

Special education teachers should be prepared in 'scaffolded' approach, professor says

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People might not think of special education teachers and surgeons as having much in common, but the way they learn their crafts could, and perhaps should, be more alike. A University of Kansas special education professor has co-authored research arguing that if special education teachers are going to educate students who are able to meet the demands of a global society, they should be prepared in a system that "scaffolds" knowledge, or provides knowledge in phases and offers feedback on learning throughout the process, all while collaborating with experts in the field.

As surgeons learn their craft, they are presented with increasingly high-level education. During this education, they also have a chance to practice techniques they will use on patients and receive feedback on that performance from educators and experts. Traditionally, as [teachers](#) learn their trade, they take several years of classes, then begin student teaching.

"Historically, pre-service teachers are told 'this is how you teach a student,' but they don't necessarily get the chance to do it," said Melinda Leko, assistant professor of [special education](#) at KU. "Now more than ever we need expert teachers. We're not going to prepare students to meet the standards of college and career readiness that are expected of them without expert teachers."

Leko and co-authors call for the adoption of expertise models in special education teacher preparation in an article published in the journal *Exceptional Children*. Leko co-authored the article with Mary Brownell and Paul Sindelar of the University of Florida and Mary Theresa Kiely of Queens College, City University of New York. Such a model would, in essence, provide students with theory and education and increasing opportunities to practice teaching from the beginning of their education. All the while, they would receive feedback from professors and educators working in the field on their performance and how they can improve.

For example, as future teachers read about teaching concepts, they could be assigned to describe how they could use the concept in teaching, put the idea to use in tutoring a single student and eventually teach an entire class, receiving feedback on the process throughout.

Leko shares the example of an athlete who receives training starting with the fundamentals, and as they progress in their sport, receive continued coaching and watch film of their performance all in effort to improve. But whereas the field of play and rules remain the same, education is much more nuanced.

"We're trying to develop experts in a very different context," Leko said. "Classes and expectations change from year to year."

Timing in developing such an approach is especially important, as states increasingly adopt more rigorous standards such as Common Core State Standards and multi-tiered systems of support. Such standards require not only proficiency in measurable areas, but teachers who are able to provide support to students at multiple levels in increasingly sophisticated methods.

The researchers offer first steps in ways teacher education programs

could adopt expertise models that align with the science of learning including deliberate, scaffolded practice opportunities; structured tutoring; coursework coupled with field experiences; performance feedback and reflection; peer coaching; and collaboration coordinated instruction. Such an approach would prepare teachers that are started on a path to teaching expertise sooner and more consistently. Thus, teachers entering the field will have had numerous opportunities to interact with students and fellow teachers and expect to continue their education and honing of their craft throughout their careers.

Technology is not only critical, but provides ample opportunities to experience teaching and feedback in a virtual environment. The military, astronautics and medicine have all widely adopted simulations as a virtual teaching tool that provides learning experiences that can be closely controlled. Technology exists to provide students experiences that "closely mimic real-life classrooms but can be tightly controlled so teacher education students have opportunities to practice discrete skills, develop routines, receive feedback and repeat practice with situations that present increasing complexity all without risk of harm to students," the authors wrote.

Leko and colleagues go on to encourage policy at federal and state levels that would support adopting expertise models. They argue for better collaboration between federal and state departments of [education](#), colleges, teacher preparation programs and school district partners to enhance student opportunities and better pairing of future teachers with student teaching mentors. They also share examples of organizations that are leading the way in such work and encourage federal funding of research that would continue to explore and support adoption of expertise models.

"If we could, as a field, say every special educator can and will have a very strong foundation and expertise in core areas before they enter the

field then we would have teachers who prepare students better and continue to learn throughout their careers," Leko said.

Provided by University of Kansas

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