

# Beginning Teacher Quality: Study Description

## Title

Beginning Teacher Quality in Special Education –  
Understanding the Practices of Beginners

## Questions Addressed

What defines teacher quality in beginning special education teachers?

- What are the classroom practices and beliefs that promote growth in reading skills for 4 th and 5 th grade students with high incidence cognitive disabilities?
- Can we develop an instrument(s) that validly and reliably captures those practices?
- Can we measure the reading knowledge of beginning teachers to determine the role it plays in teacher quality?
- Can we establish the role initial preparation and working conditions play in supporting or hindering a beginning special education teacher's ability to deliver reading instruction?

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## **Description of the Beginning Teacher Quality Study**

Operationalizing beginning teacher quality in both special and general education is imperative in a policy context that emphasizes outcomes and questions the ability of teacher education programs in general to prepare teachers in ways that they can achieve acceptable student outcomes (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2002). While special and general educators have developed numerous standards to guide their practice and the accreditation of teacher education programs, these standards have not been operationalized in ways that they can be used to determine the influence of initial preparation on beginning teacher practice. Moreover, the expansive nature of beginning teacher standards makes them difficult to operationalize (Blanton, Sindelar, Correa, McDonald, & Hardman, 2002). Clearly, we need to develop other measures of beginning teacher practice in special education that can be used to assess the influence of initial preparation (Brownell, Ross, Colon , & McCallum, 2002).

Developing measures of effective beginning teacher practice in special education, however, is no small task. As a field, we have insufficient consensus about what effective teaching looks like (Blanton et al., 2002), and

the complex nature of special education makes it difficult to establish linkages between what teachers do and how their students achieve. Special educators serve students whose needs vary widely across type of disability and age. Moreover, group administered standardized tests, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress used in studies of general education teacher quality, are insufficient indicators of effective performance for students with disabilities. Few special education professionals would argue that one measure of academic achievement is an appropriate indicator of student progress, especially given the complex social and emotional needs that some students may have.

We also have a limited amount of prior research on effective teaching to use as a foundation for examining beginning teacher practice. Prior process product research provided some insight into teaching behaviors that were linked with gains in student achievement (e.g., academic engaged time). However, this research was heavily criticized in the last decade for not capturing the complexity of teaching (Blanton, 1992). More recently, research on effective elementary literacy instruction has emerged that provides a more comprehensive picture of what effective reading teachers do; yet, this research is situated solely in general education classrooms and involves expert teachers (Haager, Gersten, Baker, & Graves, 2002; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). As a field, we need to understand more about the utility of this research for understanding beginning special education teacher practice.

In the sections below, we describe research that is being conducted during year three and four of the COPSSE project as we attempt to capture the practices of beginners by validating an observation measure designed to examine their general instructional practices, classroom management, and instruction specific to reading. Preliminary data is also being collected that relates to the teacher's belief, knowledge, context and preparation

### *Purpose of Study*

We have engaged in research to determine if the classroom practices, beliefs, and knowledge of beginning special education teachers (who teach reading to students with high incidence disabilities in the upper elementary grades) can be linked to student outcomes. To this end, one goal was to validate an observation instrument for determining the quality of beginning special educators' teaching and management. Because we were also interested in teacher beliefs, school context, and the nature and quality of initial preparation, we surveyed and interviewed teachers about how these factors influenced what they did in their classroom. Last,

understanding the level of reading content knowledge in beginners was also critical to understanding how teacher practice contributes to student outcomes. Teachers were surveyed in this regard. All of this research lays the groundwork for future study that links teacher quality, student outcomes and teacher preparation.

### *Methodology*

Beginning teachers (those completing their first, second, or third year) that provide reading instruction to third, fourth, or fifth grade students with high incidence cognitive disabilities were selected for the study. We chose reading instruction because of the extensive knowledge base on effective, research-based reading practices and because reading instruction across these grade levels is likely to be similar. Teachers were drawn from urban, rural, and suburban districts in Florida, California, and Colorado. A total of 38 teachers were observed across the sites. Each teacher was observed three to four times. Numbers of observations were dependent on the amount of time teachers provided reading instruction. During observations, field notes were taken, and then used to complete an observation instrument designed to capture general instructional practices, classroom management, levels of engagement, and comprehensive reading instruction. Items were adapted from the English Language Learner Classroom Observation Instrument developed earlier by Scott Baker, Russell Gersten and colleagues. The instrument was initially used to observe first grade teachers of English language learners. We also interviewed and surveyed teachers about their initial preparation, work context, and beliefs. In addition, reading content knowledge survey was administered, created by the University of Michigan researchers, under the direction of Deborah Ball and Geoffrey Phelps. Student outcome data were collected relating to reading performance in the areas of reading fluency, comprehension, and word attack and word identification. Data collection and analysis will be complete by fall of 2004.

### *Initial Findings*

A sub study was conducted based on data collected during a pilot study in Florida . The purpose of the study was to examine what beginning special education teachers' practices look like in terms of engaging students during reading instruction, and to examine what influences beginning teacher practice.

### **Future Research**

The Center plans to design a new study to address the following question: To what extent does intensity of preparation in reading play a role in beginning teachers' classroom reading practices?

### **Related Research**

\_\_\_\_ Blanton, L. P. (1992). Preservice Education; Essential knowledge for the effective special education teacher. *Teacher Education and Special Education* , 15, 87-96.

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\_\_\_\_ Haager, D., Gersten, R., Baker, S., & Graves , A. (2002). *The English-language learner classroom observation instrument: Observations of beginning reading instruction in*

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\_\_\_\_ Pressley, M., Allington, R. L., Wharton-McDonald, R., Block, C. C., & Morrow, L. M. (2001). Learning to read: Lessons from exemplary first-grade classrooms. *Solving problems in the teaching of literacy*. New York : Guilford .

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