2018

# Critical Skills for Special Educator Effectiveness: Which Ones Matter Most, and to Whom?

Sara B. Woolf
*CUNY Queens College*

Critical Skills for Special Educator Effectiveness: Which Ones Matter Most, and to Whom?

Abstract

Special education teachers are expected to fulfill diverse teaching and non-teaching tasks in comparison to their general education peers. However, their performance is evaluated with measures that were normed for use with general education teachers. These specialty teachers are also routinely evaluated by professionals who may lack formal special education training or experience. These conditions render special educators vulnerable for inaccurate performance evaluation. Explicit research is needed to clarify the professional skills that are most critical to special educators' professional effectiveness and ensure continuity of focus on these skills in preservice teacher education and employment contexts. This qualitative study builds on an earlier empirical investigation that demonstrated consensus among three sets of professionals that the standards developed by Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) represented skills that are critical for special education teacher effectiveness. The current study describes which skill domains were identified as essential for special education teacher effectiveness across participant groups and those that reflected distinct groups' perspectives. Implications for future research are presented relative to strategies to more clearly articulate special education teacher expertise and ways to strengthen continuity across pre-service special education teacher education and in-service professional development contexts.


*Key words*: critical special education professional skills, special education teacher effectiveness, special education standards, preservice special education

Critical Skills for Special Educator Effectiveness: Which Ones Matter Most, and to Whom?

Special education (SE) teachers, by designation, are expected to competently demonstrate specialized expertise that aligns with the professional knowledge, skills, and practices developed and endorsed by recognized scholars and practitioners (Blanton, Sindelar, & Correa, 2006; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2015).  Upon entry into the field, these teachers are routinely assigned large, heterogeneous caseloads of students across diverse classroom settings (Billingsley, Carson, & Klein, 2004; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010).  In addition to addressing their students' complex learning needs, SE teachers often work in tandem with numerous general education and other school professionals in differing capacities (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014).  For instance, SE teachers may concurrently be assigned to resource room, itinerant, and consultant teacher roles and varying configurations of inclusive classrooms.  In these latter roles, SE teachers are expected to competently develop and teach subject matter content to students in addition to accommodating students' unique learning needs (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015; Mamlin, 2012; Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2015).

Like other school professionals, SE teachers must manage numerous quasi administrative nonteaching functions.  These include writing students' annual Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) and related instructional supports as well as transition plans to support students as they age out of school (Fish & Stephens, 2010; Mamlin, 2012).  In addition, school districts often expect SE teachers to facilitate parent training and school wide professional development initiatives including team based efforts to address behaviors that interfere with individual

students' academic and/or social success (Billingsley et al., 2004; Ruppar, Roberts, & Olson, 2015; Shepherd et al., 2016).

To fulfill these diverse professional expectations SE teachers must be able to selectively draw from a wide base of knowledge and skillfully apply this across students and school contexts (Gersten, Keating, Yavnoff, & Harniss, 2001; Mamlin, 2012).  Consistent with federal mandates, SE teachers' combined teaching and nonteaching professional functions represent knowledge and skills that differ substantively from that expected of general education teachers (Brownell et al., 2010; CEC, 2015; *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act*, 2004).  These teachers' professional performance is, however, formally evaluated with measures that were developed for and normed for use with general education teachers (Baker et al., 2010; Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008; Holdheide, Goe, Croft, & Reschly, 2010).  Leading SE experts have argued that these measures may fail to capture and prioritize SE teachers' specialized practices (Baker et al., 2010; CEC, 2012, 2015; Steele, Hamilton, & Stecher, 2010).  This challenge is further exacerbated by prevailing practices that allow SE teachers' performance to be evaluated by administrators who have little or no direct training or experience in the field of SE.  As such, these professionals may not recognize SE teachers' specialized practices in the context of routine instruction (CEC, 2012, 2015; Holdheide et al., 2010; Rockoff & Speroni, 2010; Steinbrecher, Fix, Mahal, Serna, & McKeown, 2015).  Taken together, these conditions render SE teachers vulnerable to inaccurate performance evaluations (Baker et al., 2010; CEC, 2012; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014).

There is urgent need for the field of SE to "establis[h] the standards that define professional practice" (Spooner, Algozzine, Wood, & Hicks, 2010, p. 49).  This imperative includes the need to more clearly articulate and establish consensus about the professional skills

that are most critical for SE teachers' effectiveness (Blanton et al., 2006; Brownell & Jones,

2015; Holdheide et al., 2010; Ruppar et al., 2015; Woolf, 2015).  To ensure continuity across

education contexts and constituents, research must include the input of diverse SE stakeholders

such as those directly responsible for these teachers' preservice education, classroom teachers,

and local school administrators (SAs) (Baker et al., 2010; CEC, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2012;

Holdheide, 2015).  This inclusive focus is particularly timely in light of federal policy shifts (i.e.,

the 2015 reauthorization of Every Student Succeeds Act) that have restored state control over

teacher quality and effectiveness determinations (Shepherd et al., 2016).

At present, the professional standards and skills developed by the Council for

Exceptional Children (CEC), the premiere professional organization for the field of SE, represent

the most widely endorsed cadre of SE teacher professional skills (Blanton et al., 2006).  These

nationally and internationally recognized standards are used by hundreds of teacher education

programs across the country to inform course design, sequences, and priorities (Brownell et al.,

2010; CEC, 2015; Mamlin, 2012).  In addition, they have been adopted by national oversight

entities including the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) and the

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (CEC, 2015).  They also inform

national accreditation of SE teacher education programs under the auspicies of the Council for

the Accreditation of Educator Preparation's (CAEP) periodic review process.

CEC's standards are not currently written in language that includes sufficiently clear

descriptions of discrete skills.  They also do not include contextually rich exemplars that

elaborate how specific skills should be applied in relation to individual students' learning needs,

school contexts, or academic versus social priorities (Blanton et al., 2006; Brownell et al., 2010).

Some researchers have explored the utility of applying CEC's standards for purposes other than

teacher education coursework design and accreditation (Boscardin, McCarthy, & Delgado, 2009; Nevin, Thousand, Parsons, & Lilly, 2000). More recently, Woolf (2015) explored whether CEC's standards included skills that different SE stakeholders perceived to be important for SE teacher effectiveness. She embedded the 73 individual skill statements subsumed within CEC's Initial Content Core (ICC) standards (CEC, 2009) into a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at the low end (e.g., a rating of 1) to indicate that the skill was "not at all important" and at the high end (e.g., a rating of 7) to indicate that the skill was "extremely important" for SE teacher effectiveness. A total of 238 professionals completed the survey, including 127 SE classroom teachers, 53 SE teacher educators, and 58 school administrators who worked in a densely populated northeast area of the US. This empirical study demonstrated that stakeholders did rate CEC's standards as highly important for SE teacher effectiveness. However, the study did not explore any of the prose responses that participants submitted in the third optional section of the online instrument. This section invited participants to elaborate on SE teacher expertise and to specifically describe critical professional skills that they thought had not been represented in CEC's standards. The purpose of this current qualitative study was to explore participants' prose responses in order to describe which skills emerged as most critical for SE teacher effectiveness. This study was guided by the following research questions:

(1) Which skills emerge as critical for SE teacher effectiveness?

(2) Which skills emerge as critical for SE teacher effectiveness as a function of professional role?

**Method**

**Research Design and Procedures**

As noted above, responses explored in this study were collected in the third, optional section of an online survey instrument focused on the perceived importance of the SE skills subsumed in CEC's 2009 ICC professional standards (Woolf, 2015). Once participants completed the first two sections of the survey instrument, they had access to an optional third section that included five open ended prompts. This study explored how participants responded to the following prompt: "Please list the skills that you perceive to be critical to special education teachers' effectiveness that were not represented in this survey".

**Participants**

Of the original 238 participants, a subset of 140 participants submitted prose responses in addition to completing the main sections of the survey instrument reported elsewhere (Woolf, 2015). This sample included 76 SE classroom teachers, 33 SAs, and 31 SE teacher educators (TEs). Most participants were women (78%) and most identified as White, non-Hispanic (84%). Participants were experienced SE professionals, as evidenced by the number of years they were employed in the field. For example, SE teacher participants had, on average, 13 years experience while both SA and TEs participants reported over 25 years of professional SE experience.

Participation was both voluntary and anonymous (i.e., no personally identifying information was collected) and was guided by explicit inclusion-exclusion criteria as follows. SE classroom teacher participant criteria stipulated that participants needed to be *both* state certified SE teachers and employed in full time SE classroom teacher roles; mentor, itinerant or teachers fulfilling other SE teacher roles were excluded. SA inclusion criteria stated that participants had to be state credentialed building or district leaders *and* tasked with ongoing, annual teacher professional performance reviews. Criteria excluded SAs who were responsible

for fiscal or other administrative tasks.  Special education TE participants needed to be employed

in full time roles at an accredited SE teacher preparation program; part time adjunct instructors

and those in other roles were excluded.

**Procedures**

       **Dissemination**.  Participants were recruited from a densely populated northeast region of

the United States.  This urban area included roughly 5,000 registered public and non-public P-12

schools, with 453,000 students who were registered to receive SE supports.  It also included

roughly 30 nationally accredited SE teacher education programs.  Potential participants were

identified by culling publicly accessible online and print directories and websites maintained by

professional organizations.  Multiple waves of recruitment included electronic dissemination of

the study's description and invitation, electronic links to the study's survey instrument, and

explicit requests to forward information about the study to potential participants (i.e., snowball

sampling).  Recruitment was directly supported by the national office of CEC who emailed study

invitations to randomly selected members at large and members of both the teacher education

and school administration divisions.

**Data Collection**

      Responses were collected over a four month period (October 2012-January 2013) and

were stored on SurveyMonkey$^{TM}$ (http://www.surveymonkey.com) until the original study

closed.  Responses were exported into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and then transferred into

three distinct Microsoft Word files (i.e., one for each participant subgroup).  In advance of

coding the author completed multiple line by line comparisons to ensure that all raw data (i.e.,

individual responses) were retained intact.

**Data Analysis**

Once raw data were prepared for review and analysis, each separate set of stakeholder groups' responses were read in their entirety multiple times. This was done to gain familiarity with the general ideas and themes that were represented. The researcher also maintained extensive process memos to capture impressions, observed patterns (e.g., repeating and/or uniquely worded responses), potential codes, and issues to explore further (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

After this review, the researcher began formal analysis of each participant groups' responses. All responses were coded inductively to identify emergent ideas and themes (i.e., no preset codes or constructs were applied). To maximize analytic sensitivity to potential participant group specific themes, and to protect against potential cross-over influence, analysis of each group's responses was separated by three weeks.

After completing independent rounds of review and analysis for each groups' responses, the researcher created the study's pilot codebook. This included 41 codes and it was used to analyze TEs' responses, the smallest subsample of participants. After this initial round of coding, adjustments were made to some codes (i.e., a number of codes were renamed, others were combined, and a few were discarded) to better reflect emerging themes. The adjusted codebook was then used to analyze SA and SE teacher responses. After each separate phase of analysis the codebook underwent additional refinement. The final codebook included 32 codes and was used to analyze each of the three participant groups' responses separately and the entire set of responses across participant groups. Analysis continued until no new ideas emerged across responses (i.e., two thirds of the total set) (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Responses that were mentioned only once were coded as "other".

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, reflective and process memos were reviewed to ensure that analysis was anchored by the data rather than bias inadvertently imported by the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).  In addition, to clarify whether findings aligned with practitioners' perspectives, the researcher shared the final codebook and early findings with two participants who had identified themselves to the researcher.  This included one TE and one SA participant.  The researcher also shared the code book and early findings with an SE teacher who worked in the region from which participants were originally recruited.  Feedback indicated that the themes and emerging findings resonated with these professionals' perspectives (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Trainor & Graue, 2014).

## Results

**Research Question One: Which skills emerge as critical for SE teacher effectiveness?**

After analyzing all participants' responses, three major skill domains emerged as critical for SE teacher effectiveness.  These included (1) *understanding disability and other impacts on learning*, which additionally included one sub-skill, *dispositions toward children,* (2) *integrated expertise*, and (3) *instructional flexibility*.  Each skill domain is described below.  To ensure clarity, multiple excerpts from participants' responses are provided to showcase how these domains emerged.  Direct excerpts from the data are indicated by quotation marks; parentheses are used to distinguish participant group.  Specifically, responses from SE teachers are indicated by (SE); administrators' responses are indicated by (SA); and SE teacher educators' responses are indicated by (TE).  Table 1 presents the skills that emerged across participants, underlying skill themes, and exemplars.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

**Understanding disability and other impacts on learning**. The first skill domain that

emerged across participants was *understanding disability and other impacts on learning*. This

core skill encompassed the specialized disability knowledge that is essential for SE teachers to

fulfill their roles (e.g., "SE teachers must be knowledgeable about all disability categories"

[SA]). This expertise reflected SE teachers' capacity to systematically "clarify what works with

individual [students]" (SE) and identify individual "students' learning styles and learning

behaviors" (TE).

Beyond the ability to discern students' individual or disability influenced learning needs,

*understanding disability and other impacts on learning* was predicated on SE teachers' capacity

to "see students for their strengths and as whole beings" (SE), that is, to "see beyond disability"

impacts. Further this expertise was described as "fundamental" (SE) for SE professional

competence. *Understanding disability and other impacts on learning* was elaborated as SE

teachers' ability to "build on students' strengths" (SE), "create trusting relationships" (SE), and

"actively co-create [students'] self directed goals" (SA). These interconnected competencies

appear to position SE teachers' ability to proactively "anticipate how students' performance will

likely fluctuate" (TE) and mediate influences such as "prior learning and students' diverse

cultures and socioeconomic circumstances" (TE). Last, *understanding disability and other*

*impacts on learning* competence underscored SE teachers' ability to support children across

school contexts. This was evidenced in comments such as, "most general education teachers

need support when students with special needs are in their inclusion classes" and "[SE teachers]

support other gen [sic] education teachers who get overwhelmed by the students with ADHD

[attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] and other disabilities."

*Dispositions toward children*.  This sub-skill reflected interpersonal qualities that serve to undergird and facilitate SE teachers' professional interactions with children, in particular their ability to establish authentic relationships.  *Dispositions toward children* competence represented relational attributes such as "being patient" (SE) (most frequently identified) and being able to convey "empathy," warmth," and "compassion" with children.  This sub-skill also included the ability to remain "open-minded" (SA) about individual students' needs and maintain a "passion for students to grow" (TE).

**Integrated expertise**.  This second complex skill domain represented SE teachers' proficiency and broad knowledge across content areas, pedagogies, and evidence-based instructional strategies.  The emergence of *integrated expertise* was supported by response patterns that consistently co-referenced (i.e., paired) content area expertise and specialized instruction.  For example, *integrated expertise* effectiveness was represented as teachers' ability to "integrate information from diverse content areas to create and implement developmentally appropriate academic programs" (SE) and to "blend knowledge and practices in different content areas and related instructional strategies" (TE).  It was further elaborated as representing SE teachers' ability to provide "exceptional general education" (TE).  *Integrated expertise* competence reflected SE teachers' capacity to infuse "appropriate specialized strategies to support [students'] academic, social, emotional, and communication skills" (SE) and effectively "differentiat[e] the general education curriculum" (SA).

Responses distinguished *integrated expertise* relative to the depth and scope of knowledge required of SE teachers.  For example, SE teachers must demonstrate "deep and wide content knowledge" (SA) at "mastery" (TE) levels.  This required breadth and scope was contrasted with commanding "only a working knowledge of gen [sic] content" (SE).  Responses

also described *integrated expertise* as encompassing expertise that transcends potentially siloed "special education instruction" (SA) and "classroom management strategies" (SE).  This was reflected in responses such as the following SE participant's comment: "knowing all about special education approaches alone is useless in today's schools if the sped [sic] teacher does not also understand the full curriculum and grade level content."

English language arts was the most frequently identified content area associated with *integrated expertise*.  Responses also specifically identified math, science, and literacy as domains for which SE teachers needed to be proficient.  The most frequently identified instructional strategy associated with *integrated expertise* was differentiation.  Other strategies included explicit instruction, modeling, repeated practice, and data based progress monitoring.  It was noteworthy that SE teachers and TEs emphasized explicit instruction more often than SAs while SAs more often emphasized data based monitoring than either SE teachers or TEs.

Last, *integrated expertise* competence reflected SE teachers' capacity to ensure that students achieve meaningful school outcomes.  This was represented as ensuring students' access to "ultimate valued school outcomes" (TE).  It was further construed as SE teachers' ability to "expose students to social problem solving and decision-making skills that prevent victimization" (TE) and to prepare students to live safe, independent lives.   In most instances when responses emphasized student outcomes these were elaborated in relation to the needs of adolescents.  For example, SE teachers must be able to provide "full exposure to meaningful and varied community based vocational experiences and post-secondary learning opportunities" (TE), "maximize transition planning and meaningful post-school options" (SA), and ensure students access to "service learning, character building, and community engagement" (SE).

**Instructional flexibility.**  This third skill domain represented SE teachers' ability to execute multiple instructional strategies while actively engaging with students.  Responses frequently included phrases that emphasized flexibility, for example SE teachers need to "flexibly adjust instruction" (SA) and "flexibly create new lessons while at the same time delivering instruction as planned" (SE).  In addition, responses emphasized the dimensions of simultaneity and immediacy.  Simultaneity was conveyed as the capacity to "deliver content instruction *while simultaneously* [emphasis included in original response] providing individual accommodations" (SA) and to "think in modifications" (SA).  Immediacy was represented as the ability to "act quickly and think on their feet" (SA), make "real time data informed" decisions (TE), and "accurately and quickly evaluate [an] entire instructional interaction while also thinking steps ahead" (SE).  It was also described as the ability to "adjust teaching at a moment's notice" (SE) and implement "fast paced student related problem solving skills" (SE).

**Outliers.**  Responses also included skills that were mentioned only once or twice.  For example students' physical hygiene (SE), teachers' self care (SE), knowledge about emotional intelligence (SA), familiarity with music and movement therapy (TE), and the need for fluency in American Sign Language for teachers of the deaf or hard of hearing (SE).  These responses were categorized as outliers.

**Summary**.  Three skill domains emerged as critical for SE teacher effectiveness across the three stakeholder groups.  *Understanding disability and other impacts on student learning* represented the fundamental disability knowledge expected of SE teachers and the sub-skill *dispositions toward children* identified interpersonal characteristics that undergird SE teachers' successful interactions with students.  *Integrated expertise* represented the deep and wide content knowledge that SE teachers must command and *instructional flexibility* underscored SE teachers'

ability to make multiple instructional decisions while concurrently adapting instruction to meet

individual students' different learning needs.

**Research Question Two: Which skills emerge as critical for SE teacher effectiveness as a**

**function of professional role?**

Though across group responses led to the identification of three core skill domains, they

also illustrated that participant groups did emphasize some critical SE skills in different ways.

For instance, SE teacher and SA participant responses led to the identification of a fourth skill

domain *professional preparedness*. This domain appeared to include two sub-skills, *advocacy*

and *ongoing professional development and reflection*. However these sub-skills emerged from

different participant groups' responses. Specifically, SEs and SAs emphasized *advocacy*; TEs

and SAs emphasized *ongoing professional development and reflection*. Last, SEs' and SAs'

responses led to the identification of *role flexibility*, a sub-skill of *instructional flexibility*. Table

2 presents these additional skill domains, participant group specific themes, and exemplars.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

**Professional preparedness**. This expertise emerged in SE teachers' and SAs' responses,

not those of TEs. This expertise represented SE teachers' ability to fulfill non-teaching tasks

such as those related to mandated documentation and record keeping (e.g., "manage the daily

paperwork and other minutia that envelops the field of education" (SE)). *Professional*

*preparedness* also included generic professional skills such as "being organized" (SA), "time

management" (SE), and "writing and verbal skills" (SA). SAs' responses additionally

emphasized SE teachers' professional perseverance (e.g., to be "persistent and not give up if

initial efforts fail to impact student learning") and professional neutrality in response to students'

behaviors or performance. This latter competence was evident in comments such as, "SE

teachers need to know how to take a step back" and to "not take student's actions/behaviors personally."

*Advocacy*.  The sub-skill *advocacy* emerged from SA and SE teacher responses.  Both stakeholder groups emphasized that SE teachers needed to be able to "identify steps to meet the social, emotional, and learning needs of students as mandated" (SA).  This expertise encompassed SE teachers' ability to identify supports to meet students' needs and ensure that supports align with legal mandates.  For example, SE teachers must "be able to evaluate what support the student needs and then make sure to get that for the student" (SE), "it is their job to list what students need to flourish" (SA), and "effectively work with school personnel to meet mandates" (SA).

SE teachers additionally described *advocacy* expertise in relation to their own ability to negotiate tensions that emerge when voicing students' needs, i.e., to "be the voice of students" and be willing to "convey what [is] in a student's best interests – even when doing so is difficult."  This aspect of *advocacy* expertise was further reflected in comments such as "we need to know how to fight for students' rights" and that SE teachers need to know how to "directly confront colleagues when students' rights and dignity are at risk".

***Ongoing reflection and professional development***.  The sub-skill *ongoing reflection and professional development* emerged across both SA and TE responses; however, it was reflected in the majority of TEs' responses.  Both SAs and TEs described this competence as leading to meaningful improvement.  For instance, TEs commented that SE teachers needed to rely on "productive, proven strategies to improve concrete skills, not just philosophy".  Similarly, SAs observed that SE teachers need to be able to find ways to engage in "continuous practical professional development" (SA).  Responses across both stakeholder groups similarly described

practices such as regular "participat[ion] in formal professional development activities" (SA) in order to ensure that SE teachers "remain current in the field" (TE). TEs specifically articulated strategies such as "access[ing] professional publications" and "participating in professional conferences and other formal professional learning."

SA and TE responses also reflected subtle differences in the ways that they construed *ongoing reflection and professional development*. For instance, TEs emphasized SE teachers' need to see themselves as "lifelong learners" and to critically and self-reflectively improve their practices. This latter focus was reflected in comments such as, SE teachers need to "understand their own learning style and strengths" and "reframe instructional challenge[s] or failure[s] as opportunities from which to learn." In slight contrast, SAs framed this sub-skill as being related to SE teachers' responsiveness to the inputs of others. This was reflected in responses such as, SE teachers must "seek out and apply criticism to improve practices," they have to "listen and learn," and they must "hear critical inputs without being defensive."

**Role flexibility.** In elaborating on *instructional flexibility* competence, SE teacher and SA responses led to the identification of the sub-skill *role flexibility*. Both stakeholder groups identified communication competence and team based interactions as critical aspects of *role flexibility* expertise. This was reflected in comments such as, SE teachers must be able to "communicate productively with other providers" (SE) and "SE teachers have to competently facilitate student problem solving teams" (SA).

Similar to SAs' emphasis on SE teachers' team based and other interpersonal role expertise, SE teachers described *role flexibility* in terms of special educators' ability to "negotiate and nurture collegial relationships [across] school settings" (SE). In the majority, SE teachers'

responses emphasized skills more commonly associated with professional collaboration.  It was

noteworthy that responses rarely included this specific term.

In addition to team coordination and communication skills, SAs bundled expectations for

SE teachers to perform quasi managerial functions into *role flexibility* expertise.  For instance,

SAs described this skill as the ability to "create an interdisciplinary environment among school

and team colleagues" and "act as a case manager".  SAs also indicated that SE teachers needed to

demonstrate "willingness" to engage with others, that is, to "work well with all school

personnel".  Although responses did not specifically elaborate on what "willingness" meant, this

dimension of *role flexibility* was frequently paired with team functions.  For example, SE

teachers needed to "be willing to be an effective team member," "be willing to accommodate

diverse staff," and "be willing to continuously revise schedules."

**Summary**.  Findings demonstrated that SE teachers and SAs identified *professional*

*preparedness*, *advocacy*, and *role flexibility* as critical for SE teacher effectiveness.  While

responses for these two participant groups represented similar broad views, they reflected

differing points of emphasis as a function of participant group.  These skills were not emphasized

in the same way by TEs.  Competence related to *ongoing reflection and professional*

*development* emerged in TEs' and SAs' responses; however, this was not evident in SE teachers'

responses.

<div align="center">

**Discussion**

</div>

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore which skills were identified

by three sets of SE stakeholders as critical for SE teacher effectiveness and if different skills

emerged as a function of participants' distinct roles.  Findings are summarized below in relation

to across participant group similarities and differences.

**Critical Skills Identified by All Stakeholders**

Participants from all three stakeholder groups described SE teacher competence in relation to *understanding disability and other impacts on learning*.  Thematically, this skill reflected what many have described as fundamental for SE teacher expertise (Mamlin, 2012). That is, SE teachers must be able to competently recognize and ameliorate the potentially disruptive ways that disability may manifest and impact individual students' social and academic participation across contexts.  This skill echoes earlier findings that SE teacher effectiveness reflects SE teachers' ability to infuse disability specific knowledge and related pedagogies into their work with students and that this expertise differs from practices routinely applied by general education teachers (Holdheide, 2015; Ruppar et al., 2015; Shepherd et al., 2016).

This finding contributes contemporary support to long-standing beliefs that SE teachers' unique expertise enables them to fluidly address the dynamic and complex intersections of students' individual, cultural, and disability influenced learning needs (Brownell et al., 2010; CEC, 2015).  In light of SE teachers' increasingly "blurred" roles (Brownell et al., 2010; Leko et al., 2015), this finding reflects the need to ensure that this expertise continues to be a focus in SE teacher education.  It also suggests that more explicit information about disabilities should be represented in school leaders' training to ensure that administrators charged with SE teacher performance evaluation are better positioned to recognize and evaluate this aspect of SE teachers' specialized expertise.

The emergence of the complex skill *integrated expertise* indicated widespread endorsement across stakeholder groups of Race to the Top and similar accountability expectations for SE teachers to be "highly qualified" in general and SE content and pedagogies (Holdheide, 2015; Leko et al., 2015).  That is, findings demonstrated that Se teacher expertise

must cover disability specific knowledge, specialized pedagogies, and core content knowledge and related pedagogies (Brownell et al., 2010; Holdheide, 2015; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014). The prevalence and frequency of responses with this thematic emphasis comported with increased recommendations for preservice SE teacher education programs to ensure that coursework sufficiently prepares SE teachers to teach subject matter that has been historically viewed as the purview of general education (Leko et al., 2015; Mamlin, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2015).

**SE Expertise that Reflected Participant Group Specific Perspectives**

All three participant groups identified *instructional flexibility* as critical for SE teacher effectiveness. However, participants' descriptions of this skill reflected role specific differences. These are discussed in the section that follows. For instance, in describing *instructional flexibility* expertise, SEs and SAs much more frequently than TEs emphasized SE teachers' need to engage in instructional strategies that reflected fluidity and immediacy. These dimensions were similarly described by Ruppar et al. (2015); thus this finding adds additional support to observations that SE teachers' ability to flexibly and expertly respond to students' learning needs (i.e., to "think in modifications") represents expertise that distinguishes them from their general education peers. Current findings did not support more specific description of this expertise or further clarity as to whether or not this expertise reflects skills that are differently important or valued by school based professionals in contrast to SE teacher educators.

It was noteworthy that TEs and SAs both identified *ongoing reflection and professional development* as critical for SE teachers though SEs only marginally emphasized this skill. Not surprisingly, TEs' responses focused on skills that engender self directed inquiry, critical discourse to refine skills, and other constructivist approaches (Blanton et al., 2006; Mamlin,

2012).  In contrast, SAs framed this competence relative to SE teachers' ability to receive and/or

absorb "criticism" and in "open minded" rather than "defensive" stances.  Although these points

of emphasis are not mutually exclusive they warrant further inquiry to ensure shared

understandings about skills that facilitate SE teachers' ongoing professional growth (Billingsley

et al., 2004; CEC, 2015; Fish & Stephens, 2010; Shepherd et al., 2015).  That is, this finding

raised the possibility that stakeholders need to clarify which professional development skills

would most directly benefit SE teachers to advance their ongoing professional development

(Shepherd et al., 2016; Steinbrecher et al., 2015).  At minimum, SE teachers need to be polled to

determine how best to engage them in meaningful ways to ensure their longevity (Billingsley et

al., 2004; CEC, 2012).

   **Differences related to the scope of SE teachers' professional role**.  Observed

participant group differences about the scope of SE teachers' role and related expertise

highlighted potential sources of SE teachers' frequently reported role strain (Billingsley et al.,

2004; Fish & Stephens, 2010; Gersten et al., 2001; Prather-Jones, 2015).  Administrators

frequently emphasized team milieu functions (e.g., create "an interdisciplinary environment",

"case management", and "community liaison") while SEs had a more narrow lens.  They

emphasized skills that would effectively enable them to bridge barriers between themselves and

their general education peers (i.e., "we need to support our students", "we have to work in their

classrooms", and "we need to adjust to general educators' different personalities and priorities").

In contrast, TEs pointedly challenged school context conditions that confound SE teachers'

expertise (e.g., "SE teachers' role continues to be stretched in too many way" and "is it the

responsibility of the beginning SE teacher to establish the school climate").  This finding

amplified the pressing need for school leaders and scholars to establish consensus across SE

stakeholders about the range of functions expected of SE teachers and the skills needed to fulfill these diverse roles (CEC, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2016; Spooner et al., 2010).

**Skills that may warrant increased emphasis in preservice education**.  It was noteworthy that SAs' and SE teachers' responses led to the identification of *professional preparedness* as being critical for SE teacher effectiveness and that this skill domain did not emerge for TEs.  This domain reflected a cadre of professional skills (e.g., time management, technical writing) that arguably are not uniquely tied to SE teacher effectiveness.  Its emergence raised the possibility that some aspects of SE teachers' functions require a level or depth of *professional preparedness* that may not be explicitly or sufficiently covered in the context of SE pre-service education or CEC's standards.  Further inquiry is needed to clarify whether this competence represents an area of need and if so, how best to address it across pre-service SE teacher education and in-service professional development contexts.

**Skill Omissions**

A number of technical skills traditionally associated with SE teacher expertise were not represented in participants' responses.  For instance, participants did not identify screening, placement, or assessment skills, early intervention and family-school partnership practices, or skills related to applied behavior analysis.  Equally noteworthy was the infrequent direct reference to the development of IEPs and limited use of terms such as "inclusion" (mentioned three times across responses) and "collaboration" (mentioned four times).  This may suggest that participants perceived that CEC's standards sufficiently represented these areas of expertise.

**Limitations**

Findings are limited in a number of ways, including the methodological choice to collect responses anonymously.  This precluded opportunities for the researcher to verify that

participants reflected the intended pool of participants and/or verify that findings reflected

participants' understanding, views, and intended messages.  In addition, findings must be

tempered because of the uneven representation of the three participant groups.  Despite efforts to

offset this imbalance by analyzing each groups' responses separately, the fact that there were

twice as many SE teachers than either of the other two participant groups may have inadvertently

influenced the overall findings.

Findings are also limited as byproduct of how participants were recruited for the study.

Specifically, dissemination efforts targeted one area of the US and as a result findings may

reflect unique regional rather than representative perspectives.  As well, because CEC assisted in

recruitment, the sample may reflect unintended selection bias.

Finally, the identified themes and related conclusions presented emerged through

analyses that were completed by a single researcher.  Although extensive effort was applied to

ensure comprehensive cycles of iterative review, comparison, and coding, the trustworthiness of

the study's findings would have been strengthened had responses been analyzed and coded by

more than one researcher.

**Implications and Directions for Future Research**

Future research is needed to determine whether the skills identified in this study represent

the views of a larger and wider sample of SE stakeholders.  In this realm, empirical

investigations should explore the extent to which CEC's consensus generated 2015 standards

represent skills that diverse stakeholders perceive to be important for SE professional

effectiveness.  Focused qualitative studies should be designed to cull and articulate sufficiently

rich descriptions of the skills that stakeholders identify as critical for SE teacher professional

performance and effectiveness.  These lines of scholarship could contribute toward systematic

initiatives to develop, pilot, and empirically validate operationally clear descriptors of pivotal SE

professional skills and contextually rich exemplars to illustrate how skills are applied across

diverse learning contexts, content areas, and age ranges.

Research is also needed to clarify whether the critical professional skills expected of SE

teachers across P-12 school settings are well represented in preservice SE programs' coursework,

training, and experiences.  In parallel, researchers need to verify the extent to which evidence

based SE professional practices are represented across prevailing P-12 practices and priorities, in

particular SE teachers' role expectations and administrators' familiarity with SE teachers'

expertise.

These interrelated lines of inquiry would meaningfully enhance continuity across SE

teacher education and P-12 professional contexts.  That is, findings could inform preservice SE

teacher program enhancements to maximize SE teachers' acquisition of skills critical to their

performance across school contexts.  They could also lead to the development of resources that

could be used to sensitize school administrators to SE teachers' specialized expertise and other

P-12 professional development practices.  More substantively, these outcomes could be used to

ensure that the measures used to evaluate special educators' professional performance reflect the

specialized expertise expected of SE teachers.

References

Baker, E. L., Barton, P. E., Darling-Hammond, L., Haertel, E., Ladd, H. F., Linn, R. L.,…

    Shepard, L. A. (2010). *Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers*

    (Briefing Paper No. 278). Washington, DC: The Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved

    from http://www.epi.org/page/-/pdf/bp278.pdf

Billingsley, B., Carlson, E., & Klein, S. (2004). The working conditions and induction support of

    early career special educators. *Exceptional Children*, *70*, 333-347. Retrieved from

    http://www.monarchcenter.org/pdfs/Billingsley_04.pdf

Blanton, L. P., Sindelar, P. T., & Correa, V. I. (2006). Models and measures of beginning teacher

    quality. *The Journal of Special Education, 40*(2), 115-127.

    doi:10.1177/00224669060400020201

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to*

    *theories and methods* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Boscardin, M. L., McCarthy, E., & Delgado, R. (2009). An integrated research-based approach

    to creating standards for special education leadership. *Journal of Special Education*

    *Leadership, 22*(2), 68-84. Retrieved from http://a1149861.sites.myregisteredsite.com/

    NationalStudyCredentialingSpecEdAdmin.pdf

Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klinger, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative

    studies in special education. *Exceptional Children*, *71*(2), 195-207.

Brownell, M. T., & Jones, N. D. (2015). Teacher evaluation in special education: Approaches,

    supporting research, and challenges confronted. *Journal of Special Education*

    *Leadership*, *28*(2), 63-73.

Brownell, M. T., Sindelar, P. T., Kiely, M. T., & Danielson, L. C. (2010). Special education

    teacher quality and preparation: Exposing foundations, constructing a new model.

    *Exceptional Children, 76*(3), 357-377. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/572445/

    Special_Education_Teacher_Quality_and_Preparation_Exposing_Foundations_Construct

    ing_a_New_Model

Council for Exceptional Children (2009). *What every special educator must know: Ethics,*

    *standards, and guidelines* (6th ed.). Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved from

    www.cec.sped.org/

Council for Exceptional Children (2012, October). *Position on special education teacher*

    *evaluation.* Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved from www.cec.sped.org/

Council for Exceptional Children (2015). *What every special educator must know: Professional*

    *ethics & standards* (7th ed.). Arlington, VA: CEC.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*

    (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2012). *Creating a comprehensive system for evaluating and supporting*

    *effective teaching*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

    Retrieved from http://edpolicy.stanford.edu

Fish, W. W., & Stephens, T. L. (2010). Special Education: A career of choice. *Remedial and*

    *Special Education, 31*(5), 400-407. doi:10.1177/0741932509355961

Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanoff, P., & Harniss, M. K. (2001). Working in special education:

    Factors that enhance special educators' intent to stay. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 549-567.

    Retrieved from http://cec.metapress.com/content/g042241065l80827/

Goe, L., Bell, C., & Little, O. (2008). *Approaches to evaluating teacher effectiveness: A research synthesis*. Washington, DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. Retrieved from https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/goe-research-synthesis.pdf

Holdheide, L. (2015). Same debate, new opportunity: Designing teacher evaluation systems that promote and support educators in practices that advance all students' learning. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, *28*(2), 74-81.

Holdheide, L., Goe, L., Croft, A., & Reschly, D. J. (2010). *Challenges in evaluating special education teachers and English language learner specialists*. Washington, DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. Retrieved from http://www.tqsource.org

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446 (2004). Retrieved from https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statuteregulations/

Johnson, E., & Semmelroth, C. L. (2014). Special education teacher evaluation: Why it matters, what makes it challenging, and how to address these challenges. *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, *39*(2), 71-82. doi:10.1177/1534508413513315

Leko, M. M., Brownell, M. T., Sindelar, P.T., & Kiely, M. T. (2015). Envisioning the future of special education personnel preparation in a standards-based era. *Exceptional Children*, *82*(1), 25-43. doi:10.1177/0014402915598782

Mamlin, N. (2012). *Preparing effective special education teachers*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Nevin, A., Thousand, J., Parsons, A. S., & Lilly, M. S. (2000). "The kids keep me fresh!" Results of a follow-up survey of graduates from two special education programs who are teaching. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 27*(1), 87-108. Retrieved from http://www.teqjournal.org/backvols/2000/27_1/2000v27n108.PDF

Prather-Jones, B. (2011). "Some people aren't cut out for it": The role of personality factors in

the careers of teachers of students with EBD. *Remedial and Special Education*, *32*(3),

179-191. doi:10.1177/0741932510362195

Rockoff, J. E., & Speroni, C. (2010, May). Subjective and objective evaluations of teacher

effectiveness. *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, *100*, 261-266.

doi:10.1257/aer.100.2.261

Ruppar, A., Roberts, C., & Olson, A. J. (2015). Faculty perceptions of expertise among teachers

of students with severe disabilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *38*(3),

240-253. doi:10.1177/0888406414552331

Shepherd, K. G., Fowler, S., McCormick, J., Wilson, C. L., & Morgan, D. (2016). The search for

role clarity: Challenges and implications for special education teacher preparation.

*Teacher Education and Special Education*, *39*(2), 83-97.

doi:10.1177/0888406416637904

Spooner, F., Algozzine, B., Wood, C. L., & Hicks, S. C. (2010). What we know and need to

know about teacher education and special education. *Teacher Education and Special

Education, 33*(1), 44-54. doi:10.1177/088840640936184

Steele, J. L., Hamilton, L. S., & Stecher, B. M. (2010). *Incorporating student performance

measures into teacher evaluation systems*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

Retrieved from http://www.rand.org

Steinbrecher, T. D., Fix, R., Mahal, S. A., Serna, L., & McKeown, D. (2015). All you need is

patience and flexibility: Administrators' perspectives on special educator knowledge and

skills. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, *28*(2), 89-102. Retrieved from

http://www.casecec.org/resources/jsel.asp

Trainor, A. A., & Graue, E. (2014). Evaluating rigor in qualitative methodology and research

dissemination. *Remedial and Special Education*, *35*(5), 267-274.

doi:10.1177/0741932514528100

Woolf, S. B. (2015). Special education professional standards: How important are they in the

context of teacher performance evaluation? *Teacher Education and Special Education*

*38*(4), 276-290. doi:10.1177/0888406414557284

Table 1

*Critical Special Education Skill Domains Identified Across Participants' Responses*

| Skill 1: Understanding Disability and Other Impacts on Learning | | |
|---|---|---|
| Underlying Skill Theme | Exemplar | Participant Group |
| "Fundamental knowledge" | | SE |
| | basic fundamental knowledge about disability | SE |
| | knowledgeable about all disability categories | SA |
| "See beyond disability" | | SE |
| | see students' strengths and as whole beings | SE |
| | recognize impacts of prior learning, culture, etc. | TE |
| Individualize | | |
| | create trusting relationships that build on strengths | SE |
| | match instruction and environments to learning styles | SE, SA |
| Sub-Skill: Dispositions toward children | | |
| Patience, empathy, warmth | | |
| | patience, warmth, empathy | SE |
| | empathy, kindness, openness | TE |
| Other | | |
| | love children and be compassionate | SE |
| | kindness, openness | TE |

*Note*.  SE = special education teacher; SA = school administrator; TE = special education teacher educator; text in quotations denotes in vivo code.

Table 1

*Critical Special Education Skill Domains Identified Across Participants' Responses, continued*

| Critical Skill 2: Integrated Expertise | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Underlying Skill Theme | Exemplar | Participant Group |
| Blended expertise | | |
| | blended knowledge across content areas and strategies | TE |
| | provide exceptional general education | TE |
| | integrate diverse content knowledge and practices | SE |
| "Mastery of general education curriculum" | | SA |
| | deep and wide understanding of content areas | TE, SA |
| | more than a working knowledge of the content delivered in inclusion classes | SE, TE |
| Utilize evidence based practices | | SE, TE |
| | differentiation for individual needs | SA |
| | modeling and structured repetition | SE |
| | effective classroom and behavior management | SE |
| "Ensure 'ultimate' valued outcomes" | | TE |
| | ensure academic and social success | SE |
| | social, problem solving, and decision-making skills to prevent victimization | TE |

*Note*.  SE = special education teacher; SA = school administrator; TE = special education teacher educator; text in quotations denotes in vivo code.

Table 1

*Critical Special Education Skill Domains Identified Across Participants' Responses, continued*

| Critical Skill 3: Instructional Flexibility | | |
|---|---|---|
| Underlying Skill Theme | Exemplar | Participant Group |
| Simultaneity | | |
| | deliver content …*while simultaneously* providing individual accommodations | SA |
| | flexibly create new lessons while at the same time teaching what you planned | SE |
| Immediacy | | |
| | think on the spot and adjust as needed | SE |
| | adjust/adapt teaching at a moment's notice | SE |
| | think on their feet and act in real time | SA |
| "Creativity" | | |
| | think in modifications | SA |
| | creatively and continuously revise strategies | SA |
| Anticipatory skills | | |
| | able to think many steps ahead | SE |
| | be ready to adjust in response to students' reactions/learning behaviors | SA |

*Note*. SE = special education teacher; SA = school administrator; TE = special education teacher educator; text in quotations denotes in vivo code.

Table 2

*Critical Special Education Skill Domains Identified by Select Participant Groups*

| Professional Preparedness | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Underlying Skill Theme | Exemplar | Participant Group |
| Professionalism | | |
| | cognitive, verbal, and writing skills | SA |
| | organizational skills, time management | SE, SA |
| Objectivity | | |
| | ability to take a step back | SA |
| | not take student's actions/behaviors personally | SA |
| Commitment and persistence | | |
| | determination, perseverance | SE |
| Sub-skill: Advocacy | | |
| | fight to get students the services they need | SE |
| | advocate for the rights of children | SA |
| Sub-skill: Ongoing Reflection and Professional Development | | |
| | self-evaluate on ongoing basis; self reflection | TE |
| | engage in continued professional development | TE |
| | apply professional development trainings | SA |

*Note*.  SE = special education teacher; SA = school administrator; TE = special education teacher educator; text in quotations denotes in vivo code.

Table 2

*Critical Special Education Skill Domains Identified by Select Participant Groups, continued*

| Role Flexibility* | | |
| --- | --- | --- |

| Underlying Skill Theme | Exemplar | Participant Group |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Work with other professionals | | |
| | work with all stakeholders and providers | SA |
| | collaborate; fulfill instructional roles | SA |
| | negotiate and nurture collegial relationships [across] school settings | SE |
| | communicate about students' needs to team and administration | SE |
| Work with students | | |
| | work with students to develop goals | SA |
| | understand student's learning profile | SA |
| | help students feel comfortable and safe | SE |
| "Willingness" | | |
| | do whatever it takes to support students | SA |
| | to reflect on their practices | SA |
| | to accept criticism | SA |

*Note.* * = Role Flexibility is a sub-skill of Instructional Flexibility; SE = special education teacher; SA = school administrator; TE = special education teacher educator; text in quotations denotes in vivo code.