

Introduction

Stories special educators tell of their immersion into the profession are often told in disbelief that they beat the odds. Pathways to becoming a special educator are some of the most varied in the profession.

Retention of special educators is an issue that has been a concern and has been wrestled with for at least two decades. Whether a person stays or leaves teaching is often dependent on more than one factor, but among reasons given for exiting the profession are academic training, level of support provided by administrators, understanding of roles and responsibilities, feelings of collegiality with other teachers in the building, facilities and available resources, caseloads, paperwork, and student behavior.

Costs associated with the continual turnover of special education teachers are considered a burden to school districts that invest in the recruitment of special education teachers.

When Madelyn Will (1986) considered the question “What’s so special about special education?” the elephant in the room was revealed. Educational experiences that students with disabilities had been receiving were a product of a dual system. The precedent established in *Brown versus the Board of Education* that “separate is not equal” has been pivotal in promoting the concept that the academic welfare of students with disabilities is the responsibility of all educators.

Rather than serving as a faucet that is used to release pressure when the steam is too hot, special education should be designed as a finely tuned instrument that is selected carefully by professionals who are relentless and intentional in their commitment to teach all students. With the heightened emphasis on student achievement, now, more than ever, it is necessary to have highly effective special education teachers using research-based instructional practices with students on individual education programs (IEPs). The revolving door of special education teachers leaving the profession does little to enhance the academic integrity and continuity of a student’s program.

Teacher education programs are being asked to guarantee their graduates will be able to ensure and document a year of progress in student achievement. Most administrators and principals who hire and support new special educators know they must encourage and provide professional development. Confident, competent, and connected special education teachers apply knowledge and use their secure skills but also recognize areas where they can improve.

Topics in this book were selected because they were identified by new special educators and best-practice research as the most necessary practices in becoming a successful special education teacher. Contemporary research and focused observations of novice special educators confirmed the need for specific skills and knowledge in order to survive and thrive in the early years of one's career.

Chapter 1, *Working with Diverse Students*, is unique from the other chapters because it addresses the changing population of students that all teachers need to be prepared to educate. It is an overview of one factor among many that must be addressed in the complex task of meeting the needs of diverse students in the world of special education. The nitty-gritty issues presented in Chapter 2, *Organizing a Classroom for Instruction*, and Chapter 3, *Managing Student Behavior*, are front and center in the minds of new special education teachers. Ideas from these chapters can be adapted and used to provide a basis to research other effective practices specific to a teacher's classroom setting.

Once some level of order is achieved, the art of teaching becomes a priority. Chapter 4, *Designing Effective Instruction*; Chapter 5, *Teaching Strategies and Learning Activities*; Chapter 6, *Graphic Organizers*; Chapter 7, *Incorporating Technology*, and Chapter 8, *Student Assessment and Evaluation*, describe effective instructional practices to be used in the educational setting. The final chapter, *Promoting Achievement Through Collaboration*, affirms that successful teachers rely on partnerships as a fundamental and ongoing component of instruction.

Each chapter provides examples of situations a special educator faces daily. More importantly, the chapters contain classroom and instructional suggestions for new special education teachers to implement immediately. The strategies come from the research and have been implemented by highly effective teachers to support student achievement.

To achieve the book's purpose, all chapters contain examples of teaching practices designed for instructional success. The chapters each list the Spanish and Hmong word for the number as a reminder to think inclusively. Each chapter begins with **Chapter Objectives**. The chapter objectives describe what the reader will know and/or be able to do as a result of conscientious reading. Next, the **Chapter Introduction** briefly provides the reader with the focus and essence of the chapter. The **Wisdom of Practice** section bonds the chapter objectives to a real-life educational practice that allows for an additional chapter focal point. What about the research supporting the chapter's targeted educational practices? The **In Brief: What Does the Research Say?** section describes the best-practices research that substantiates the chapter's content. **Chapter Summaries** provide a brief chapter review. The **Self-Assessment and Reflection** allows the reader to reflect and self-test the chapter's information. And, finally, the **Reference** list provided at the end of the book lists the many useful references found throughout each chapter.

Use this book in the following ways:

1. As a daily resource. Pull it off the shelf regularly to add to your teaching practices.
2. As a tool for professional development. Focus on one chapter a month throughout the year.

3. As a training document for preservice teachers ready to enter the profession. Provide it as a text for student teaching seminars.
4. As a discussion point for collaboration in the school. Bring staff together to initiate the use of consistent strategies.
5. As a guide for those whose quick entry into the arena of special education found them underprepared. Give it as a gift of support.
6. As a refresher for experienced regular and special education teachers needing new ideas. Generate divergent thinking.
7. As a model of integrated practices that support all learners. Document the successes.
8. As a textbook in college and university courses such as Student Teaching Seminar, Special Education Practicum, Inclusive Practices, Differentiating Instruction, Research and Practice in Special Education, Teaching Diverse Learners, Instructional Practices for Students with Disabilities, and Special Education Methods and Materials.