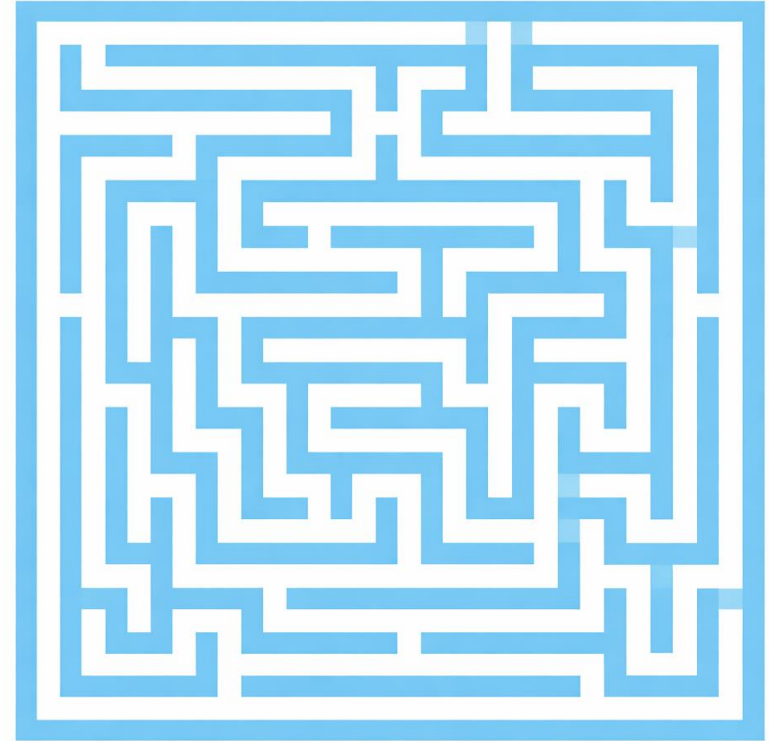


**Special
Education at a
Crossroads:
Possible Future
Paths**

**Andrew Wiley
Kent State University
March 15th, 2026**




Thank You

Greek Primary Teachers Federation

My special education background - 12 years in schools

- Special school for students with severe disabilities
- Special school for students with emotional and behavioral disorders
- Itinerant teacher for autistic students (preschool - high school)
- Behavior specialist - students across placements, grades

I have great respect for all teachers and schools



Following Giant Footsteps

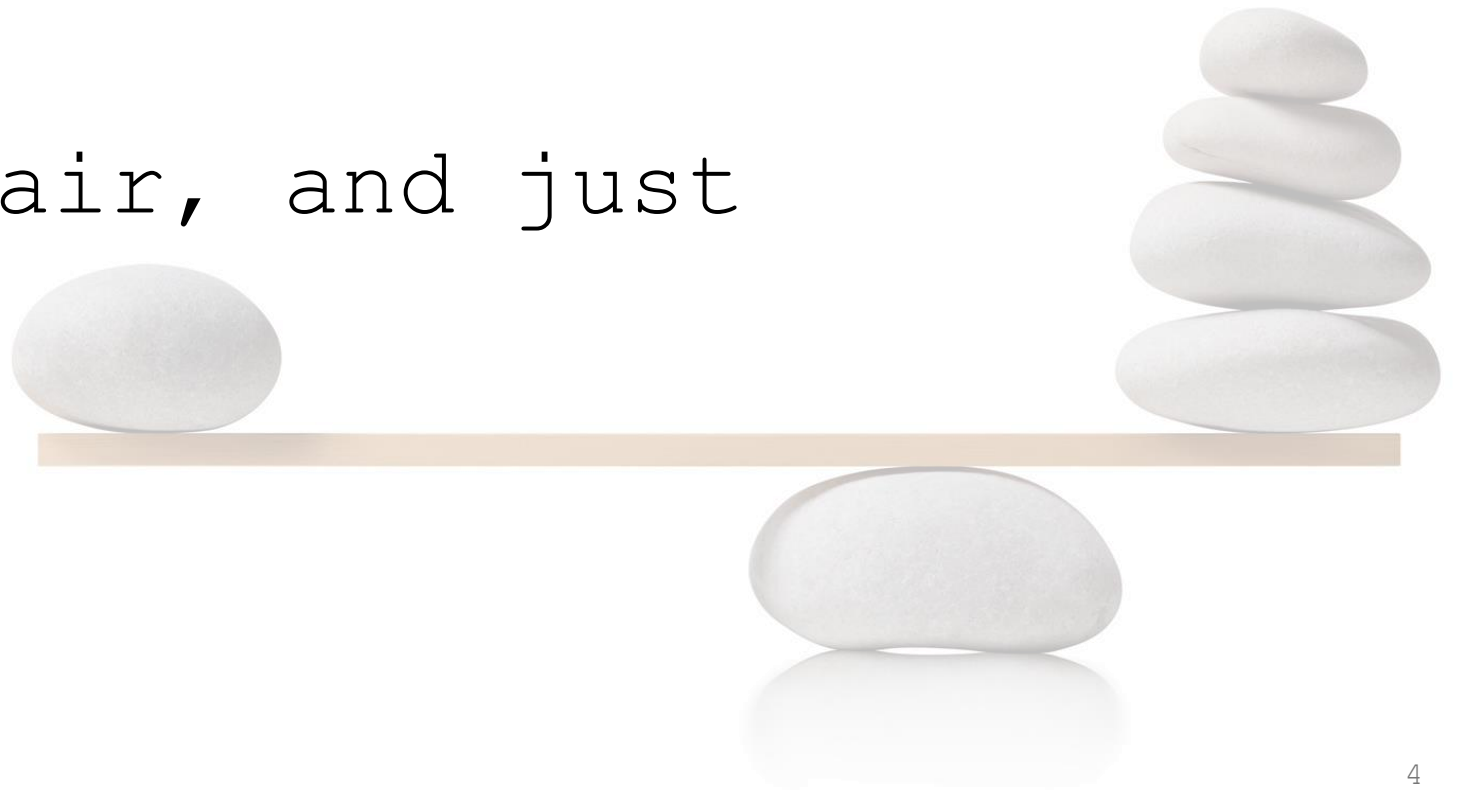
- Dimitris Anastasiou
- Jim Kauffman
- Bryan Cook
- Garry Hornby
- Doug and Lynn Fuchs

Many more...

Our Shared Goal

Better ensuring that special education is


- Equitable, fair, and just
- High-quality



My Scholarship

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Science, Ethics, and Advocacy
- Inclusion and the Continuum of Alternative Placements
- Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)
- Evidence-Based Practices/Knowledge Base
- Supporting Special Educators
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
- Special Education Reform – Good,

Special Education at a Crossroad(s)

Improve, revitalize, strengthen 

 devalue, diminish

Devolve,

Special Education at a Crossroad(s)

- Kauffman, J. M., Anastasiou, D., & Maag, J. W. (2017). Special education at the crossroad: An identity crisis and the need for a scientific reconstruction. *Exceptionality*, 25(2), 139-155.
- Zigmond, N. (2001). Special education at a crossroads. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 45(2), 70-74.
- Gartner, A. (1986). Disabling help: Special education at the crossroads. *Exceptional Children*, 53(1), 72-76.
- Taylor, G. R. (1973). Special Education at the Crossroad. *Mental Retardation* 11(2) 30

Special Education at a Crossroad(s)

- Shevlin, M., & Banks, J. (2021). Inclusion at a crossroads: Dismantling Ireland's system of special education. *Education Sciences*, 11(4), 161.
- Cumming, T. M., Jolly, J. L., & Saint-James, A. (2024). Australia at an educational crossroads: Special schools and inclusive education. In *Frontiers in Education*.
- Thirumurthy, V., & Thirumurthy, V. (2007). Special education in India at the crossroads. *Childhood Education*, 83(6), 380-384.

Current Political Realities in the United States

Trump Administration & Conservatism in USA

- Ideological attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Hostility to public education, public programs, government services
- Dangerous time for special education
- Awareness that destruction is often cloaked in misleading rhetoric

Heritage Foundation; American Conservative Union; Center for Renewing America; Claremont

vs. Center-Right (e.g., Fordham Institute; American Enterprise Institute)

Project 2025

Special Education Funding

- Converting most IDEA funding into **“no-strings” formula grants**
- Sending federal funding **directly to school districts instead of state education agencies**
- Giving states and districts **much greater flexibility in how funds are used**
- Market-oriented, decentralized

Parent-Controlled Funding

- Private schools
- Therapies
- Educational services outside public schools

Possible shift away from IDEA structure

- Federal safeguards tied to IDEA could be weakened or changed.
- States might have more authority to design their own special-education systems

Special
Education
as
Market
Commodity

"...deregulation, marketization, & privatization of public welfare..."

"...if schooling is turned into a market commodity through vouchers, then this would inevitably generate greater inequalities in school resources for children with disabilities."

"...parents with sufficient money would buy additional services in marvelous private schools, beyond the amount of voucher. On the other hand, low-income families could not afford to buy the same services, and under certain circumstances they would choose less prestigious private schools..."

Anastasiou, D., & Kauffman, J. M. (2009). When special education goes to the marketplace: The case of vouchers. *Exceptionality*, 17(4), 205-222.

Policy Insider



Learn about the special and gifted education issues Congress and the administration are considering by reading CEC's Policy Insider. Sign up today to receive weekly e-mail updates!

[STAY INFORMED](#)

Take Action



CEC works with policymakers on Capitol Hill, in the administration, and throughout the federal government to shape legislation that advances the lives of individuals with disabilities and to promote the policy agenda of CEC. Our advocacy only works if you, our advocates, join with us in lending your voice. See our current advocacy topics and engage in advocating with us.

[TAKE ACTION](#)

Advocacy Basics



Find out how you can advocate for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with exceptionalities and the professionals who support them 365 days a year.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Perpetually at a Crossroads

That special education continuously finds itself at a crossroads is concerning

- **Why** we have special education – purpose
- **What** special education should be
- **How** special education should be delivered
- **Where** it should be delivered
- **Who** should deliver it
- **Which way** it should go next



Mature vs. Immature

Professions

- **Practice is guided by validated scientific knowledge**
- Practitioners rely on methods that have been experimentally tested.
- **Clear professional standards**
- There is broad agreement about effective practices.
- **Training aligned with evidence**
- Professional preparation teaches effective practices
- **Limited tolerance for untested fads**
- Must demonstrate effectiveness before widespread adoption.
- **Continuous feedback between research and practice**

Carnine, D. (2000). Why education experts resist effective practices (and what it would take to make education more like medicine)

Mature vs. **Immature** Professions

- **Practice based heavily on opinion or ideology**
- Methods may spread without strong evidence.
- **Low consensus about effective practices**
- Competing approaches coexist without clear standards.
- **Preparation programs teach conflicting methods**
- Training varies widely across institutions.
- **Frequent fads and trends**
- New ideas replace old ones without strong empirical validation.
- **Weak accountability to outcomes**

Special Education's Crossroads

-
1. Ethics, Science, & Advocacy – Roles and Relationships
 2. IDEA – Embrace or Abandon?
 3. FAPE – Primary or Secondary?
 - a. Full Inclusion vs. Continuum of Alternative Placements
 - b. Optimizing Knowledge Base
 - c. Translating Knowledge Base
 - d. Sustaining High-Quality, Equitable Special Education

Crossroad #1-Ethics, Science, & Advocacy

Roles and relationships for better ensuring that special education is:

- Equitable, fair, and just
- High-quality

Ethics

Goals of special education and
how we pursue those goals

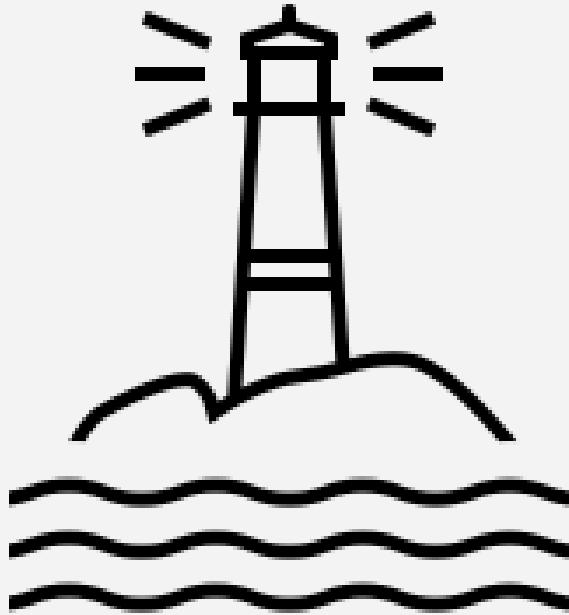


- **Beneficence** - maximizing benefit, minimizing harm
- **Justice** - fair and equitable distribution of benefits
- What we ***ought*** to do



Science

Informs and **guides** pursuit of goals



- **Is** this beneficial? **Is** this harmful?
Is this fair? **Is** this equitable?
- Is this most likely to be beneficial?
Under what circumstances?

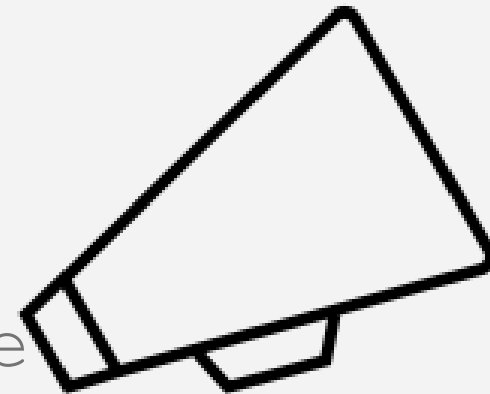
Starts with questions, seeks least biased/most objective answers

Scientific inquiry and methods are a check against ideology, intuition, authority, tradition, superstition, bias to avoid injustice and harm

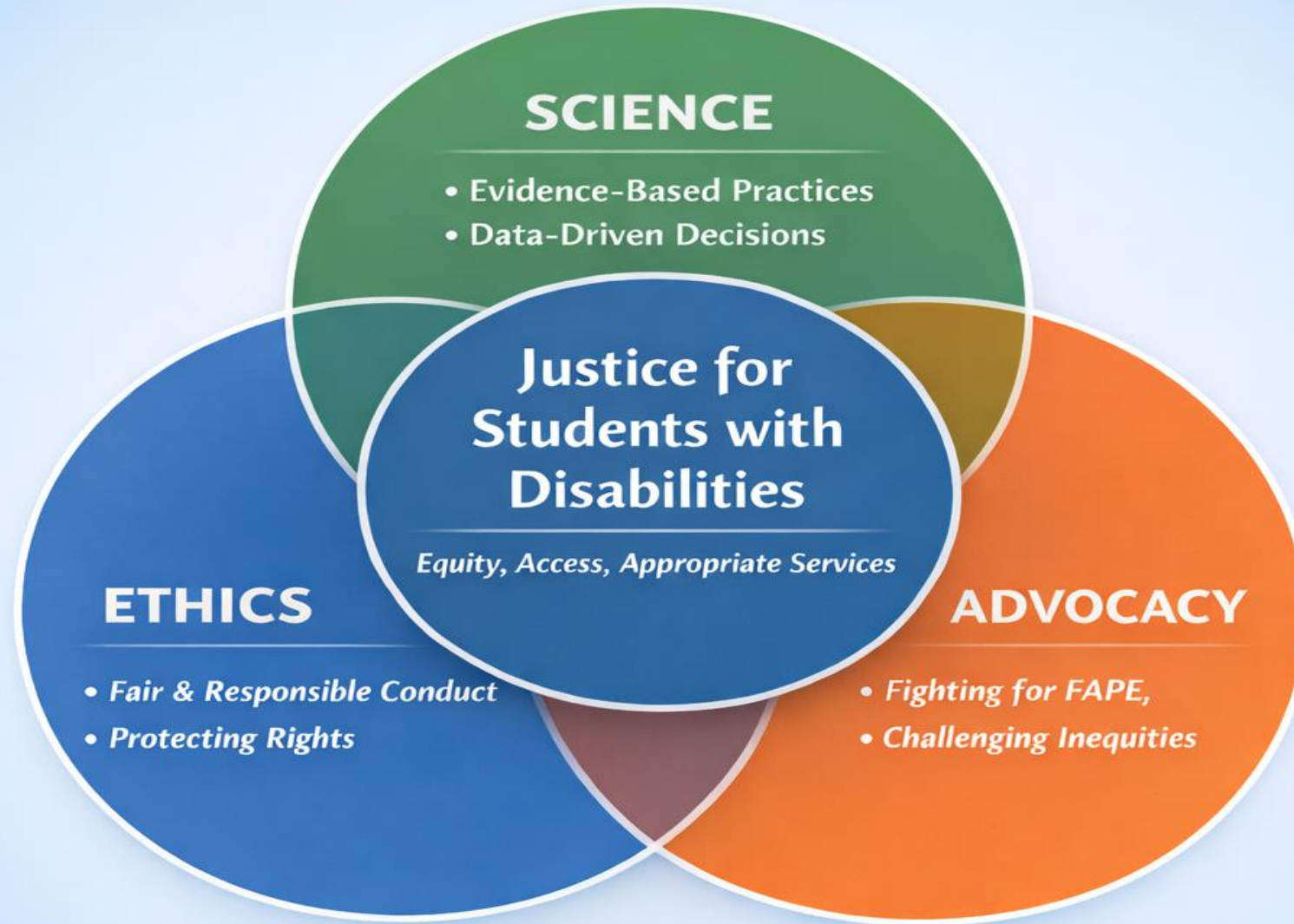
Advocacy

- Intentional actions to **promote** beneficence and justice
- Laws, policies, rights, funding, resources, supports
- **Starts with answers** - actions that are most likely* to promote beneficence and justice

* *Based on evidence and objective data and constrained by ethics*



Promoting Justice in Special Education



Integrating Science, Ethics, and Advocacy for Educational Equity

Clarifying vs. Blurring Roles & Relationships

Values (Seeking Justice) and Science (Seeking Truth)

Context of discovery

- Values, interests, and social concerns influence what scientists study.
- Example: choosing to research reading instruction for students with disabilities.

Context of justification

- Claims must be supported through **systematic evidence and transparent methods**.
- Hypotheses are tested through data, replication, and peer review.



Science isn't value free → Science is just politics

Blurring Roles & Relationships

Movements in special education that:

- Deny objectivity
- Blend/blur ideology and methodology
- Blend/blur values and science

Commitment to Social Justice/Commitment to Truth Seeking

Centering Personal Narratives/Testing Competing Claims

Blurring Roles & Relationships

Disability Studies in Education

- *Science isn't value free → personal narratives = other scientific methods*
- *Science=medical model → remediation, normalization, correcting deficits**
- *Science=pathologizing disability → rather than societal transformation*
- *IDEA/FAPE → Full Inclusion/Ending "Segregated" Special Education*

* *"Correcting Deficits = Teaching?"*

Critical Special Education, DisCrit, QuantCrit

Example of Why it Matters

Disproportionate
Identification
of Minority
Students

Evidence that
minority
students are
underidentified
and underserved
in special
education

Impact of
poverty on
development and
disability

other areas
(e.g., medicine,
mental health)
less
controversial,
recognized as

For this issue,
what are the
right or just
things to do?

Crossroad #2 IDEA – Embrace or Abandon?

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

- Laws and policies are where debates/crossroads meet reality – what are our commitments?
- Legal framework for making judgments for providing equitable, high-quality special education
- Who, what, how, **why?** Why do we have special education?

IDEA



- Qualifying disability category, adversely affects educational performance
- Appropriate, nondiscriminatory evaluation
- FAPE - specially designed instruction* → IEP
- **Least restrictive environment - with nondisabled peers to maximum extent appropriate**
- **Continuum of alternative placements - general education, resource room, self-contained classroom, special school, residential, home, hospital**
- Parent participation, Procedural safeguards, Zero reject

IDEA –
Embrace
or
Abandon?

Attacks from Inside Special Education

- Full inclusion critics -
IDEA=segregation (Taylor & Sailor, 2024)
- MTSS advocacy - IDEA=unnecessary
- Disproportionate identification
controversies - IDEA=perpetuating racism
- Proliferation of pseudoscience and anti-
science (left/liberal)

Attacks from Outside Special Education

- Dismantling of Department of Education
where IDEA is “housed”
- Attacks on public education/school
choice advocacy
- State control vs. federal control
- Proliferation of pseudoscience and anti-
science (right/conservative)

IDEA – Embrace or Abandon?

Perhaps it is time to question IDEA – almost 50 years old
Surely it can be updated, improved, or perhaps even
eliminated?

- Qualifying students with disabilities – can't everyone qualify?
- Specially designed instruction, individualized education programs – Too hard? Unnecessary?
- Continuum of alternative placements, full inclusion – one decision for all?
- Identification includes labels, potential stigma, potential errors – stop labeling?
- No longer need a dedicated system for special education – merge with general education?

What can and should we do away with?

Special Education

What It Is and Why We
Need It

Second Edition

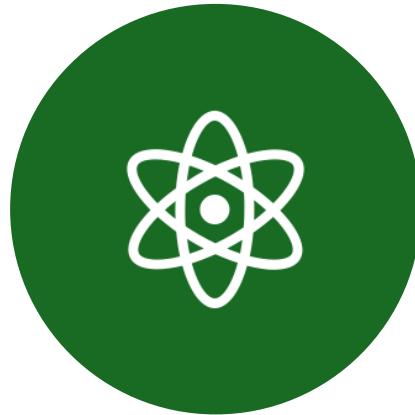
**James M. Kauffman,
Daniel P. Hallahan,
Paige C. Pullen, and
Jeanmarie Badar**



IDEA at a Crossroads



ETHICS AS A GUIDE –
WHAT ARE OUR GOALS?



SCIENCE AS A GUIDE –
WHAT DO WE KNOW?



ADVOCACY – EMBRACE,
REPLACE, OR ABANDON
IDEA?

Crossroads #3: FAPE – Primary or Secondary?

Important
question – what
are our goals?

Must we
prioritize
goals?

look like
when we “get
there” ?
What is
high-
quality,
equitable
special

Crossroads #3: FAPE – Primary or Secondary?

Current IDEA – FAPE is the **primary obligation**

Placement in general education is **presumptive**, but can be overridden to ensure FAPE

Inclusion in general education is secondary to FAPE

“Appropriate” – Individualized, addresses unique needs, meaningful progress, least restrictive environment

IDEA **is** Inclusive Special Education

1. Inclusion is Important but Not Absolute

2. Special Education Expertise Is Essential

3. A Continuum of Support Is Necessary

4. Individual Needs Should Drive Placement

- Students with disabilities participate in general education as much as appropriate
- Receive specially designed instruction
- Services are flexible and individualized
- The goal is learning outcomes, not simply placement in general education classrooms

Hornby, G. (2014). *Inclusive special education*. New York: Springer.

Is FAPE Primary in Special Education Advocacy?

Most advocacy for students with disabilities in education focuses on the **place of instruction**

- Full inclusion movement
- Powerful emotional appeals
- Opposition to "segregation," unequal (special?) treatment

Assumption of no "trade off" between FAPE and inclusion - fair and just instruction can and will be provided in general education in every or nearly every case....

Why FAPE is Primary in IDEA

- "...the appropriateness and effectiveness of special education can make the difference **between more or less independence, better or worse quality of life, and better or worse outcomes** across the lifespan. Effective instruction can significantly **reduce or prevent lifelong exclusion from the community**. This includes mitigating challenges related to unemployment or underemployment, decreased participation in postsecondary education, difficulty forming or maintaining relationships, involvement with the justice system, and fewer options for more independent living as adults. It is for these reasons that in IDEA's legal and moral framework, **FAPE is the primary obligation** with the LRE an important but secondary obligation. If one priority must "bend"

FAPE at a Crossroads

Must we prioritize FAPE or inclusion, one or the other?

Can we have both in every or almost every case, as full inclusion advocates claim?

If We Choose FAPE as Primary – What Then?

Specially Designed Instruction
Individualized Education Plan

If we prioritize FAPE, what does better
ensuring FAPE require?

How can we best close the research-to-
practice gap?

How do we advocate for FAPE?

Crossroads within the FAPE Crossroad



A. Full Inclusion vs. CAP

- Assumption in IDEA is that FAPE cannot always be achieved satisfactorily in general education environments
- Ensuring FAPE requires a **continuum of alternative placements** (CAP)
- Place must 'bend' to instruction

CAP – Unnecessary and/or Immoral?

- “Separate placements constitute ableist segregation”
- “Unfair to make students ‘earn’ inclusion”
- “CAP is based on a ‘deficit mindset’”
- “Special education is a service, not a place”
- “Inclusion = better outcomes for students with disabilities”
- “We now know how to make general education effective for all”

CAP – Necessary and Good?

Location and Specially Designed
Instruction/IEP

Dimensions (Allowances &
Constraints)

- **Physical** – space, noise, safety, materials
- **Social** – class size, stigma, peers, support
- **Practical** – efficiency, feasibility, implementation
- **Professional** – authority, roles, responsibility, tasks
- **Programmatic** – structure, predictability, purpose

B. Optimizing Knowledge Base

- **Evidence-Based Practices** – High-Quality, Appropriate Research Designs
- Ensuring Rigorous Research Practices – **Open Science** (Cook et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2022)
- Ensuring Scientific Rigor in **Communication & Dissemination**

Evidence-Based? Co-Teaching; Universal Design for Learning; Multi-Tiered Systems of Support; Full Inclusion

- **Understanding of disability** and the implications of disability for education – cultural, social, psychological, biological – Interactional Models of Disability

C. Translating Knowledge Base

Research-to-Practice Gap

Gaps within the Research-to-Practice Gap

1. Research-to-Teacher Training Gap
2. Research-to-Working Conditions Gap
3. Sustaining Special Education

1. Research-to-Teacher Training Gap

Professional Knowledge Base → **Special Education Curriculum**

Currently, the development and design of **special educator training** is neither systematic nor evidence-based

High-quality, equitable special educator training requires a **science of special educator preparation** – evidence-based curriculum & instruction

Special education teacher educators need training, certification, and tools (curricula that have been rigorously tested and validated)

1. Research- to- Teacher Training Gap

Special Educator Curriculum or Curricula

- Disabilities
- Ages
- Academic Curriculum
- Independence Curriculum (Adaptive, Functional)
- Social/Emotional/Behavioral
- Evidence-Based Practices

Translation of Knowledge Base into Evidence-Based Training

Pre-Service and In-Service Training

STEPHANIE STIMAC DEBOOR
EDITOR

KEATING'S CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION IN NURSING EDUCATION

FIFTH EDITION



Keating Nursing Curriculum

**Curriculum is evidence-based,
systematically designed, and continuously
evaluated**

- **Systematic curriculum design and testing**
- **Alignment between outcomes, instruction, and evaluation**

1. Research-to-Teacher Training Gap



Certified Special Education Teacher Educator (CSETE)



Competencies and knowledge for effectively implementing special educator curricula



Standards, training, certification



Program accreditation aligned with curriculum

CERTIFIED NURSE EDUCATOR

REVIEW BOOK

THE OFFICIAL NLN GUIDE
TO THE CNE[®] EXAM

Second Edition

LINDA CAPUTI, EdD, MSN, RN, CNE, ANEF, EDITOR



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2. Research- to-Working Conditions Gap

Conditions Necessary to Deliver FAPE

- Tools (Validated Curricula, Programs, Materials, Equipment)
- Professional Identity
- Professional Autonomy Constrained by Knowledge Base
- Professional Authority Grounded in Competence
- Role Clarity
- Resources Necessary to Accomplish Professional Functions
- Support Across Continuum of Alternative Placements

2. Research-to-Working Conditions Gap

To make special education better, it must be
made better for special educators



What we do – or fail to do – that makes
special education harder for special
educators undermines FAPE and hurts students
with disabilities

3. Sustaining Special Education

System to Sustain & Continuously Improve Special Education

Laws and Regulations

Public Funding

Rigorous, Specialized Training w/ Developmental Framework

Research (Design/Methods Matched to Purpose; Rigor)

Evidence-Informed Advocacy

Clear Thinking & Communication

Where Next for Special Education?

Thank You
Questions/Discussion