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Using CEC High Leverage Practices to Prepare Teacher Candidates to Meet Individual Student Learning Needs

Abstract

Whether instruction is happening in traditional classroom settings or through a variety of virtual platforms, successful teaching requires that all teachers possess the ability to collaborate with others, evaluate student performance, establish quality learning environments, and individualize instruction. Drawing on the 2017 Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) publication, *High-Leverage Practices for K-12 Special Education Teachers* (McLeskey et al., 2017), the Special Education faculty at Eastern Kentucky University describe ways in which four intertwined components of collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral practices, and instruction are incorporated into teacher preparation courses to equip candidates with skills to meet the individualized learning needs of their future students.

Keywords

HLPs, CEC High Leverage Practices, Differentiated Instruction, Teacher Preparation Programs

The publication, *High-Leverage Practices for K-12 Special Education Teachers* (McLeskey et al., 2017), represents the culmination of a project by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) with the goal of identifying methods for supporting special education teacher candidates as they learn to apply effective practices in their classrooms. High Leverage Practices (HLPs) consist of four components of teaching (collaboration, assessment, social-emotional-behavioral practices, and instruction). Within these components are specific HLP practices that teachers can implement to maximize the effect of instruction. While originally designed for teacher candidates in the field of special education, current data and the variety of academic platforms through which instruction is currently provided has made it apparent that the four main components of practice are applicable for *all* teacher candidates, not merely those in the field of special education. Classrooms across all ages and formats are becoming more and more diverse, thus the need for all teachers to individualize and differentiate instruction is greater than ever. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), during the 2019-20 academic year 14% of all public-school students received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Furthermore, 65% of all students ages 6 - 21 receiving services under IDEA spent 80% or more of their school day in general education classes.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic launched the field of education into an era of new and often unconventional ways of teaching and learning. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), 93% of households with school age children participated in some form of distance learning during the pandemic (McElrath, 2021). However, the format of distance learning has varied greatly by income level. As McElrath (2021) explains, families in higher income brackets have been able to support the use of online resources while use of physical print items is significantly more common for children from families in lower-income households. Effects of this resulting “digital inequality” are likely to manifest themselves as students and teachers resume face-to-face instruction, thus requiring teacher candidates to acquire skills grounded in these HLPs in order to support the individual learning needs of all students. The following sections describe how faculty at one regional teacher preparation program incorporated one HLP from each of the four main components of practice into their courses to ensure that all teacher candidates are prepared to become highly effective teachers.

Components of Practice

HLP1: Collaborate with Professionals to Increase Student Success

Although there are several HLP practices within collaboration, the focus of this section is on collaboration with individuals and teams (e.g., families, caregivers, support personnel, etc.) and how to prepare candidates in teacher preparation programs to collaborate with these individuals. Recent circumstances have required collaborating in family living rooms, workspaces, and various non-traditional locations with adults experiencing heightened stress levels related to COVID-19, resulting in behaviors and attitudes which may be challenging. In the past, the focus of teacher preparation programs has been on pedagogy, but now faculty find themselves working with and through these adult learners which creates a need to understand andragogy (Anderson & Boutelier, 2021). Andragogy, or the practice of teaching adult learners, requires an understanding of the Adult Learning Theory and specifically, how we apply this theory to practice.

Adult learning theory, designed to better understand the education of adults was first introduced by Malcolm Knowles in the 1970's and is based on the following assumptions: adults are self-directed learners, life experience and knowledge contributes to adult learning, adults learn when they perceive a need to know something, and learning must be relevant (Knowles, 1984). But learning about the life experiences and needs of other adults in professional circumstances poses additional challenges. Therefore, the use of meaningful activities that address such challenges is essential.

One activity to support teacher candidates' understanding of the adults with whom they are now collaborating is to consider what is "Beneath the Surface" using the image of an iceberg (Facing History and Ourselves, 2021). By providing a vignette or case story related to collaborating with adults in our field, teacher candidates can learn to identify behaviors and attitudes of adults and place those on the tip of the iceberg. Participants may then brainstorm or discuss what might be driving specific behaviors and attitudes. Factors that drive and influence behaviors and attitudes often lie hidden beneath the surface (i.e., time management or stress related to working from home while simultaneously caring for children). As with the hidden part of the iceberg, these factors may not be visible, yet they can be immense. With further discussion, this activity provides awareness and an immediately useful tool to implement for understanding and collaborating with families and support personnel.

HLP 4: Use Multiple Sources of Information to Develop a Comprehensive Understanding of a Student's Strengths and Needs.

The second component of practice is related to Assessment. High Leverage Practice 4 states that effective teachers must demonstrate the ability to determine the strengths and needs of each student by gathering information from a variety of sources. An important first step in the information-gathering process is for teachers to get to know their students and families. By gathering information about student backgrounds, culture, language, interests, and motivations, teachers can identify possible barriers to learning. Getting to know the language of students also includes determining language-based abilities such as reading and writing skills as well as skills and personality traits that relate to participating and answering questions in class. In order for teacher candidates to learn how to truly get to know their students, they must experience strategies firsthand. By engaging with students on the first day of class, instructors in teacher preparation courses can model ways to build relationships with students, a practice which has been shown to positively impact student learning (Roberto, 2019). Examples of "getting-to-know-you" activities include inviting teacher candidates to share their favorite hobbies or interesting facts with the class or with the instructor through the use of index cards, Google Forms, or any variety of video platforms. No matter what strategy is used, the purpose of such activities must be explicitly stated to ensure that teacher candidates are ready to carry this over to their own classrooms.

Another means by which teachers learn about student strengths and needs is through classroom or formative assessments. Unlike typical weekly or monthly tests, or even high stakes exams which are summative in nature, formative assessments are **non-graded**, planned, ongoing activities. Formative assessments are used by students **and** teachers during learning and teaching to improve instruction and outcomes (FAST SCASS, 2018). Formative assessments provide ongoing information about student learning so teachers can decide what changes need to be made in real time, while simultaneously allowing students to monitor their own learning. Teacher observation and classroom discussion are examples of formative assessment and provide opportunities to monitor learning as it is happening (Boston, 2002). By using formative assessments, teachers are able to understand, predict, and recognize student errors and misconceptions and provide the support needed for students to become more self-directed learners. This is in sharp contrast to the practice of distributing exit slips at the end of a class period to determine what was or was not learned. Once class is over, teachers have missed the invaluable opportunity to address misconceptions and ensure understanding. Formative assessments can be modeled in teacher preparation courses with activities such as think-pair-share, low stakes quizzes, simple

thumbs-up or thumbs-down gestures, the use of sticky notes on Jamboard activities, or voting on possible answers to a question, just to name a few (Boston, 2002). These types of activities make the teacher and student partners in teaching and learning through the process of continual redesign, evaluation, and revision of instruction.

HLP 7: Establish a Consistent, Organized and Respectful Environment

Social/Emotional/Behavioral is the third important component of practice outlined in the HLPs. COVID - 19 has created unexpected complexities and challenges but has also offered opportunities to develop unique learning environments that establish mutual respect and continue to embrace diversity (e.g., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021, Kentucky Board of Education, 2021). Engaging in mutually respectful relationships begins with teacher behavior that promotes predictability, reliability, and cultural responsiveness across various settings. Teacher candidates should gain experience with establishing a classroom climate that is positive, supportive, and engaging (Council of Chief State School Officers, [CCSSO], 2018). Faculty can model examples of classroom structure by affording opportunities for students to share their own life experiences, establishing consistent content delivery, and maintaining predictable due dates. Routines help to build trust and reciprocity within the classroom environment. By developing clear, simple expectations that are easily accessible, students can devote less effort to interpreting teacher expectations, thus increasing positive outcomes. Routines and expectations should be visually represented throughout the day; such accommodations help address potential challenges in learning and language deficits. Whether posted on a bulletin board or on a virtual screen, visual prompts help students to feel comfortable with common expectations.

Furthermore, timely communication using various modes including verbal, visual, and written methods with both students and family members helps to reinforce expectations and build relationships. Communication methods extend beyond notes, e-mails, and phone calls. Programs such as Class Dojo, Remind, and other broadcast messaging services can be helpful. It is important for teacher candidates to be aware that not all families have access to the internet, cell phones, or even a consistent home address. Families may rely on messaging services such as Whatsapp and Facebook messenger which do not require a phone number and can be monitored periodically. Teacher candidates can learn to work together with *their* students to develop a class-wide Google Doc that includes classroom expectations, important announcements, and a detailed communication plan. Modes of communication can be complex. Providing clear

instructions for technology use should be a critical part of the communication plan.

HLP 17: Use Flexible Grouping

The final component of practice relates to instruction. High Leverage Practice 17 focuses on the use of flexible grouping as an effective instructional practice. There are four types of flexible grouping:

1. Whole class grouping is demonstrated when all students within the classroom serve as a single group.
2. Homogeneous grouping occurs by placing students in groups based on similar abilities, knowledge levels, performance level, and/or characteristics.
3. Heterogeneous grouping divides students into groups based on differences in abilities, knowledge levels, performance level, and/or characteristics.
4. Individualized grouping is characterized by students working independently.

It is critical for teacher candidates to be skilled in the various types of grouping as they accommodate learning differences, promote in-depth academic-related interactions, and teach students to work collaboratively. Teacher preparation faculty can facilitate the development of this skill through modeling each grouping type and allowing teacher candidates opportunities to practice grouping implementation. When modeling the use of grouping in the higher education classroom, access to classroom data and various group activities are required. In order to construct meaningful groupings, instructors can gather and deidentify classroom data, such as major, assignment/test/quiz performance, and/or surveys in which teacher candidates rate their level of knowledge or comfort with content. This will allow teacher candidates to become comfortable with classroom data, as well as using this data to place students in different types of groups. Flexible grouping is just one hallmark of universal design for learning (CAST, 2018). By incorporating groupings into higher education classrooms with opportunities to practice implementing flexible grouping, faculty support teacher candidates' skills in building inclusive and differentiated classrooms.

Conclusion

Teacher preparation programs must ensure that all candidates, not just those in special education, are prepared to meet the individual educational needs of all

students. Specifically, teacher candidates need to be prepared for a variety of instructional and learning environments, increases in student diversity, and ever-changing technology. High quality teacher preparation programs that use intentional planning and explicit instruction, create opportunities to 1) identify effective strategies for collaboration with colleagues, families, and students; 2) understand multiple sources of data for determining strengths and weaknesses; 3) build mutually respectful relationships within a classroom; and 4) design effective grouping strategies to promote equal access and quality learning outcomes for all students. Teacher candidates that are provided with such authentic opportunities to observe and implement activities across all four components of successful teaching, as outlined in the CEC HLP document, will experience heightened outcomes for their students.

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