2020

Evaluating Preservice Special Education Candidates’ Comfort Level Implementing High Leverage Practices

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Abstract
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Keywords
High leverage practices, instructional practices, teacher education, special education, educator preparation program
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Introduction

In order to meet higher learning outcomes for all K-12 students, field experiences have become an integral part of educator preparation programs (EPPs). Thus, it is critical that education faculty members provide teacher candidates with knowledge on the best evidence based instructional practices (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015). However, it is not guaranteed that teacher candidates will even see, let alone be able to identify, various instructional strategies and practices while they are in community classrooms. Therefore, high leverage practices (HLPs), common strategies that all teachers should be taught, have been developed to become the focus of educator preparation programs. HLPs were first created in 2011 by teacher educators at the University of Michigan, who aimed to create a list of essential practices for general education teachers to use to increase learning. They identified 19 common practices that range from leading a whole class discussion to setting long and short-term goals for students to communicating with other professionals (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015).

In 2015, a committee of various professionals from within the field of special education came together with a similar goal: to identify high leverage practices for special education teachers (McLeskey et al., 2017). A little over a year later, the Council for Exceptional Children published a list of 22 practices anchored in four concepts: collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral practices, and instruction. HLPs are named because they are “used to leverage student learning across different content areas, grade levels, and student abilities and disabilities” (McLeskey et al., 2017, p. 9).

As faculty within a special education EPP, the authors view these HLPs as foundational skills that are essential for teacher candidates to understand so they can then practice and master them in their field experiences. Therefore, to best serve our teacher candidates, a review of our
program’s current curriculum in regard to teaching the HLPs was deemed necessary. The following research questions served as our guide:

1. How does current special education teacher candidates’ comfort level with the High Leverage Practices for Special Education change after direct instruction?

2. How can educator preparation programs use the comfort levels of teacher candidates with the High Leverage Practices for Special Education to prompt discussion and change in the special education curriculum?

**Literature Review**

Merriam-Webster offers a rather simple definition of a teacher: one whose occupation is to instruct (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, for those in the field, teaching is not so easily defined. A teacher’s duties can include an array of tasks, including but not limited to: leading classroom discussions, locating and adapting educational materials, differentiating instruction to meet students’ needs, formulating in-depth questions, developing assessments, communicating with parents, collaborating with co-workers, and creating and maintaining a positive learning climate. Not only do teachers need to have a deep understanding of the content, but they also must be able to present in a way that makes sense for the learner (Ball & Forzani, 2010). Simply knowing about a subject area, no matter how well, does not necessarily mean one has the skills to make it comprehensible to someone else. (Ball & Forzani, 2010). EPPs take on the task of providing future teachers with a multitude of skills to address the various responsibilities they will face. How to adequately train our future teachers to be the best educators has been at the center of debate for years. There have been shifts throughout history in perceptions of how EPPs can best serve their students. In the United States, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, becoming a teacher was based solely on receiving approval from a local clergy.
member or someone from the board of trustees. The only requirements at the time were that you were able to read, write, spell, and be of good character (Ornstein & Levine, 2006).

It was not until the nineteenth century and the development of normal schools, that teacher preparation programs became more structured. Normal schools were two-year programs that provided instruction on the history and philosophy of education, instructional methods, and opportunities to practice teaching (Ornstein & Levine, 2006). As with any new program, enrollment in these schools was low at first, but grew over time and by 1875, over 26,000 students were enrolled in teacher preparation programs across numerous states (Labaree, 2008). These students were able to focus on how to teach in their courses then practice those skills at laboratory or practice schools.

In 1862, the federal government made a statement of support for normal schools with the passing of the Morrill Act, which granted of over 30,000 acres of land to be used to establish colleges. While Justin Morrill, a Vermont congressman, said the grant was to help establish colleges with a focus on agriculture and mechanic arts, education programs also benefited and were able to grow (Staley, 2013). Over time, the normal schools slowly changed over to state colleges and eventually in the 1950s most of these colleges became universities (Labaree, 2008). This new model for educating future teachers meant students obtained their content knowledge and general studies from other departments on campus while the education department focused solely on pedagogy, such as lesson planning and classroom management. Stengel and Tom (1996) noted three universal components for most teacher preparation programs at that time: “foundations of schooling and learning, teaching methodology, and practice teaching” (p.593).
The field experience aspect of education programs typically took place during the students’ final year and lasted six to eight weeks. Similar to most student teaching placements today, students were placed with an experienced teacher to serve as a mentor then observed by someone from their university (Huling, 1998). This early field experience concept was championed by John Dewey, who led a progressive movement in the 1930s, emphasizing the experiential development of teachers (Huling, 1998). However, it was not until the 1960s that universities started to emphasize practical field experiences in classrooms earlier in their programs (Huling, 1998). Now, teacher candidates often start visiting classrooms during their freshmen year, spending more time as they progress through their college careers, ending with a full semester of student teaching. Requirements and assignments corresponding to the field experiences are individualized for each university, however many include observing teachers, attending staff meetings, lesson planning and teaching, developing a behavior plan, and collaborating with others. Research supports the need for multiple field experiences as students often rate their student teaching experience as the most beneficial aspect of their education (Ducharme, Ducharme & Dunkin, 2012). While teacher candidates clearly value their experiences in real classrooms, it is equally important for EPPs to equip candidates with the necessary skills and strategies they will need to put into practice as they enter these classrooms.

Additionally, the passage of recent legislation raising the educational outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities, has elevated the need for highly trained special educators (McLeskey et al, 2017). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) was the first legislation which required that all students, including students with disabilities, meet certain educational standards in reading and math. In 2004, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) mandated the use of evidence-based practices and programs that have
been proven to increase student achievement. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) also set higher educational expectations, mandating every student graduating from high school should be ready to successfully enter college or a career. Moreover, the 2017 ruling by the United States Supreme Court in the Endrew v. Douglas County School System raised the bar for students who receive special education services when it defined an *appropriate* education for a student with a disability. In their ruling, the justices declared that a child’s Individualized Educational Program (IEP) must be “reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances” (Endrew F., 2017, pp. 16). These laws demanded greater accountability for the educational progress for students with disabilities and pushed schools and teachers to make drastic changes to their practices.

Results from The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in 2014, the most recent year for available nationwide data, added to the call for higher educational standards for all students. NCES data indicated that while students with disabilities have made some gains in reading, only 28% were at a basic reading level (NCES, 2014). Furthermore, in the state of Kentucky, the achievement gap between students with disabilities and those who do not have a disability continues to widen. Results from a Pritchard Committee report in 2017 indicate that among 4th graders, only 35% of students with disabilities were proficient or distinguished in reading compared to 59% of students without disabilities (Weston, 2017). Additional statistics from the report revealed that middle school reading results were more discouraging for students with disabilities with a 35-point gap between students who have disabilities and students who do not: 26% to 61%, respectfully (Weston, 2017). The achievement gap in reading for high school students was even lower with only 16% of high school students with disabilities scoring in the
proficient or distinguished range compared to over 60% for students who do not have disabilities (Weston, 2017).

Master, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2014) provided evidence supporting the best way to improve outcomes for students with disabilities is to improve the effectiveness of their teachers. Their research found teachers make a greater contribution to student achievement than any other school influence including per-pupil spending by schools. In 2012, the Council of Chief State School Officers published a report which focused on each state’s responsibility in assuring quality educator preparation programs as a key element in raising student achievement. The report titled, Our Responsibility, Our Promise: Transforming Educator Preparation and Entry into the Profession, underscores the need for learner-ready teachers from day one of their careers as being essential to increasing student achievement (CCSSO, 2012). They defined a learner ready teacher as:

…. one who is ready on day one of his or her career to model and develop in students the knowledge and skills they need to succeed today including the ability to think critically and creatively, to apply content to solving real world problems, to be literate across the curriculum, to collaborate and work in teams, and to take ownership of their continuous learning. (CCSSO, 2012, pp. iii)

This report further delineates a list of common characteristics that must be observed in learner-ready teachers. States have responded to this call to action by elevating the requirements for educator preparation programs.

Much of the research for educating students with disabilities comes from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). In 2017, CEC identified 22 practices that all special educators must
use effectively in order to maximize learning for students with disabilities (McLeskey et al., 2017). For EPPs it is critical to prepare teacher candidates to educate their students with the evidence-based practices that make a difference in the lives of students with disabilities. Using the HLPs developed by CEC as a model, two faculty members in the special education department at a southeast regional university began a review of their current curriculum to determine if each HLP was being taught.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The student population for this study included 12 teacher candidates who were enrolled in their final semester of coursework at the university. The final semester includes their last special education practicum, indicating that all candidates had completed the required classes while maintaining at least a 2.75 GPA. The participants would be completing student teaching the following semester. Seven of the teacher candidates were enrolled at the main campus of the university and five were enrolled at one of the university’s regional campuses. All teacher candidates were seeking dual teaching certifications: three in Learning Behavior Disorder (LBD)/Middle School Education and nine in LBD/Elementary Education. This degree will allow candidates to teach in either a general education elementary or middle school setting, in addition to teaching students who have mild to moderate learning and behavioral disorders.

The candidates were all female and eleven of the twelve were traditional age, i.e., they entered college directly from high school, with the other one being non-traditional age. The non-traditional student was enrolled at the regional campus. All candidates were full-time and the
number of participants was representative of the number of candidates participating in their final practicum before moving to student teaching the following semester.

**Setting**

The study took place at a public, four-year university in the southeast region of the United States. Current enrollment is just over 9,000 students and includes candidates at five regional campuses. The College of Education and Human Services currently serves over 1,500 students. Specifically, this study used candidates from the university’s two special education practicum courses, one at the main campus and one at a regional campus. According to the syllabus, this course, which is taken the semester before student teaching, provides opportunities for supervised direct involvement with children in the school environment.

Teacher candidates are required to implement strategies and procedures used in the education of students with mild disabilities during their required 50 hours in a special education setting in a local, community school. Practicum placements are arranged by the university professors who receive names of mentor teachers from principal recommendations. Since certification in our state is K-12, LBD/Elementary candidates are placed in a middle or high school and LBD/Middle candidates are in an elementary setting to gain more experience with an age group they have not had previous field experiences. Placements can be a combination of resource and/or collaboration formats based each district’s instructional delivery method. Typically, candidates spend 5-6 hours per week supervised by their cooperating teachers for 10 weeks. University professors meet with all teacher candidates every other week for an hour and fifteen minutes class session to focus on instructional strategies deemed appropriate by the instructors.
Each student is observed once by their cooperating teacher and once by their university professor during the semester. In addition to the observations, candidates are required to observe two additional master teachers in the school, develop two Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and progress monitor those for a student. Teacher candidates must also choose three additional activities from a list, that includes but is not limited to: attending an IEP meeting, reviewing a special education folder, and developing and implementing content curriculum-based measurement.

**Procedures**

To determine the teacher candidates’ comfort level with the 22 HLPs for special educators, the authors developed a pre/post survey. The survey was administered on the first and last day of the final special education practicum. Figure 1 is a sample of part of the survey. The teacher candidates were instructed to assign their current level of comfort in using each HLP. A Likert scale from 1-5 was used, with one being not at all comfortable and five being very comfortable. Space was also provided on the survey for the teacher candidates to write any questions or comments they had beside their answer.

The data from the surveys were entered in a spreadsheet and the average rating for each HLP was calculated. HLPs with an average score of 1 and 2 automatically became the target of teaching for the semester. The following HLPs: 2, 5, 12, 16 & 20 were the lowest for the main campus candidates and 2, 5, 14, 16, & 20 were lowest for the regional campus candidates. To address these deficits specifically, the authors developed a final HLP project where each student
had to make a Google Drawing to demonstrate his/her use of these 5 HLPs while they were completing their 50-hour practicum.

Figure 1. HLP comfort level survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HLP</th>
<th>Comfort Level Rating</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Collaborate with professionals to increase student success.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student’s strengths and needs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This assignment was intended to serve as a way for candidates to observe and identify evidence of the HLPs in practice in their assigned classroom. This included documents, photos, videos, or descriptions of materials, lessons, or experiences conducted by their cooperating teacher or themselves in the classroom. After gathering the evidence, teacher candidates were able to be creative in the format and design of their Google Drawing which they presented at the end of the semester. Instructors developed a rubric outlining the requirements and grading procedures for the HLP assignment.

In addition to the final project, the authors began intentionally teaching the practices that the candidates felt uncomfortable with. Both authors collaborated to prepare instructional materials to share with all teacher candidates during the class sessions. For example, while teaching HLP 12, the authors made a power-point that the candidates could reference which
described the practice in detail. Instruction was supplemented by using the HLP resources provided by the CEEDAR Center. Additionally, a video, made by the taskforce demonstrating the practice, was viewed and discussed so each teacher candidate felt comfortable in their understanding of the key dimensions of the practice.

The results of initial survey data were also shared with the rest of the special education department to prompt a discussion about where each HLP was incorporated into the curriculum. To help guide the discussion, a table with each of the 22 HLPs was created. Three columns were inserted and labeled: introduced, practiced, and mastered (see Figure 2). Each HLP was discussed as a department to determine where that practice was being introduced, practiced, and mastered within the special education curriculum. Course syllabi were also consulted to review objectives and assignments in relation to the content of each HLP, however the most beneficial information came from direct conversations amongst the faculty. The authors made notes during this meeting and made the document available to the rest of the special education faculty through Google Docs for additional notes or comments concerning where the HLPs are taught. After multiple meetings and discussions, the authors developed a final draft examining the HLPs instruction through the university’s special education program.

Figure 2. HLP course exploration document.
In order to evaluate the effectiveness of one educator preparation program’s efforts to prepare its special education teacher candidates to use the HLPs, the researchers used a mixed methods design. The first research question was designed to determine the comfort level of teacher candidates in using the HLPs at the start of the semester and again at the end of the semester using a pre and post survey. Figure 3 is an example of a completed student survey. The data from the surveys was entered in a spreadsheet and the average for each HLP was calculated for both the pre and post survey. Table 1 shows the difference in the comfort level of the teacher candidates at the beginning and end of the semester. Each HLP shows a positive increase in comfort from pre to post survey.

Figure 3. Sample HLP comfort level survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HLP</th>
<th>Introduced</th>
<th>Applied</th>
<th>Demonstrated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Collaborate with professionals to increase student success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student’s strengths and needs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HLP</th>
<th>Pre-Survey Average</th>
<th>Post-Survey Average</th>
<th>Pre to Post Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2*</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5*</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6*</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9*</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14*</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15*</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16*</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: An * indicates that HLP was one of the five chosen to be explicitly taught and used in the final HLP project.

In addition to the survey, the authors developed a final HLP project where each student had to construct a Google Drawing to demonstrate their use of the five lowest HLPs. Google Drawings is a free, web-based diagramming software developed by Google that allows users to create flowcharts, organizational charts, mind maps, concept maps, and other types of diagrams. The use of this technology allowed the teacher candidates to demonstrate the application of their
understanding in a unique way. Two still shots of a student’s project can be seen in Figure 4. This student had a fun opening slide which hyperlinked to her evidence slides, such as a sample IEP meeting agenda for HLP number two. The Dean and Assistant Dean of the College of Education as well as other special education faculty members were invited to the final class meeting of the semester where the candidates presented their Google Drawings.

Figure 4. Sample slides from a student’s HLP final project.
The second research question ignited multiple conversations among faculty members as a result of the teacher candidates’ comfort levels with the HLPs. A portion of each monthly departmental meeting was allocated to discussing the candidate surveys for three consecutive months. The special education is made of five faculty members: three assistant professors, one associate professor, and one professor. Figure 5 shows the chart that the authors developed to help guide the conversations about where each HLP was introduced in the curriculum, which courses gave them opportunities to practice the skills, and finally which course required them to show us mastery or demonstrate competence.

Figure 5. Snapshot of graphic used to evaluate curriculum in higher education institute.
Going one by one, each HLP was addressed with faculty members contributing based on the courses they taught. Some HLP conversations went very quickly and the faculty members were able to easily identify the three stages of instruction. On the other hand, some HLP conversations were more difficult and gaps in instruction and the curriculum were found. For example, when discussing HLP number ten about Functional Behavior Plans (FBAs), it was discovered that only one class introduces the concept and requires candidates to develop a single FBA. This process also provided a chance to clarify objectives in course syllabi for the whole curriculum.

Moreover, some gaps discovered within the curriculum led to conversations about how in some cases we are unable to require teacher candidates to demonstrate mastery (see Figure 5) so a creative approach to teaching these practices is needed. Since teacher candidates are not able to actively collaborate to plan effective meetings with parents (HLP #2), they are typically able to sit in and observe an IEP meeting during practicum. This understanding helped faculty members to realize that the topic of effective meetings with families could be introduced in our SED 350:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HLP</th>
<th>Introduced</th>
<th>Applied</th>
<th>Demonstrated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Collaborate with professionals to increase student success</td>
<td>SED 310</td>
<td></td>
<td>SED 455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families</td>
<td>SED 350</td>
<td></td>
<td>SED 455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services</td>
<td>SED 310</td>
<td>SED 409</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student’s strengths and needs</td>
<td>SED 310</td>
<td>SED 409</td>
<td>SED 537</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Law and Special Education course which focuses on special education law and writing an individualized education program (IEP). Within that course, the topic of IEP meetings and parent participation are discussed within the context of the IEP and law requirements. Then through their HLP final project they can share their thought processes on how to plan effective meetings by showing evidence of suggested meeting agendas, conference summaries, etc.

Based on these discussions, the special education faculty members realized that some creative approaches must be used in order to address all the HLPs within the curriculum. Adjustments to courses objectives and requirements to intentionally instruct on the HLPs in a more in-depth manner across our curriculum are still being addressed.

**Discussion**

Educator Preparation Programs have recently been under fire for not preparing their graduates to improve the educational outcomes for students with disabilities. In order for preservice teachers to impact the achievement of students with disabilities, educational scholars, McLesky and Brownell (2015) first proposed that general and special education teachers need to identify a set of critical practices that are essential to improve student learning. In 2017, The Council for Exceptional Children and the CEEDAR Center developed a list of 22 critical practices that, if used correctly, can significantly improve the learning of students with disabilities. These 22 practices, called High Leverage Practices for Special Educators, can be used by all grade level and content area teachers.

One of the basic purposes of CEC’s HLP publication was to “identify improved methods for supporting special education teacher candidates as they learn to use effective practices in
their classrooms” (McLeskey et al., 2017, p 2-3). It is then incumbent on each educator preparation program to train its teacher candidates to use these practices in the classroom. Research indicates that effective teacher preparation programs include aligning coursework with meaningful field experiences (Leko et al, 2012). The 50-hour practicum provided the preservice teachers with opportunities to practice the 22 HLPs that are essential to increase outcomes for students with disabilities. Additionally, the five HLPs receiving the lowest scores were targeted for additional teaching by the faculty.

The results of a pre/post survey provided the authors with significant insight into both research questions. This study was used to determine how the comfort level of senior teacher candidates with the 22 HLPs for special educators changed due to direct instruction. Additionally, faculty evaluated how to improve the educator preparation program to meet candidates’ needs based on the survey outcomes. The results of the pretest survey given on the first day of the teacher candidates’ final practicum indicated the senior teacher candidates were somewhat familiar with the 22 HLPs. The survey used a Likert scale of 1-5, with 1 being not at all comfortable and 5 being very comfortable. Averages ranged from 1.83 to 3.42. However, comments written on the survey indicated that several of the 12 candidates were very uncomfortable recognizing and using more of the Instruction HLPs than practices in the other three areas.

A post-test survey given on the last day of the semester indicated that the teacher candidates had made significant progress in their ability to recognize and use all 22 of the HLPs. The five targeted HLPs indicated the most significant increase in understanding. The
combination of the course work along with the chance to practice and receive feedback on their teaching appeared to be an effective strategy for assisting the teacher candidates in their journey to become learner ready teachers.

The internal review of the authors’ institution’s special education curriculum and the incorporation of the HLPs was a critical step in order to properly prepare its teacher candidates. Prior to the creation of the HLPs, there was not enough “clarity regarding the practices and expertise that define an effective special educator,” leaving these decisions up to special education faculty (McLeskey et al., 2017, p. 1). Now that these practices have been identified and published, special education faculty members across the nation can use these as a guide for designing courses and curriculum.

However, this process is not without potential issues and questions, some of which were identified by McLeskey and Brownell (2015). They specifically addressed concerns related to the need in infrastructure changes required in staffing, clinical experiences, relationships between higher education programs and local schools, and pedagogy to teach the HLPs. As faculty, the authors’ institution has not addressed all of these questions but have provided preliminary conversations to identify where in the current program the HLPs can be taught. This process was an instrumental start in recognizing gaps in what faculty thought was being taught, what was being taught, and what still needed to be taught.

Further conversations are needed to determine additional actions, such as editing class sequence and current assignments, developing new assignments, changing requirements in clinical experiences, and determining the best ways to teach the HLPs in the courses. In the end,
it is each higher education institution’s responsibility to take these 22 practices and ensure the CEC’s purpose for developing the HLPs is complete: using the HLPs as a “playbook that describes the foundational practices needed for an effective and successful career creating success stories for students with the most complex learning and behavioral needs,” (McLeskey et al., 2017, p. 4).

Limitations

There are some limitations worth mentioning in regard to this study. Mainly, the small sample of teacher candidates limits the ability to generalize results to a similar population. In our final design for teaching the HLPs, we did not align them to the CEC standards, but this could be addressed in future research. In addition, this study was really evaluative in nature of the authors’ course of study and curriculum specifically which would also limit the ability to generalize to other college programs. However, institutions could replicate the procedures and obtain results specific to their own programs.
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