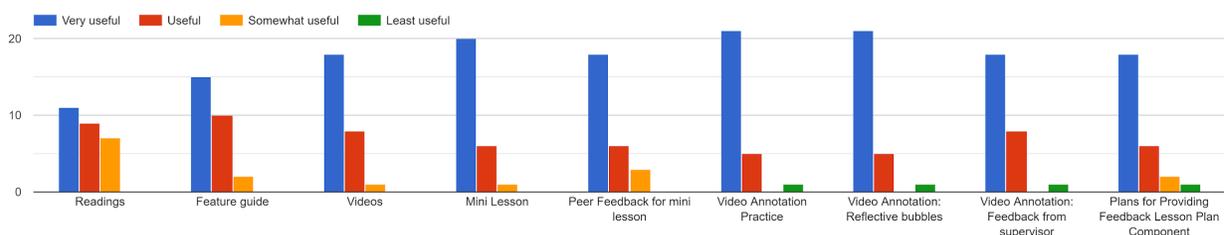


Figure 4

Advanced Practicum: Candidates' Rating of Usefulness of Feedback Activities

As seen from the chart, the candidates deemed the different elements of the video annotation project and mini lesson practices most useful, followed by Plans for Providing Feedback Lesson Plan Component. More candidates thought the videos and feature guide on feedback were more useful than the readings. All of these materials played a role in representing the practice of giving effective feedback to the candidates in the course. But it seemed that they valued more the opportunities for approximations of the practice of giving feedback, through teaching to peers in a mini lesson assignment, or practicing teaching a family member outside of the university class through the Video Annotation project. Last, but not least, the candidates, just as they did in the math methods course, benefited from learning from the feedback provided by their supervisors and peers on how to give effective feedback in the practice exercises.

Finally, the survey asked for constructive feedback related to the training on how to give effective teacher feedback in this course or the entire program. Ideas we collected from the survey touched upon the need for more modeling, guided practice, and approximations of practice, as can be seen from some of the comments below:

- The need to create more opportunities for more practice with feedback as a class
- More practice with sample lessons within the class
- I think it would have been nice to also have a sheet filled with verbiage for feedback
- Introduce feedback earlier in the program
- Exploring what specific feedback looks like in different settings

Student Teaching

Our project also covered the student teaching seminar that took place in the quarter after the practicum II. The candidates involved in the project were in for a special student teaching that happened during a pandemic. Many of them were thrown into remote learning, along with other school staff, after only two or three weeks of face to face contact with their students. At the end of their student teaching, an exit survey was administered to the same groups of candidates, including the two groups who took the math methods course with one of the authors and practicum II with another.

Several open-ended questions were posed to the student teachers about their perceptions of feedback as a practice, recognizing the many changes caused by COVID-19: The questions were: 1) There has been a focus on feedback in math methods and the advanced practicum course. Now that you have experienced student teaching in COVID-19, have you had opportunities to provide feedback to your students, and if so, how? 2) What did you find challenging? What surprised you? 3) In what ways did the students respond to your feedback?

During student teaching in this special period, the teacher candidates reported a variety of experiences concerning opportunities to provide feedback to students. A salient theme in their reported experience is the use of various technologies to support their

practice with giving feedback. Some of the technologies mentioned were online platforms provided by the school districts to support remote learning, such as Google Classroom, Google Meets, Zoom, Schoology, Class Dojo, and Seesaw. Other technologies included programs the candidates either learned within the Special Education program or tools to foster different ways to deliver instruction, which they were already familiar with through work, such as Padlet, Pear Deck, NearPod, Class Dojo, Flipgrid, etc.

The student teaching experience gave the candidates a rich testing ground for providing feedback to their students in e-learning environments. The experience was a mixture of great opportunities for feedback enhanced by technologies and a general lack of student participation and response to feedback in these settings. In spite of all the constraints caused by the pandemic, the candidates reported practicing using various types of feedback that they had learned through the courses mentioned in the project.

They also provided the following suggestions related to feedback training based on their student teaching experience:

- Stress feedback earlier in the program and then show students how they have been growing in this skill as they go through the program
- More practice with different feedback strategies
- Provide more in-class opportunities to practice giving feedback.
- Do more mini video recordings of giving feedback to allow candidates to see themselves grow and get more experience giving feedback

Discussions and Implications

The primary purpose of this FRR project is to identify needs and ways to innovate the Master's in Teaching (MAT) in Special Education Program through a practice-based teacher education model. The focal research questions were as follows: 1) In order for our teacher candidates and recent graduates to become successful as first year teachers, which High Leverage Practices (HLPs) are most important to master by completion of their SPE Master of Arts program, from the perspectives of a Community of Special Educators? 2) How do our teacher candidates perceive the benefits and/or challenges of instructional and coaching activities related to learning the HLP of Providing Effective Feedback (HLP22)?

The results of the project have significant implications for practice-based teaching in general and incorporation of the HLP of providing effective feedback in particular. The survey we administered to our community of special educators indicated that all of the HLPs for special educators were considered important, as indicated by the majority of ratings leaning towards 5 and 6, on a scale of 1-6. This could be interpreted in two ways. First, the scale we used might not be the best way to rate the importance of the HLPs. Second, the respondents truly believed all HLPs to be important for beginning special education teachers to learn and be ready to implement upon entering the field after initial preparation.

Still, the aggregate data revealed the top five HLPs that received the highest scores on the scale of importance: HLPs 1, 7, 8, 11, and 22. HLP 22 is the practice of providing effective feedback, part of what our project and program focus on as we explore ways to implement the PBT model. It is somewhat surprising to us that the survey HLP1 (Collaborate with professionals to increase student success) and HLP7 (Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment) surfaced again in the top five HLPs in the question that asked the respondents to choose their top five HLPs from the set of 22 HLPs.

We did not anticipate that they placed such a great emphasis on beginning teachers' preparation in the area of collaborating with professionals and establishing conducive learning environments. Although HLP 22 did not make into the top five HLPs chosen by the respondents, it did end up in the medium-important category based on the number of times it was nominated by the respondents. We surmised two reasons that providing effective feedback was not selected as top five HLPs, but was one of the five HLPs that obtained the highest importance rating. First, feedback practice can be an integral part of every single instructional activity subsumed under each of the four categories of HLPs: Collaboration, Assessment, Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices, and Instruction. Therefore, it is easy for special educators to consider it as a given, resulting in it not being chosen as the top five. If it is like oxygen we breathe and take for granted, we tend to ignore it unless we are short of it. But feedback, if it is ubiquitous, people may assume it is highly important and not pick it in the survey. Second, we thought the respondents might have chosen practices based on their unique experiences, which we could not easily analyze based on the survey we designed and the data we subsequently collected.

The second research question sought to examine how feedback practice can be embedded in several courses according to the PBT model. We learned that technology, in this COVID-19 era, can play a significant role in leveraging the field to enable equitable and quality access to learning in remote learning settings. The course survey data showed that the candidates benefited from using technologies to support their feedback practice, including differentiated feedback, in the field. It would benefit future teacher candidates to be provided training in how to use an assortment of technologies to provide students with timely, specific, positive, and quality feedback for remote learning.

Additionally, the results suggest that we need to prepare candidates through a variety of representations of practice. One way is to provide plenty of videos as models of practice. The models should have rich information on the contexts of learning, including information on students, focus learners, classroom setting, and the lessons presented in the videos. Another viable way is to gain access to simulations of classroom teaching via technologies such as TeachLive.

This project will be a valuable contribution to the ongoing NCE-wide professional dialogue and innovative curricular reform revolving around the PBT approach of teacher education. The project comes at a perfect time when all teacher preparation programs work as a collective to develop a set of core practices that can be implemented across programs within the college.

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