

# What special education teachers want to know

BY DENISE HEPPNER

**W**hat do special educators want and need to learn more about? In a recent study, I addressed this question by examining the capstone literature review projects of practicing and aspiring special education teachers enrolled in post-degree studies in special education in Saskatchewan, Canada. These research projects offer insight into the areas that teachers were motivated to explore and indicated what themes of professional learning they were seeking.

I examined the literature review topics of 457 special education teachers from 2009 to 2022. Teachers had been asked to choose an area of study they wished to learn more about or an issue they found challenging, with the ultimate goal of positively impacting their teaching.

## THE TOPICS

The top five main themes teachers selected were:

1. Emotional and behavioral difficulties/ disorders.
2. Autism.
3. Reading.
4. At-risk students.
5. Student mental health.



Challenging student behavior has been linked to teacher frustration and stress (Strickland-Cohen et al., 2016). Special educators working with students with challenging behaviors or emotional disturbance experience burnout at crisis proportions (Brunsting et al., 2014), which in turn results in poor student outcomes (Brunsting et al., 2014; Moats, 2020).



Students with disabilities are at a particularly high risk for experiencing reading challenges. Only 12% of students with disabilities read at or above proficient levels in 4th grade, compared to 35% of their peers (Toste & Lindstrom, 2022).





## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IMPLICATIONS

Special educators have specific professional learning needs to support students with special academic and behavioral or emotional needs.

Increasing teacher knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy for dealing with challenging behavior improves student outcomes and mediates the relationship between students' behavior and special educators' burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014).

High-quality professional learning grounded in Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) gives special education teachers the knowledge and tools needed to meet the needs of all students.

System and school leaders and facilitators of professional learning can embody the standards in the following ways:

- **Evidence:** Proactively provide evidence-based learning opportunities on the topics of behavioral and emotional management and reading intervention strategies;

- **Professional Expertise:** Deepen special educators' discipline-specific expertise in management of behavioral and emotional challenges, trauma-informed strategies, and neurodiversity-affirming models of care;
- **Equity Foundations:** Help special educators focus on identifying the underlying problems causing the concerning behaviors and working collaboratively and proactively to solve the problems so all students can achieve (Lives in the Balance, 2023);
- **Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction:** Scaffold special education teachers' knowledge of reading strategies at all levels of student mastery (Moats, 2020); and
- **Culture of Collaborative Inquiry:** Foster effective communication skills in and out of the classroom with all parties involved in educating students with special needs to develop a culture of "we," where all stakeholders are involved (Rock et al., 2016).



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