

**“You Know What Works and What Doesn’t:”
How Special Education Teachers
Individualize Instruction for Their Students**



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Focus Questions

- Many teachers identified individualizing instruction as an attribute of a highly effective teacher.
 - What does it mean to individualize instruction?
 - Which components of individualized instruction are used most frequently by special education teachers?

Review of the Literature

- Several research studies have directly or indirectly examined the issue of individualization
 - For the most part these studies suggest that special education teachers do not individualize
 - Studies of the IEPs suggest that teachers and the team may not be attending to information about individual students when crafting goals and objectives (Smith & Simpson, 1990)
 - One qualitative study involving interviews and observations showed that special education teachers did not differentiate instruction (Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998)

Review of the Literature

- Only one study sheds light on how expert special education teachers consider students' individual needs:
 - Stough and Palmer (2003) found that expert special education teachers' extensive knowledge base about students enabled them to assess the academic and behavioral needs of their students and respond to them

The Problem

- Individualized instruction is repeatedly discussed in the literature with little elaboration about definition; instead, individualized instruction remains a somewhat global construct with many ill-defined and untested dimensions

Individualizing Instruction: Possible Dimensions

- Winter reviewed the literature regarding individualization, and identified the various ways in which it is conceptualized:
 - Adapting or differentiating the curriculum to meet identified individual needs
 - Prescriptive or diagnostic teaching based on individual learners' competencies
 - Individual instruction is one to one teaching or tutoring

What Do We Need?

- Since the ability to individualize instruction is so essential to any definition of special education teacher quality, we need research that better identifies its key properties
- The purpose of this study was to describe how special education teachers conceptualize individualization for students with high incidence disabilities

Methods

Special Education Teacher Quality: COPSSE

- Our study is part of larger study of special education teacher quality and its various dimensions.
 - Studied more than 90 special education teachers, both beginners and experienced
 - Special education teachers came from three states: California, Florida, and Colorado

Measures

- Reading Instruction in Special Education (*Items adopted from the English Language Learner Observation Instrument: Baker, Gersten, Haager, Goldenberg, & Graves, 1999*)
- Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (*TORP-Deford, 1995*)
- Special Education Influences on Practices Survey
- Content Knowledge for Teaching Reading Questionnaire (*Ball & Phelps, 2002*)
- Eloise Teacher Interviews

Eloise Teacher Interview

- Beliefs
 - about ability to teach, about learning, about the role of the special education teacher
- General Pedagogical Knowledge
 - about learners and the learning context
- Reflections
 - about teaching reading as a special educator, and the impact teacher education coursework and professional development.

Participants: Teachers (n=20)

- **Teachers (20)**
 - 16 females, 16 Caucasian, 3 Hispanic, 1 DTS
 - BA (7), MA (8), 5th year (5)
 - All have certification in special education
 - 1-31 years of teaching experience
- **Schools**
 - Southern CA urban (10), Northern CA suburban (9)
 - Range of FRL, but many moderately high (18-95%)
- **Instruction**
 - Reading instruction
 - 14 resource rooms, 4 SDC
 - Structured reading curricula
- **Teacher Quality Rating**
 - Range 1-4 mean 2.25

Participants: Students

- Majority of students had Specific Learning Disabilities
- 3rd to 5th grade
- Receive special education instruction for reading and have IEP goals in reading
- 4 to 12 students per teacher

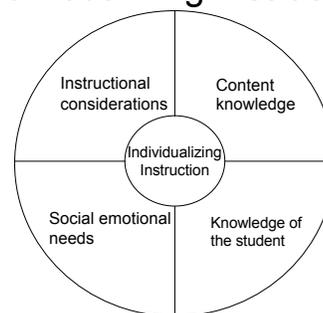
Data Collection

- Individual interview
- Semi-structured responses
- Audio-taped and transcribed
- Coded for descriptions of individualizing instruction

Data Analysis

- Constant Comparison Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
 - Undergoes continuous refinement through the data collection and data analysis process, continuously feeding back into the process of categorical coding
- Trustworthiness
 - Triangulation: multiple observations and measures
 - Peer debriefing
 - Prolonged engagement

Four Properties of Individualizing Instruction



Instructional Considerations

- *Adapting instruction to ability level
- Explicit direct instruction
- Repertoire of strategies
 - Break it down into smaller steps
 - Grouping students/peer work/one on one
 - Visuals, manipulatives
- Keep trying different approaches
- Recognize and teach to different modalities
- Intensity of instruction
 - Constantly monitor
- Prioritize instruction

- “If she doesn’t know all the words that 1st graders are expected to read, we need to start from there.”
- “It’s much more focused on finding the ... I just mean finding individually what’s causing that student to fall below grade level in reading and working closely with the student in that area. If there’s something that is hindering the students progress that you need to get beyond than you have to find out what that is and help the student get beyond that.”
- “Even in a resource program because she’s real needy and she’s not going to get better unless we intensify her instruction right now. She’s already in fourth grade. We’ve gotta get going”
- “I’ll give them maybe 5 things to work on and a worksheet might be 20 things to work on, but we’re addressing those specific things. And so when it’s in small doses like that, we can a little bite of that any day and that usually gives me a chance to target those areas.”

Content Knowledge

- *Understanding how students learn to read
- Understanding general education curriculum
- Working with general education teachers
- Assessing the instructional context
- Adaptations and modifications to general education curriculum
 - Pre-teach, review, extended time, fewer questions, books on tape

- “I think I have a good knowledge of core curriculum of teaching reading, and writing, and math so that I can take those students where they are and really build on that and give them what they need to hopefully read and succeed.”
- “Knowing what I know now I think I could tweak just about anything to make it work because of what I know. But a lot of what I know now is because of the material [curriculum] that I have used.”

Social-emotional Needs

- Understanding unique needs
 - Outside school challenges
 - culture of poverty
 - lack of parent involvement/skills
 - Challenges as a struggling student
- Developing rapport with students
 - Trust
- Using incentives
- Developing a supportive environment

- “I think that with special ed children they already have a rumbling of an awareness that they are not keeping up with their peers. And so its really important to keep their self esteem up. And keep them motivated and interested in learning and a lot of humor does that for me.”
- To keep everyone focused on the same lesson and try to keep the behaviors at bay so they can learn how to self regulate and how to monitor themselves.
- So I think that what I like about being a special education teacher is first of all is the challenge of helping those children to be successful when they've had a lot of failure in their life. I like that challenge. And providing them with a safe environment.

Knowledge of Student

- *As a person, beyond disability or skill level
- *Knowledge of disability and how it impacts learning
- Knowledge of students' ability levels
- Understand strengths and weaknesses
- Careful assessment
- Access and supplement prior knowledge

- “I think that it has to do with, more than anything, knowing the individual because each child that comes into special ed has a specific learning difficulty and so they each need to be addressed in a very individual way.”
- “An effective special education teacher knows their students well. Knows their disability. Danny, for example has memory problems so I need to remember to always review and never assume he knows what he knew the day before. I know my students and their disabilities and know how to help them.”
- “I think it looks different for most every student that you're working with. It's individualized so. I have students who are really struggling with breaking words down into parts and phonics and general not able to grasp that so I try and use sight words and more of a whole word approach for those students. So it looks different for every student. I can't say it looks one way.”

Discussion

- Individualizing instruction is a “given” but definitions are elusive
- Previous research has examined individualization from the researchers’ perspective, and this research suggest that special education teachers do not individualize instruction
- Thus, findings provide a definition of individualization that is grounded in practice and may help us operationalize an important aspect of teacher quality

Questions for Reflection

- What kinds of knowledge would teachers’ need to develop about curriculum, students, and instruction that would enable them to individualize?
- What frameworks could we create in teacher education that would enable teachers to use this knowledge to problem-solve for individual students? (e.g., case studies, video cases)