

## RESEARCH

## previews

NEW FINDINGS FROM COPSSE

## Defining Teacher Quality in Special Education

### A Look at Classroom Practices, Content Knowledge, and Beliefs of Beginning Teachers

... **T**eacher quality is at the forefront of current reform efforts—and for good reason. Research demonstrates that exemplary teachers can make a difference in student achievement and growth.

“Policymakers are right to say that quality matters,” asserts **Mary Brownell**, researcher and COPSSE director. “We know that better general education teachers—for example, those who are certified, more experienced, brighter, and who demonstrate subject matter knowledge and pedagogy—tend to get better student gains. Unfortunately, we do not have the same level of research for identifying the characteristics of high-quality special education teachers.”

To address this need, Brownell and her colleagues at COPSSE have been studying the practices, content knowledge, and beliefs of effective beginning special educators. “In a policy context that emphasizes student outcomes and questions teacher preparation, we need to know the relationships between teacher preparation, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement,” Brownell explains. “But first, we must define and assess what effective beginning special educators do.”

What do exemplary beginning teachers of students with high-incidence disabilities know and do? How prepared are they to teach reading—a skill area that is challenging to many students with high-incidence disabilities? Read on to gain insights from COPSSE research.

### What Special Education Teachers Do Makes a Difference

“In general, the practices of beginning special education teachers are good,” Brownell tells us. Beginning special education teachers rate above average in the following areas:

- General instructional practices.
- Classroom management.

Brownell notes that knowledge is an important variable. “More knowledgeable teachers are more likely to engage in more effective classroom practices.”

Although teachers engaged in effective pedagogical practices, they were found to be less effective when teaching reading. On a four-point scale, four being highest and 2.5 being average, beginning special education teachers’ reading instruction was rated less than 2.0

THIS JUST IN

Research identifies several characteristics associated with effective beginning teachers of students with high-incidence disabilities.

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for phonological awareness, word study, fluency, and vocabulary. Only comprehension was rated higher, at 2.0. Brownell notes that some beginning teachers did excel at teaching reading, even though others did not.

“On average, beginning special education teachers are not as sophisticated in their reading practices as they are in their general practices. When we looked at teacher knowledge of reading, we found that teachers who were effective had more content knowledge of teaching reading (e.g., comprehension, word analysis),” Brownell explains. “The weakest teachers overall demonstrated very little content knowledge.”

## Teacher Knowledge—A Key Component of Quality

Brownell provides the following observation: “It is not enough for special education teachers to know research-based interventions. Content matter knowledge also is important to effective special education instruction.”

When it comes to teaching reading, a stronger focus on preparation and classroom assistance is needed. “Beginning teachers will tell you that they believe they were not sufficiently prepared to teach reading to students with disabilities. But the reality is, generic preparation is unlikely to produce the types of teachers who can teach reading well,” Brownell

says. “Most beginning special education teachers, need a lot more assistance once they reach the classroom. If special education teachers are prepared broadly and generically—which often happens to meet the demand for teachers—school districts will need to assume responsibility for helping beginning teachers situate their knowledge in a content area.”

Brownell notes that these findings raise serious questions about individuals who become certified to teach special education simply by taking an exam. “How can teachers with only a background in mathematics or English possibly acquire the knowledge needed for teaching reading without some type of formal preparation?”



**Comprehensive reading curriculum accompanied by intensive professional development may prove helpful to beginning special education teachers.**

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### Studying Beginning Teacher Quality: COP SSE Methodology

**Studying special education teacher quality can be challenging given the factors specific to special education—for example, the varying nature of teacher roles, the multiple sources that contribute to a child’s education, the individualized nature of student achievement, and the lack of sufficiently sensitive and standardized assessments. As a result, Brownell and her colleagues designed the methodology to include the following features:**

- **Subjects (beginning special education teachers) who had varied preparation backgrounds were chosen from three states where multiple settings, delivery models, and curricula were present.**
- **Students with disabilities in third through fifth grades were assessed on a variety of reading measures.**
- **Teacher knowledge was assessed using a content knowledge survey. Reading lessons were observed using an observation protocol.**

### For More Information

Information reported in this preview was based on research that COP SSE researchers—**Mary T. Brownell, Anne G. Bishop, Paul T. Sindelar, Janette Klingner, Diane Haager, Russell Gersten, Shailaja Menon, Joe Dimino, and Randy Penfield**—crafted into professional presentations (available on the COP SSE web site at [www.copsse.org](http://www.copsse.org)).



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#### About COP SSE

The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COP SSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The research previews are produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.



Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education.