

Limited Evidence Based Practices in SPED: What's a Teacher to Do?

Limited Evidence Based Practices in Special Education: What's a Teacher to Do?:

A Meta-Synthesis

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### **Abstract**

Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind, there has been a push for scientifically based methodologies in education. While the same holds true for special education, the progress is notably slower than in the general education field. Research in regards to Evidence Based Practices (EBPs) in special education is extremely limited. Furthermore, the individualization of special education and the variation in which each individual presents their disability require that educators not use one approach to meet the needs of all students. Given the limited availability, educators must familiarize themselves with the characteristics of EBPs to make informed instructional decisions. EBPs must be implemented with fidelity. Furthermore, they must monitor student progress and be responsive to each individual's needs. It is clear that education is in the midst of a scientific based reform. The availability of research is limited, and additional research will need to be conducted in the future.

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### **1. Introduction**

#### *1.1. Background*

My initial research for this paper was in regards to the use of learning centers in secondary special education. Early on, it was clear that availability of resources was scarce. Throughout my search, I was repeatedly met with stagnant, outdated views of the use of learning centers. Moreover, what limited references I did encounter were all based in elementary application and not secondary.

As appears to be the case throughout the history of special education, scientific based research is limited. Special educational research experiences a funnel effect in regards to educational practices. Educationally based research for general education has more availability and encompasses a wider scope. As we move into special education, educationally based research becomes more limited.

This is when the focus of my research shifted dramatically. No longer was my focus on learning centers in the secondary special education classroom, it was now focused on Evidence Based Practices (EBPs) in special education. In my research that it became clear that while some information was out there, it's scope was limited. This led me to the second component of my research, what exactly is a teacher to do given the fact that there is limited research and identification of EBPs in special education.

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EBPs are relatively new to education (Detrich & Lewis, 2012). Prior to its application to education, research was limited to the scientific world. As educational research has shifted, so has teacher pedagogy. According to Mustain, Mazzotti & Test, educators are recognizing the importance of implementing EBPs in their classrooms. Education is moving into a new research based era (Mustian, Mazzotti, & Test, 2012).

Being responsive to students and their diverse needs is the hallmark of a great teacher. Another mark of a great teacher is their ability to remain cognizant that effective teaching methodologies vary from student to student. Being responsive and effectively applying EBPs to the classroom assists teachers in ensuring that their students are well equipped for their future. In education, future independence will look drastically different from one student to the next. This is the cornerstone of Special Education. In looking at the fundamental evolution of the use of EBPs in education, it's clear that it is intended to ensure that students receive the most constructive services as well as to protect students from the use of inept practices (Spaulding, 2009).

Controversy has arisen in special education since its conception. According to Spaulding (2009), throughout special educational history, multiple crucial concerns have been identified and argued. In today's special education system, issues such as access and inclusion have made way for issues such as the identification and use of EBPs. Currently, a push for the identification and effective implementation of EBPs in special education is at the forefront of major educational reform along with other crucial topics such as: the importance of functional

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curriculums being taught, transition planning, graduation rates, and generalization of skills learned.

Public Law-94-142 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allowed students with special special needs to access their education and allowed for certain protections. Sadly, both of these groundbreaking legislations did very little in regards influence and regulate the effectiveness of practices and services provided (Spaulding, 2009). When No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed in 2001, teachers were required to base their instruction on scientifically based research (Detrich & Lewis, 2012). In their paper, A Decade of Evidence-Based Education: Where Are We and Where Do We Need to Go, Detrich and Lewis (2012) cite Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg and Hayes (2000) when they assert that the push for EBPs got its start in the medical field before spreading to multiple human services applications. More recently, in 2015, President Obama signed into effect the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) . This most recent educational legislation relinquishes some control of education from the federal government and places it back in the hands of states. In a time when federal and state educational initiatives act to standardize teaching across the board, as educators we must remember that individualization is the key component of special education (Spaulding, 2009).

Despite NCLB's mandate that scientifically based educational practices be implemented in the classroom, implementation in special education is still in it's infancy. A tremendous discrepancy between academic related achievement for individuals with disabilities and their

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typical counterparts remains evident (Spaulding, 2009). According to Spaulding (2009), one of the foundational challenges in special education is identifying which particular educational interventions are the most effective at meeting the unique needs of diverse students. According to the Council for Exceptional Children's Interdivisional Research Group (2014), while EBPs in special education continue to grow, there is still a void left by limited research. They go on to stress that the effective implementation of EBPs in special education should be of high priority.

### *1.2 Author's Beliefs and Experiences*

It is my belief that more must be done to get EBPs fully integrated into special education. As history has revealed, special education experiences the funnel effect in regards to initiatives. I believe this is partially because special education has a separate classification. It is seen as a separate component of education rather than being a fully integrated part of the educational system. I also believe that special education is at the forefront of providing an individualized education to its students. All students would benefit from a specialized education.

I am interested in finding out more about this topic because as a future special education teacher I want to know how to best meet the needs of my individual students. I also want to ensure that I am using teaching methodologies that have been proven to be effective. I believe this will maximize learning time. This will be beneficial to my students. In my experience as the Lead Behavior Technician for my local school district I have seen many strategies employed that were not effective. Oftentimes I felt as though the teaching methodology employed had more to do with teacher convenience than student success. As educators we must be responsive to

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our student's needs and not base our instructional methodologies on what's most convenient for us.

This particular topic is of importance to me because I have seen ineffective strategies being employed all too often. This seems to be especially true in regards to self contained special education classrooms. Partially I think this is because when people are faced with severe behaviors or students with multiple and severe disabilities, they are at a loss for what to do. When people are at a loss they do what they think is best rather than researching what has been proven to be effective.

Sadly, I have also witnessed things that have been unethical. I was once asked to observe a student with Autism who had limited verbal ability. He was in a self-contained special education classroom in a secondary school. There were concerns regarding sexual behavior such as inappropriate sexual comments and public erections and masturbation. When I inquired as to what they did when inappropriate sexual behavior occurred I was told that they take the student into the bathroom and place an icepack on his pants in the genital region. I was shocked! This is not a teaching strategy! I don't think they did this intentionally to hurt him, I believe they did it because they didn't know what else to do. When I inquired as to what they do to proactively teach him about inappropriate sexual behavior in public, they told me they just tell him to stop.

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In response, I developed a plan that introduced effective and proven strategies which included a proactive plan for teaching personal and sexual health in a way that the student could benefit from. This required modification of materials, and the incorporation of visual supports. Staff is now confident as to what they need to teach on the proactive side as well as the how to handle any undesirable sexual behaviors in the moment. I am happy to report that the student is now making a tremendous amount of progress.

The social implications of this topic are immense. By using EBPs in their teaching, educators can assist students in learning socially relevant skills. They can also assist their students in learning the skills they need to live an independent life. While it is important to note that many students receiving special education will never lead a fully independent life, they can be taught to live as independently as they're capable of. This will look drastically different from one student to the next.

Throughout my research I hope to gain knowledge as to what the characteristics of EBPs. I believe this is of importance because identification of EBPs in special education is limited. Because information is so limited, I also think it's important for educators to know what to do in the absence of EBPs. I believe that my fellow educators can benefit from learning about characteristics of EBP so they can make informed instructional decisions. In turn, I believe this will help students and their families by assisting the student in making progress towards their annual goals and increasing their level of independence. By increasing student independence, their quality of life can increase. This holds true for their families as well.

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### *1.3. Purpose of this meta-synthesis*

My purpose in conducting the review of this literature is to identify research based information to better inform my instruction. By using peer reviewed articles I can have trust that the information I'm basing my teaching strategies on is accurate and valid. I believe that by using EBPs in the classroom I can better foster student success. I believe this is crucial in reaching the needs of my diverse students and becoming an effective teacher. Moreover, I believe that teaching students with special needs requires fidelity in the teaching strategies being employed.

My research questions are many. The first question I will look into is, what defines an EBPs as well as what are the characteristics of EBPs. I will then explore any problems related to EBPs. I will question what happens in regards to the implementation of EBPs in special education. Finally, I will try to come to a conclusion as to what a teacher should do when there are no available EBP's.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Selection criteria*

The articles that were reviewed for this Meta-Synthesis had to meet the selection criteria that follows:

- 1) Articles had to be related to the identification or implementation of EBPs in education.
- 2) Articles had to be peer reviewed.

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Admittedly, the selection criteria are minimum. This is because an excesses of selection criteria would have minimized even more an already limited field. In further exploration of this topic I would add additional selection criteria. This would occur once more resources became available. Too many constraints would not have produced enough references for a quality Meta-Synthesis. In developing this Meta-Synthesis, I also included resources from the course site to use for reference on formatting questions.

### *2.2. Search procedures*

To locate articles for this meta-synthesis, I conducted database searches and ancestral searches on the subjects of learning centers and EBPs.

#### *2.2.1 Database searches*

I utilized Boolean operators to characterize my search on the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC, Ebscohost) database. I searched for articles based on the following key terms:

Initial research on the use of learning centers in secondary special education:

1. ("Learning Centers")
2. ("Special Education") AND ("Learning Centers")
3. ("Special Education") AND ("Learning Stations")
4. ("Special Education") AND ("Structured Learning Centers")
5. ("Learning Centers") AND ("Daily Living")
6. ("Learning Centers") AND ("Special Needs")
7. ("Free Play") AND ("Learning Centers")

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8. ("Learning Centers") AND ("Classroom")
9. ("Learning Centers") AND ("Topics")
10. ("Learning Centers") AND ("Preschool")
11. ("Learning Centers") AND ("Classroom")
12. ("Student Lead") AND ("Learning Centers")
13. ("Learning Centers") AND ("Student Lead")
14. ("Adolescent") AND ("Learning Centers")
15. ("Functional Learning Centers")
16. ("Functional Curriculum")
17. ("Secondary") AND ("Learning Centers")
18. ("Vocational") AND ("Learning Centers")

## Research on EBPs in Special Education:

1. ("Evidence Based Practices") AND ("Education")
2. ("Evidence Based Practices") AND ("Special Education Education")
3. ("Best Practice") AND ("Special Education")
4. ("Special Education") AND ("EBP")
5. ("Autism") AND ("Evidence Based Practice")

The searches on EBPs in Special Education produced the following eight articles:

(Center for Exceptional Children, 2014; Center for Exceptional Children Interdivisional Research Group, 2014; Cook, Tankersley, Harjusola-Webb, 2008; Detrich, 2008; Detrich & Lewis, 2014; Mustain, Mazzotti & Test, 2013; Spaulding, 2009; Torres, Farley & Cook, 2014)

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Formatting research on the course site yielded the following article:

(McKim, n.d.)

It is important to note in the examination of this Meta-Synthesis that two major variables in regards to the limited resources were identified. The first, limited research in regards to EBPs in special education. Limited research directly impacts the number and types of credible resources available. Secondly, the transition of the focal point of this Meta-Synthesis from the use of learning centers in secondary special education to bigger picture focus on the EBPs in the special education classroom was also a major limitation.

If semester time constraints were not in effect, more resources could have been identified and analyzed in regards to this Meta-Synthesis. If time had allotted, I intended to incorporate subjects such as: progressive education, scientific education and educational research in to database searches. I view this Meta-Synthesis as a starting point rather than an end all. My research in the identification and implementation of EBPs in special education continues.

What's interesting is that all of these articles identified were written within the past nine years. This shows that as educators and researchers we are moving into a new educational era in which EPBs are being identified and implemented in special education. Given increased

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interest in EBPs in special education, I remain confident that future research on EPBs will generate a wealth of available resources. This is progressive education in action.

### 2.2.2 Ancestral searches

I conducted several ancestral searches by reviewing the reference list of the articles that I reviewed for use in this paper. Ancestral searches on learning centers is what lead me to revise my topic. Moreover, I noticed that several of the articles cited the same resources. I believe this is a testament to the limited availability of articles. The following three references were explored and the direction of this Meta-Synthesis shifted based on the following ancestral searches:

Detrich, R. (2008) Evidence-based, empirically supported, or best practice? A guide for the scientific practitioner. In J.K. Luiselli, D.C. Russo, W.P. Christian & S.M. Wilczynski (Eds.), *Effective practices for children with autism: Educational and behavior support interventions that work* (pp.3-25). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Detrich & Lewis (2013). A Decade of Evidence-Based Education: Where Are We and Where Do We Need to Go. *Journal of Positive Behavior Intervention*, 15(4), 214-220

Torres, C.T., Farley, C.A., & Cook, B.G. (2014). A Special Educator's Guide to Successfully Implementing Evidence-Based Practices. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 47(2), 85-93

### 2.3. Coding procedures

Each of the articles and guides identified were coded on a form using the following codes:

- 1) Research Study
- 2) Theoretical work
- 3) Descriptive article
- 4) Position paper

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- 5) Guides
- 6) Annotated bibliography
- 7) Reviews of literature

*2.3.1. Publication type*

Through the use of a form (table1), Coding was used in regards to various types of publications. *Research Studies* gather and/or analyze data that is qualitative and/or quantitative using formal research designs. *Theoretical works* analyze or expand literature to further define theory or philosophical inference. *Descriptive works* explore experiences and phenomena however; they do not disclose the methods used to collect data. *Position papers* are an articles in which an author or multiple authors state their opinions and/or their beliefs to describe, justify, or make recommendations for an action plan. *Guides* are a way in which to guide practitioners who may choose to implement a particular methodology. *Annotated bibliographies* cite various works on a specific topic and each entry includes a short description that serves to evaluate or critique the listed sources. *Reviews of literature is a summary*, classification and comparison that critically analyze literature that has been published.

**Table 1**

<b>Author(s)( &amp; Year of Publication</b>	<b>Publication Type</b>
Center for Exceptional Children 2014	Theoretical Work
Center for Exceptional Children Interdivisional Group (2014)	Position Paper
Cook, Tankersley & Harjusola-Webb (2008)	Position Paper
Detrich (2008)	Position Paper

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Detrich & Lewis (2013)	Theoretical Work
McKim (n.d.)	Position Paper
Mustian, Mazzotti & Test (2012)	Theoretical Work
Spaulding (2009)	Theoretical Work
Torres, Farley & Cook (2014)	Guide

*2.3.2. Research design*

Due to the nature of: this topic, limited availability of articles, infancy of application, and time constraints, research studies were not readily identifiable on this topic. This is an area for further exploration and identification of resources. If research articles had been identified, each study would have been classified as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. *Quantitative* conveys important information using numbers. *Qualitative* explores issues and phenomenon using language. *Mixed methods* uses both quantitative and qualitative to relay information in a given study.

*2.3.4. Participants, data sources, and findings*

Had research studies been available, I would have also identified each study's participants as well as data sources that had been identified. If research studies had been identified, they would have been included (table 2).

**Table 2**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Findings</b>
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

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### *2.4. Data analysis*

In 2015, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) which, for the first time, required educators to use Evidence Based Practices (EBPs) in their classrooms was replaced by The Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA). One of the most notable changes in the transition to ESSA is the shift from federally mandated practices to more state level instructional control. This allows far more flexibility in educational practices and allows states to offer a more culturally responsive education for each individual state's diverse population. More local control is a step in the right direction.

In addition to the legislation changes, it is clear that educators are transitioning to an evidence based educational system. Educators are making a conscience choice to implement EBPs in their classrooms (Mustain, Mazzotti & Test, 2013). Despite having only limited education based research, interest in EBPs in special education is on the rise and more and more teachers are recognizing the importance in the classroom. While teachers recognize the importance of EBPs in education, many falter in applying EBPs with fidelity.

In order for educators to implement EBPs with fidelity they must possess knowledge of the characteristics of EBPs. Without a true understanding of the characteristics of EBPs, a teacher will have a harder time recognizing if something is going wrong in their application. In 2014, the Center for Exceptional Children (CEC) developed an Interdivisional Research Group to look into EBPs. The research group developed a number of Quality Indicators & Criteria for standards in EBPs in special education. They classified EBPs as having a high level of

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experimental research design. Moreover, they assert that studies that have been replicated or have a large number of participants are more legitimate. The group also cites Detrich and Lewis (2013) when they reiterate that EBPs are identified once they have been supportive as being effective by evidence from research studies with a high level of credibility.

Experimental research designs have been identified as being promising or as being potentially effective by a source that has established credibility (CEC Interdivisional Research Group, 2014). Evidence based reviews and practice guides have been identified as noteworthy. In addition, they also identified Meta-analysis and Narrative literature review. Educators should be familiar with the various types of experimental design.

In becoming familiar with the various types of experimental design educators must also become aware of the limitations and problems with educational research. First and foremost, it can be extremely difficult to conduct high quality experimental research in educational settings. This is especially true in regards to special education and with the low incident population (CEC Interdivisional Research Group, 2014). The educational research setting has a wide variety of what is referred to as extraneous variables (Spaulding, 2009). At times these variables can't be controlled enough to reach a valid conclusion. School culture, quality of the teacher, dynamics of peer influence, and the context of the school environment are all variables that must be identified and controlled by the research team (Spaulding, 2009). In addition, wide variation in regards to how specific individuals are impacted by the same disability is a core variability that can easily be overlooked (Spaulding, 2009). Because research settings are often in contrast

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to educational settings there is often decreased effectiveness in regards to EBPs that have been implemented. Reaching credible conclusions can be extremely difficult in the educational setting.

One of the least identified limitations of research is the identification of who is conducting the research. In our current educational system, there are ample examples of what can be best described as advocacy driven studies. While these studies can provide educators with quality information, it is crucial that educators remain cognizant of who's money is backing the research and what their motives are in backing the research project. If educators are not aware of the problems and limitations of educational based research studies they will be less equipped to recognize poor research designs when they encounter them.

It is clear from the limited resources available that more research will need to be done in regards to EBPs in special education. Cook, Tankersley, & Harjusola-Webb (2008), assert that the limited availability in special education of EBPs is cause for an inadequate number of EBPs available for all learning types. Moreover, just because a practice is evidence-based, doesn't mean that it will work for all learner types. It is crucial that educators monitor student progress and assess the effectiveness of an EBP in regards to each individual student (Cook, Tankersley, Harjusola-Webb, 2008).

Admittedly, there has been a recent increase in the availability of quality research, but identification of EBPs is only the first step. Once EBPs have been identified, they must be

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implemented with both efficiency and fidelity. The ability to implement EBPs in the educational settings with fidelity is crucial in increasing student success. To date, implementing EBPs with fidelity is limited. Implementation integrity is of major concern among educators who are knowledgeable in EBPs in special education (Detrich, 2012).

In their 2012 article, *A decade of Evidence Based Practice: Where Are We and Where Do We Need To Go?*, Detrich & Lewis speak to concerns regarding the effective implementation of EBPs. Detrich & Lewis also provide statistics on the average implementation life span of educational interventions. They state that the Center for Comprehensive School Reform reports that 80% of educational interventions have a life span of two years and 90% of educational interventions are discontinued within just four years. Detrich & Lewis assert that failure to implement with fidelity is the core reason that implementations of EBPs in the classroom are discontinued.

The sustainability of interventions in special education is of major concern. It is crucial that prior to implementing EBPs, educators plan and prepare thoroughly (Detrich & Lewis 2013). A systematic implementation approach is crucial to student success. Educators must effectively assess whether the intervention can be supported with available classroom resources, staff, organizational practices, and infrastructure (Detrich & Lewis, 2013). Detrich & Lewis (2013) further argue that the failure of an intervention is often caused by a failure to implement the practice with fidelity.

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Detrich & Lewis (2013) have identified five favorable conditions for effective implementation, treatment integrity, and the sustainability of EBPs. The first condition is ability to implement the practice as it was designed. Next, there must be procedural reliability amongst staff members. The reliability of independent variables is a crucial condition. Treatment fidelity is a hallmark of an educators' true ability to implement EBPs. Finally, adherence to the intervention is also a key condition.

On going training is important to develop and hone the skills needed to effectively implement EBPs in special education (Mustian, Mazzotti & Test, 2013). Application of EBPs and implementation rehearsal is also important in effective implantation. More importantly, receiving feedback on one's performance has proven to be effective in effectively implanting EBPs in special education. As educators we must strive to be life long learners and seek out ways to develop and hone our skills.

According to Lucinda Spaulding, a Doctoral Follow and Special Education Educational Psychology candidate at the Regent University in Virginia Beach, in order for teachers to effectively implant EBPs in special education they must possess three critical skills. The first skill is the ability to discriminate. This can be defined as the knowledge to tell the difference between what practices are effective with an individual student and which practices are not. Second, the educator must know the individual needs of each student. This can be accomplished through the use of effective assessment, spending time with the particular student and established experience. The third and final favorable condition is common sense.

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According to Spaulding (2009) common sense a very necessary and valuable commodity in the classroom.

So what exactly is a teacher to do given the limited availability of EBPs in special education? According to the CEC's Interdivisional Research Group (2014) when limited EBPs are available educators should be mindful of classification characteristics for credible evidence. While it is important for educators to use research informed instructional decisions it is more important to be able to recognize quality research designs and applications. Educators can also look towards practices that have been proven to be effective for related populations while being mindful that individuals present differently (CEC Interdivisional Research Group, 2014). The group warns against the use of the trendy designer interventions of the time. They also remind educators that practices that do not improve outcome should be discontinued.

Educators must be responsive to their students needs. To make informed instructional decisions, educators must accurately monitor student progress. This also requires an honest evaluation of their own performance as a teacher in implementing practices with fidelity while remaining responsive each individual student (Detrich & Lewis, 2013). If educators fail to assess their own performance they are neglecting a crucial educational variable. As educators, our strengths and challenges are some of the most important educational variables that our students will encounter. We must recognize our own instructional strengths as well as our challenges. Educators must possess the crucial ability to accurately and honestly assess whether

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or not they are implementing EBPs with fidelity and whether or not those specific practices are increasing student outcomes.

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