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Preface

When we first started teaching in our classrooms years ago, we never dreamed that one day we would be writing a book for teachers with the goal of helping them learn how to better meet the needs of their students with disabilities. However, as we reflected on this, we realized that the birth of this book actually began those many years ago and continued through all the years thereafter as we worked in many different districts, schools, and classroom settings and with many different students and their families.

While each of us has always had good instincts for creating structured environments to support student learning and have accumulated many years of success in our own classrooms, our knowledge of what it takes to truly support student learning has evolved greatly since our early years in the classroom. This journey was influenced by many factors. Without these factors and experiences, we might never have reached the point of creating this book. The hundreds of students and their families with whom we have worked, the other educators with whom we collaborated, and the continual training to which we have had access have all contributed to the high level of our expertise in the field of special education.

After leaving our respective classrooms, we both served on our district's autism and special education support team. This provided us great opportunities to observe many different teachers and different classroom settings. Over and over again, our supervisors came to us requesting that we help another teacher with just this one student. We knew from our own experiences that, sometimes, there is one student who can challenge a teacher in ways that he or she has not been challenged before. We also knew that all students can learn when a classroom is set up for success and the teacher has strategies and knowledge about how to apply those strategies. As we began to travel and work in different school districts, it became apparent to us that we needed a way to help teachers organize the various elements in their classrooms. We needed a framework to organize the important elements that needed to be addressed in each special education classroom.

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In order to assist teachers in seeing the big picture of what was needed for success in their classrooms, we began developing areas or categories that need to be addressed by all special education teachers. These components were actually developed to assist us in helping teachers who were struggling with how to manage a special education classroom effectively. We identified 10 major components: physical arrangement of the classroom; organization of materials; schedules; visual strategies; behavioral strategies; goals, objectives, and lesson plans; instruction; communication systems and strategies; communication with parents; and related services and other school staff.

This book contains foundational information on each of these 10 areas, forms for you to copy and use, and a list of resources to guide you as you investigate further into the topics. We strongly encourage you to research these topics, learn, and explore much more in depth than we have gone into in this book. We are giving you the blueprint. It is up to you to provide the detailed plans and customize the information to meet the needs of your students.

It is also important for you to know that this book is not about the research that supports the information it contains. We are well aware of the need to base your instructional strategies as well as your classroom management on evidence-based strategies. You are welcome to, and likely should, explore the research that supports the information contained here. It will help you understand more fully why the strategies and ideas we present in this book work.

From our own experiences as teachers, and now as consultants, we have come to the conclusion that the 10 critical components are absolutely necessary for creating a foundation that supports our students' success. We are constantly emphasizing to teachers and administrators that none of these components stand alone. They work together, and all must be in place to ensure a successful special education classroom. Teachers regularly confirm what we have learned from our own experiences: Not only does it make their jobs easier when they implement the 10 critical components, but more importantly, they also recognize that all their students benefit.

Whether teaching social skills to students, doing school consultations, conducting in-home and parent training evaluations, leading workshops for parents, or presenting our two-day workshop on which this book is based, we are always mindful that our business is about the students and helping them achieve their goals and potential. This book is a tool that will help all special education teachers. Whether you are a preservice teacher or one with experience, we know that your students will benefit from your using these 10 components as the foundation for your approach in your classroom.

Introduction

There are no two classrooms that look alike, no two teachers who teach exactly the same, and no two students whose special needs are the same. Embracing and implementing the foundation laid out in *10 Critical Components for Success in the Special Education Classroom* will set the stage for each student to achieve, increase positive behaviors, establish effective communication with parents, and enhance teacher effectiveness for all students. How can that be possible with all the differences in students, teachers, parents, and facilities?

The foundation or framework created when all of the 10 components are in place sets the stage for progress and success for each student. In addition, you will use your professional judgment and knowledge of educational best practices as you consider how to best address the needs of your students. Blending the guidelines of the 10 components with your knowledge of specific students, the family's needs for their students, and evidence-based practices is a winning combination. Use all the components as a blueprint for educating your students, and you and your students will be successful.

All areas that are essential in order to develop and maintain successful special education classrooms are incorporated within these components. While this book is not about the research that supports the content, the recommendations and strategies are based on current findings, and each component contains numerous educational best practices. The 10 critical components include the following:

1. Physical Arrangement of the Classroom
2. Organization of Materials
3. Schedules
4. Visual Strategies
5. Behavioral Strategies

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6. Goals, Objectives, and Lesson Plans
7. Instructional Strategies
8. Communication Systems and Strategies
9. Communication With Parents
10. Related Services and Other School Staff

It is crucial to understand that none of the 10 critical components stand alone. We have numbered the components for clarity and ease of reference, but the numbers do not designate greater or lesser importance or even the order in which they should be implemented. These components are all of equal value; none is more important than another. They overlap and work together to create a framework that maximizes student learning.

We first began this book to address the needs of students and teachers in self-contained special education classrooms. However, as we began developing these 10 components, we realized that the practices, ideas, and suggestions would also be beneficial to students in resource and inclusion settings as well. In addition, our experience has shown us that general education students also benefit from the implementation of the concepts covered in each component.

We recommend that you preview all sections in the book to get an idea of the scope of the issues that are needed for the foundation of your special education classroom. We think that, if you flip to one specific component and read nothing else in the book, it will leave you with incomplete information and understanding of the need to address all 10 areas.

These 10 components form a foundation by working together for the education of your students. A classroom that consistently implements the structure and strategies of the 10 components will display the following characteristics:

- It is easy to tell what types of activities take place in various areas of the classroom.
- The classroom environment is physically structured, and schedules are used consistently throughout the day.
- Boundaries, physical and behavioral, are clearly defined.
- Students and staff move about the room with purpose.
- Students are actively engaged in meaningful activities at all times.
- Communication systems and strategies are a part of each lesson.
- Students are able to more easily anticipate what will occur next.
- Student behavior improves.

- Materials are stored in labeled cabinets or on labeled shelves.
- Data collection occurs regularly.
- Distractions are minimized.
- Lesson plans address each student's individual education plan (IEP).
- The beginning and ending of activities are clear to the students.
- A variety of instructional strategies are used throughout the day.
- Student independence is maximized.
- Communication with parents occurs on a regular basis.
- There is a system in place for service providers and the classroom teacher to share information and strategies about specific students.
- There is a minimum amount of adult chatter.

You will be able to answer the following three questions with a resounding yes when the 10 critical components are implemented for your students.

1. Is the student making progress?
2. Has the student learned to be more independent?
3. Does the student have more knowledge and skills than he or she did a year ago?

At the end of each of the 10 critical components, we have included real-life applications that contain examples highlighting content within the component. We think this will show how this information can be applied in a practical manner. We have also included a list of resources that you may find useful as well as reproducible forms for your use. One of these forms is a checklist containing all 10 critical components. It can be used by you or by your direct supervisor to determine if all the components are being addressed within your classroom.

You will find that changes will need to be made in how you implement the components throughout the school year or at the start of each new school year. Your students' needs will change. You might be moved to a different classroom or campus. A new student might be added to your roster, or there might be an addition or a loss of support staff. When you use these components as the blueprint for your classroom, you will have a foundation for success each year regardless of changes that may occur.