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NASET Special Educator e-Journal

Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children

Table of Contents

Special Education Legal Alert	3
Buzz from the Hub	6
Update from the U.S. Department of Education	9
Understanding the J-1 Visa: Opportunities, Limitations, and the Experience of an International Special Education Teacher: A Practitioner and Autoethnographic Perspective	15
The Effectiveness of Early Literacy Interventions for Elementary Students At-Risk for Reading Disabilities	23
Acknowledgements	30

Special Education Legal Alert

Perry A. Zirkel
May 2026

This month's update identifies two recent decisions that respectively illustrate the fuzzy "need prong" for special education eligibility under the IDEA and the relatively rare legal appearance of counteractions to IDEA and Section 504/ADA protection, here extending to "anti-SLAPP" laws. For related publications and special supplements, see perryzirkel.com

On February 11, 2026, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals issued an unofficially published decision in *G.E. v. Williamson County Board of Education*. In this case, upon his enrollment for 5th grade, G.E.'s parents filled out a health form indicating that he suffered from anxiety. His teachers did not notice any particular anxiety at school but expressed concern with his 41 absences and 17 tardies. The parents arranged for a private evaluation, which yielded diagnoses of anxiety disorder, panic attacks, and depression and a prescription for medication. They shared this information with school officials in March in discussions about his attendance issues and 2 incidents in which he was the victim of reported bullying. As a side effect of his doctors' resulting doubling of his anxiety-medication dosage, R.L. tripped in the hall at school, hitting his head and losing consciousness. Despite his continued attendance and mental health struggles in grade 6, he received passing grades. In the summer before 7th grade, his parents filed a due process complaint, alleging child find violations under the IDEA and Section 504. In response, the district initiated a comprehensive eligibility evaluation. The parents consented to the educational, but not psychological, part of the evaluation. Upon completion of the evaluation in September, the multidisciplinary team met and determined that G.E. did not qualify but agreed to another IDEA-eligibility meeting after the parents provided the private neuropsychologist's evaluation. The team agreed to separately determine eligibility under Section 504, but the parents did not agree to any of the successive offers of meeting dates/times and ultimately declined. Meanwhile, during 7th grade, G.E.'s mental health struggles escalated, causing partial hospitalization and resulting homebound instruction from October to February, followed by the pandemic. As part of the ongoing due process hearing, the district conducted the psychological part of the evaluation per hearing officer authorization, but the parents refused to participate in an IDEA- or Section 504-eligibility meeting, having unilaterally placed G.E. in a private school. After a 12-session hearing, the hearing officer ruled in the district's favor. After an initial remand, the district court affirmed, and the parents appealed to the Sixth Circuit.

<p>Under Sec. 504, the parents alternatively argued that in grades 5–6 the district should have initiated a Sec. 504 evaluation or should have provided formal accommodations for G.E.’s school phobia.</p>	<p>The Sixth Circuit ruled that the district did not have reason to know G.E.’s attendance problems were due to anxiety, much less school phobia.</p>
<p>Under the IDEA, the parents argued that the district violated its child find obligation by not evaluating C.E. in grade 7 after the partial hospitalizations.</p>	<p>Rejecting this claim, the Sixth Circuit considered the district’s actions reasonable in light of the recent evaluation and the parents’ lack of responsiveness after filing for a hearing.</p>
<p>This decision reflects the ongoing increase of anxiety and other student mental health issues in recent years. Moreover, for related eligibility disputes, the fact-based determinations under the IDEA and Section 504 warn against over-generalization of the outcomes.</p>	

On March 27, 2026, a federal district court issued an unofficially published decision in *Allen v. Lewisville Independent School District*. In 8th grade in Florida, R.A. had a 504 plan for ADHD and dysgraphia. His family moved to Texas in the summer before 9th grade. He continued to receive Section 504 accommodations, and received As, Bs, and Cs in a mix of class levels, including advanced placement (AP). In the first marking period of the second semester in 10th grade, he received failing grades in AP algebra and AP chemistry. When informed that the reasons were his failure to submit homework, attend tutoring, and make up tests, his parents had his medication adjusted, asked his football coach to resume the monitoring that was successful in the first semester. However, when R.A. continued to lack motivation, his parents reluctantly moved him into on-level algebra and chemistry classes, which he passed. He also passed the state proficiency exams. In 11th grade, his father died, and his mother asked the school counselor in addition to the football coach to “keep watch over” R.A. He passed all his classes except pre-calculus, in which he missed several assignments and was caught cheating on a test. He retook and passed pre-calculus in summer school. In the meanwhile, after a difficult Father’s Day, his mother took him to a psychologist, who diagnosed him with depression and anxiety. She only shared this information with school officials, and then without documentation, in November of 11th grade when they assigned him to a disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP) for 60 days for sending social-media messages implying impending violence at the school. The district conducted a threat assessment that concluded that R.A. did not pose a serious risk. The DAEP counselor reported that R.A. had expressed suicidal ideations, which was not unusual for students in the program. In the meantime, the district conducted a manifestation determination under Section 504, concluding that neither his ADHD nor his dysgraphia caused the violation of the school’s code of conduct. His mother filed for separate due process hearings under IDEA and Sec. 504, which each ruled in the district’s favor. In the meantime, the Section 504 committee met again and determined that his misconduct was not a manifestation of R.A.’s depression and anxiety, and his mother consented to an IDEA evaluation, which found R.A. eligible for special education. She then filed a lawsuit in federal court, alleging separate violations under the IDEA and Section 504.

<p>The parent’s first claim was child find under the IDEA, contending that the district should have evaluated R.A. sooner during his high school career.</p>	<p>The court disagreed with the parent’s claim, concluding that that district did not have reason to suspect the need for special education under the circumstances, including R.A.’s grades, his state proficiency assessments, his father’s death, and his teachers’ anecdotal reports.</p>
<p>The parent’s second claim was the IDEA’s “deemed to know” protection for manifestation determinations based on written parental concerns that the child needs special education.</p>	<p>Again disagreeing, the court concluded that the parent’s expressions of concern in this case were not reasonably understood to be a request for an IDEA eligibility evaluation or, to the extent they were in writing, to specifically or sufficiently suggest the need for special education.</p>
<p>The parents’ third claim was under Sec. 504, contending that the 504 plan was not appropriate.</p>	<p>Although acknowledging that district obligations are “less exacting” under Sec. 504, the court used IDEA standards for FAPE to conclude that the school’s responses to R.A.’s struggles were reasonably calculated for academic advancement.</p>
<p>As in the first case, (1) student mental health struggles served as the overall stimulus; (2) the legal outcome for child find depended on multiple factors viewed with a lens that is less stringent than professional norms; and (3) the judicial analysis of Sec. 504 was not well-developed or consistent compared to that for the IDEA.</p>	

Buzz from the Hub

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-march2026/>

What If Everyday Routines Were STEM Moments? A New Podcast Series

Want to learn simple ways to embed STEM learning with your child into everyday routines and activities? The STEMIE Family Hotline podcast series is designed for busy families and can be listened to on the go. Each short episode offers practical ideas to help you turn everyday moments into meaningful STEM learning opportunities.

You can listen to the STEMIE Family Hotline podcast series on [Spotify](#) and [Apple Podcasts](#), or stream the episodes directly on their website <https://stemie.fpg.unc.edu/blogs/>.

Every few months we'll feature a Parent Center on our website and we will now be including the featured parent center in the Buzz!

Encircle Families is the federally funded Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for the state of Arizona. Encircle Families began in 1979 as a grass-roots effort of families, professionals, and community leaders determined to provide support and information for parents of children with disabilities and special health care needs.

Encircle Families has virtual trainings and workshops for families and professionals on topics such as IEP Development, Positive Behavior Supports, Understanding 504 Plans, Bullying Prevention, and many others.

Check them out!

Pathways to Partnership: Early Childhood Education

This guide by School House Connection explains how school district homeless liaisons and service providers can work together to connect young children experiencing homelessness with early childhood education programs.

Read the guide [here](#).

School Choice Lets Parents Decide How Much AI Belongs in Education

This blog post from the U.S. Department of Education's *Homeroom Blog* argues that because the long-term effects of AI in classrooms aren't yet clear, school choice should let parents decide whether they want their children's schools to embrace AI technologies or stick with more traditional, teacher-centered approaches focused on cultivating independent thinking.

Read the blog post [here](#).

Understanding the Differences between High School and College

This guide was created by the Think College Transition team to help teachers, families, and students prepare for college. It discusses the need to plan for the ways that higher education will be different from high school, including higher academic expectations, increasing independence, and new social environments.

Access the guide [here](#) (available in English and Spanish).

WIOA, IDEA, Perkins Measures Crosswalk

Developed by VRTAC-QM and NTACTION, the guide, *Transition Programs – Performance Accountability*, was developed to outline intersection points across three primary pieces of legislation that have a transition focus, the Workforce Investment Opportunities Act (VR

Performance Indicators), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Part B Indicators), and the Perkins V (accountability indicators).

Access the guide [here](#).

Guiding Principles of Collaborative Advocacy

CADRE's short video, *Guiding Principles of Collaborative Advocacy*, combines highly effective communication strategies, facilitative behaviors, interest-based problem-solving skills, and most importantly, a collaborative approach to empowering students with disabilities, their families, and other advocates for the student to effectively navigate the IEP process.

Watch the video [here](#).

Update from the U.S. Department of Education

<https://www.ed.gov/>

Birth to Grade 12 Education-Resources

<https://www.ed.gov/birth-to-grade-12-education>

Available Grants

<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/apply-grant/available-grants>

U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker Highlights Civics Education at 'History Rocks!'

April 30, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker visited Hayes Elementary School as part of the Department's national 'History Rocks!' Trail to Independence Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Finalizes Landmark Rule to Lower College Costs and Simplify Student Loan Repayment

April 30, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education released a final rule that will lower the cost of college and make student loan repayment easier, an important step toward implementing historic reforms contained in President Trump's Working Families Tax Cuts Act.

Task Force Publishes Report on Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias and Restoring Religious Liberty

April 30, 2026

Today, the Task Force to Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias published a report detailing how the Biden Administration's prosecutions, policies, and practices revealed deep-seated anti-Christian bias throughout the federal government.

U.S. Department of Education Initiates Investigation into Stanford for Allegedly Discriminating Against Students on the Basis of Race

April 29, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights opened an investigation into Stanford University to determine whether Stanford violated Title VI by discriminating on the basis of race in its operation of a school program.

U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker Highlights Civics Education at History Rocks! Event in Wyoming

April 29, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker visited Riverton High School as part of the Department of Education's national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Officials and Local Leaders Highlight Civics Education at 'History Rocks!' Events in Montana and Oklahoma

April 28, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education (the Department) Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker visited Billings West High School in Billings, Montana as part of the Department's national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

Secretary McMahon Testifies on President Trump's Fiscal Year 2027 Budget Request

April 28, 2026

On April 28, 2026, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon testified before the United States Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee on President Trump's fiscal year 2027 budget request.

U.S. Department of Education Launches Comprehensive, Nationwide Federal Student Aid Fraud Prevention Effort

April 27, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education launched a new, real-time fraud detection capability for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form, marking the largest and most comprehensive, nationwide fraud prevention effort in the agency's history.

U.S. Department of Education Initiates Title VI Investigation into NYC Department of Education for Alleged Antisemitic Discrimination

April 23, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights opened an investigation into the New York City Department of Education.

U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in Washington

April 23, 2026

U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education Dr. David Barker Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in Washington.

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Announce Child Care Access Means Parents in School Partnership Grant Competition

April 22, 2026

ED and HHS announced the Fiscal Year 2026 competition for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program, a grant that aims to support campus-based child care services for low-income student parents.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Idaho on Returning Education to the States and History Rocks! Nationwide Tours

April 21, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Coeur d’Alene Charter Academy and Kootenai Technical Education Campus in support of the Returning Education to the States Tour and History Rocks! Tour.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Oregon on the Returning Education to the States Tour

April 20, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Oregon on the Returning Education to the States Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in Texas

April 20, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka visited Waxahachie High School as part of the Department’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Finds Four Kansas School Districts Violated Federal Law

April 17, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Student Privacy Policy Office determined that four Kansas school districts have policies that violate the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event Nebraska

April 17, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka visited Concordia Lutheran Schools of Omaha as part of the Department’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Issues Proposed Rule to Hold Colleges and Universities Accountable for Low Earning Outcomes

April 17, 2026

The U.S. Department of Education today issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) to establish a postsecondary education accountability framework that will break the cycle of low return on investment for students and taxpayers.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Connecticut on the Returning Education to the States Tour

April 16, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Connecticut on the Returning Education to the States Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in North Dakota

April 16, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education (the Department) Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka visited Westside Elementary School as part of the Department’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence Tour.

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor Announce Additional Grant Competitions Under Elementary and Secondary Education Partnership

April 16, 2026

Today, the U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Labor (DOL) issued the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 competitions for the Supporting Effective Educator Development Grant Program and the Charter Schools Program Grants to State Entities.

Victories for American Taxpayers: Trump Administration Reveals Top States Impacted by Federal Student Aid Fraud

April 16, 2026

Last year, the Trump Administration launched a nationwide effort to combat identity fraud and theft in the federal student aid programs – leading to more than \$1 billion in savings for the American taxpayer.

U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka Highlights Civics Education at “History Rocks!” Event in Minnesota

April 15, 2026

Today, U.S. Department of Education Senior Advisor for Civic Education Katie Gorka visited Christian Heritage Academy as part of the Department’s national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Opens Disability-Discrimination Investigation into Texas School District

April 15, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) opened an investigation into the New Home Independent School District (the District) in New Home, Texas.

Victories for American Taxpayers: Exposing COVID-Era Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Education Programs

April 10, 2026

The Trump Administration continues to tackle fraud, waste, and abuse across federal elementary and secondary education and higher education programs that have squandered taxpayer dollars as part of the President’s Task Force to Eliminate Fraud.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Nebraska on Returning Education to the States Tour

April 9, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Nebraska on her Returning Education to the States Tour.

Victories for Higher Education: Ending Gender Extremism and Cutting Underused Programs

April 9, 2026

Just over a year ago, we saw men claiming victories in women’s athletics. Colleges and universities were focused more on diversity, equity, and inclusion than ensuring graduates were prepared for success in life after graduation.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits South Dakota on Returning Education to the States and History Rocks! Nationwide Tours

April 8, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Colman-Egan High School and the McCrossan Boy’s Ranch in support of her Returning Education to the States Tour and the Flandreau Indian School in support of the History Rocks Tour!

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor Announce First Grant Competitions Under Elementary and Secondary Education Partnership

April 8, 2026

Today, the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor issued the Fiscal Year 2026 competitions for the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program and the Innovative Approaches to Literacy Program.

Proclaiming April 2026 as National Community College Month

April 7, 2026

For more than 125 years, community colleges have opened doors, powered local economies, and prepared millions of Americans for real jobs and real opportunity.

Victories for Higher Education: Eliminating DEI

April 6, 2026

Just over a year ago, we saw men claiming victories in women’s athletics. Colleges and universities were focused more on diversity, equity, and inclusion than ensuring graduates were prepared for success in life after graduation.

U.S. Department of Education Rescinds Illegal Title IX Resolution Agreements

April 6, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights rescinded provisions of resolution agreements from prior Administrations.

Understanding the J-1 Visa: Opportunities, Limitations, and the Experience of an International Special Education Teacher: A Practitioner and Autoethnographic Perspective

By Revitche Quijano

Abstract

The J-1 Visa Exchange Visitor Program provides international educators and professionals with opportunities to work in the United States while engaging in cultural exchange and professional development. This article explains how the J-1 Visa works, including its benefits, limitations, and the two-year home residency requirement under Section 212(e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act. It also presents my personal experience as an international Special Education teacher. By combining policy explanation with lived experience, this article aims to help educators better understand the realities of the J-1 Visa program.

Keywords: J-1 Visa, international teachers, special education, cultural exchange, autoethnography, 212(e)

Introduction

The J-1 Visa Exchange Visitor Program plays an important role in supporting education systems in the United States, particularly in high-need areas such as Special Education. Many school districts rely on international teachers to help address staffing shortages while also bringing diverse cultural perspectives into the classroom.

For educators who are considering this opportunity, it is important to understand not only the benefits of the program but also the responsibilities and challenges that come with it. Adjusting to a new country, education system, and professional expectations can be both exciting and challenging.

This article uses both a practitioner and autoethnographic approach. I explain the J-1 Visa program based on relevant policies while also sharing my own experience as an international Special Education teacher. Through this, I aim to provide a clearer and more realistic understanding of what it means to participate in the J-1 program. This approach allows me to connect my personal experience with broader educational and policy contexts, providing a deeper understanding of the realities faced by international teachers.

Overview of the J-1 Visa Program

The J-1 Visa is a non-immigrant visa under the Exchange Visitor Program that allows individuals from other countries to participate in approved programs in the United States. These programs are designed to promote mutual understanding through educational and cultural exchange.

Participants are sponsored by designated organizations and must follow specific regulations, including maintaining program compliance and fulfilling the objectives of their exchange category. The J-1 program includes several categories such as teachers, students, research scholars, interns, and trainees, each with its own eligibility requirements and limitations.

For teachers, the program typically allows employment in accredited K–12 schools for a limited period, usually ranging from three to five years, depending on program guidelines.

Personal Narrative: A Teacher's Journey

My journey as a J-1 teacher started with uncertainty.

I applied online without knowing if I would be selected. I simply took the chance and hoped for the best. After some time, I received a call from one of the school districts in California. I was invited to interview, and eventually, I was hired and assigned to a public high school. That moment marked a turning point in my life.

However, being hired was only the beginning.

The documentation process was one of the most challenging parts. There were strict deadlines, multiple requirements, and constant pressure to complete everything before the school year started. At times, it felt overwhelming. With the support of organizations such as FCEC and Teacher Lounge, I was able to complete the process and move forward.

When I arrived in the United States, I experienced culture shock. Even though I had been using English in my teaching career, speaking and teaching in a real classroom setting felt very different. There were moments when I struggled to express myself clearly and felt less confident.

I also had to adjust to a new educational system, especially in Special Education. I had to learn how to implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), understand compliance requirements, and apply behavior support strategies. These were all new expectations that required immediate learning and adaptation.

One of the biggest challenges I experienced during my first year was working with paraprofessionals. In my previous experience, I was used to managing my own classroom independently. However, in this new setting, I had to lead and collaborate with a team. At first, I

found it difficult to communicate expectations, define roles, and ensure consistency in supporting students with moderate-to-severe disabilities. There were moments when I felt that I needed more structured guidance in managing this kind of teamwork.

Over time, I began to learn through experience, observation, and the support of my colleagues. I developed clearer communication strategies, became more confident in giving directions, and learned how to build stronger working relationships with paraprofessionals. The help and mentorship from colleagues played an important role in my growth as a teacher and as a team leader. This growth also allowed me to provide more consistent and structured support for my students.

This experience taught me that collaboration is not automatic; it is a skill that develops over time. It also showed me that effective teamwork is essential in Special Education, where consistency and coordination directly affect student progress.

Beyond the classroom, being away from my family was one of the most difficult parts of the journey. There were moments of homesickness, emotional stress, and self-doubt. Adjusting to a new environment while carrying personal responsibilities required strength and resilience.

Despite all these challenges, I found purpose in my work.

Teaching students with moderate-to-severe disabilities gave me a deeper sense of meaning. I realized that my role was not only to teach academic skills but also to support independence, communication, and life skills.

As the years went by, things became more manageable. I gained confidence, improved my teaching practices, and became more comfortable in the system. What once felt difficult became part of my daily routine.

Reflection

Looking back, I realize that my experience is not just my personal story. It reflects the journey of many international teachers who navigate new systems, cultures, and expectations while trying to make a difference. My experience shows that growth comes through challenges and that adaptation is both a personal and professional process. It also highlights the importance of support, collaboration, and continuous learning in becoming an effective Special Education teacher.

Another important part of my journey is understanding the limitations of the J-1 Visa, particularly the two-year home residency requirement under Section 212(e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act. While the program provides valuable opportunities for growth and professional development, it also requires participants to consider their long-term plans carefully.

As an international teacher, there is a natural desire to continue contributing and growing within the system where I have developed my skills. However, the requirements of the program remind me that the J-1 Visa is designed as an exchange, not a permanent pathway.

This experience has helped me better understand the purpose of the program and the importance of planning ahead. It also highlights how policies can shape the professional journeys of international educators, influencing both their opportunities and decisions for the future.

Discussion

The experiences shared in this article highlight the importance of preparation, adaptability, and support systems for international teachers participating in the J-1 program. In Special Education settings, collaboration, communication, and understanding structured processes such as IEP implementation are essential for effective teaching.

International teachers bring valuable perspectives that can enrich inclusive practices. However, structured support and guidance are necessary to help them successfully transition into new educational environments. These insights suggest that school systems should continue to provide mentorship and professional development opportunities to support international educators.

The experiences presented in this article can also be understood through a process of professional growth. As an international teacher, I first had to learn, adapting to a new educational system, expectations, and cultural environment. Through this learning process, I was able to create an impact by supporting students with moderate-to-severe disabilities and contributing to inclusive classroom practices.

At the same time, I had to navigate the complexities of the system, including collaboration with paraprofessionals, compliance requirements, and the limitations of the J-1 Visa program. Over time, these experiences allowed me to grow and thrive in my role as an educator.

This journey reflects not only individual development but also the broader contribution of international teachers in education. This also highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing our work and contributions as international teachers, particularly as we navigate complex systems while striving to support student success.

Conclusion

The J-1 Visa provides valuable opportunities for teachers, especially in Special Education. At the same time, it requires preparation, patience, and resilience.

From my experience, this journey is both challenging and rewarding. For teachers who are willing to take the risk, it can be a life-changing opportunity.

It also highlights the importance of continuous learning and support in helping international teachers succeed in diverse educational settings.

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The Effectiveness of Early Literacy Interventions for Elementary Students At-Risk for Reading Disabilities

By Cosett Maytin, Julianne Verdayes, Amyerim Suarez

Introduction

Reading proficiency is a foundational skill that significantly influences a student's academic success and long-term educational outcomes. Students identified as at-risk for reading disabilities often demonstrate early difficulties in phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency, which can hinder their ability to access grade-level content. Students who experience early reading difficulties are at increased risk for ongoing academic challenges, including reduced comprehension and lower overall achievement (Wanzek et al., 2018). Without timely and effective intervention, early deficits may continue and may even increase for students over time. As a result, early literacy interventions implemented during the lower elementary grades, particularly kindergarten through third grade, have become a central focus in special and general education alike. We now know that early reading struggles can impact a student's confidence and motivation as well, which can also lead to frustration and disengagement from learning. This makes early intervention not only an academic priority and important component of supporting students' overall development because when students begin to see themselves as capable readers, it can positively influence them across all subject areas.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on how effective early literacy interventions are for elementary students at risk for reading disabilities. It looks at key components such as explicit instruction, the use of Response to Intervention (RTI), and differences in how students respond to

interventions. While the research mostly supports early intervention as an effective means of improving foundational reading skills, especially when it is structured and consistent, there are unanswered questions and gaps remain regarding when it comes to how long the effects last and why some students benefit more than others. Looking at these gaps is important because it helps educators understand and reflect on what is working and what still needs improvement by refining their instructional practices to better meet the needs of their diverse learners. It also informs of the importance of ongoing research and professional development in reading instruction.

Early Identification and Intervention

Across the researched literature there is a consistent theme and that is the importance of early identification and providing support as soon as possible. In many districts, as in our own M-DCPS, Response to Intervention (RTI) is THE framework used to identify students at risk. Teachers rely heavily on this system to track progress and make decisions about instruction. According to Arias-Gundín et al. (2021), RTI models provide a structured approach to delivering increasingly intensive interventions based on student need, allowing educators to address reading difficulties before they become severe. This approach helps ensure that students are not overlooked and that support is provided as soon as the teacher sees concerns arise. It also promotes collaboration among teachers because as a team working together they can analyze data and adjust instruction. What stands out is how much timing matters. Lovett et al. (2017) found that intervention timing is very important, because students who received targeted reading support in first grade demonstrated much stronger outcomes than those who receive intervention later on. Early intervention not only improves reading skills but it can also reduce the likelihood of latter academic failure and special education placement. From a practical standpoint, it

reinforces the idea that waiting for students to “catch up” on their own is not an effective approach. Instead, immediate and intentional intervention, teacher collaboration and regular data analysis can make a significant difference in a student’s academic path.

Effectiveness of Explicit and Systematic Instruction

The researched literature strongly supports the use of explicit and systematic instruction in early literacy interventions and this is what new educators are being drilled on. Al Otaiba et al. (2022) found that structured approaches targeting phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency produce significant improvements in early reading outcomes. These approaches work especially well in small groups, where teachers can provide more individualized support and immediate feedback. This type of instruction provides students with clear expectations and step-by-step guidance, which is especially beneficial for those who struggle with retaining or processing information. It also allows teachers to model skills and guide students through practice which they may not yet be able to do on their own.

Wanzek et al. (2018) demonstrated in their research that intensive reading interventions provided significant gains in foundational literacy skills among at-risk students. These interventions often include direct modeling, guided practice, and repeated opportunities for skill practice. The nature of findings across the literature suggested that explicit instruction is the most important component of effective early literacy intervention. Students who receive more frequent, intentional and focused instruction tend to make greater progress. However, it is also important that instruction remains engaging for students because even the most structured lesson will not be effective if students are not actively involved or motivated to learn. We have learned

that when students are both supported and engaged, they are more likely to retain and apply new skills.

The Role of RTI and Tiered Support Systems

RTI frameworks play an important role in organizing and delivering early literacy interventions. Within this model, Tier 1 instruction provides high-quality, evidence-based teaching to all students, while Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions offer strategic intensive support for those identified as at risk. Arias-Gundín et al. (2021) sound that RTI not only helps facilitate early identification but also promotes data-driven decision-making and instructional responsiveness. The researched literature indicates that Tier 2 interventions, mostly delivered in a small groups model, are particularly effective for students with mild to moderate reading difficulties. This level allows teachers to differentiate instruction without moving students into special education, which can be beneficial for both academic and social reasons. Students who do not respond adequately may require more intensive, individualized interventions at Tier 3. While RTI frameworks are widely encouraged, variability in “implementation fidelity”, (a word so loosely used by administrators) across schools can influence their overall effectiveness. The success of RTI depends on how consistently it is implemented and how well teachers are trained to use it. It can be a powerful tool if done correctly, but can limit its impact and create gaps in student support if there are inconsistencies.

Inconsistencies in Student Outcomes

Although early literacy interventions are generally effective, the literature reveals inconsistency or differences in student outcomes. Seerup et al. (2025) found that while students receiving early literacy tutoring showed improvements in decoding and phonological awareness, the magnitude of these gains really “differed” by student. There were factors such as the

intervention intensity, the duration, and the individual student's characteristics which contributed to these differences. These differences remind us that no single intervention works the same for every student, and flexibility in instruction is of utmost importance. Also, while foundational skills such as decoding often improve with intervention, gains in reading comprehension can be less consistent. This would suggest that while early interventions may successfully address lower-level reading skills, additional instructional strategies are or may be necessary to support higher-order comprehension. The research shows the complexity of reading development and the need for teachers to have differentiated approaches to intervention. Teachers must, therefore, consider how to build foundational skills while also supporting student's deeper understanding, a more comprehensive approach to reading instruction.

Gaps and Future Directions

Although there is strong documented evidence supporting early reading interventions, gaps remain in the research. First, there is limited research on the long-term effects of intervention effects, such as beyond the elementary years. Second, there is also a need for more research which is focused on reading comprehension because while decoding is important, it is only one part of reading. Students need support in understanding and applying what they read as well. This ensures that reading gains are not lost over time. Another important consideration is diversity. The literature does not fully address how interventions can be adapted for students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The research should focus or at the very least include, on how to make interventions more inclusive and relevant for all types of learners. Finally, inconsistencies in RTI implementation by teachers suggests a need for more research on best practices for ensuring implementation *fidelity*. Future research should also explore how to best prepare and support teachers in implementing these interventions.

Conclusion

Early literacy interventions play an important role in supporting elementary students at risk for reading disabilities. The researched literature consistently shows that interventions based on structure and explicit instruction, while it being implemented within RTI frameworks can greatly improve foundational reading skills. Early identification and timely intervention are important factors in preventing long-term difficulties. The findings reinforce the importance of teachers needing to be proactive rather than reactive when addressing these types of challenges. At the same time, it is important to recognize that not all students respond in the same way. Differences in outcomes and gaps in the researched literature suggest that there is still more work to be done. Teachers need to continue to refine instructional practice, schools need to invest in teacher support so that teachers can improve the effectiveness of early literacy interventions. This will ultimately positively impact not only academic success but also help students become confident readers beyond the classroom.

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Sarah S. Ayala, LSU | Associate Editor, NASET e-Journal