

THE NEXT BIG THING IN LEARNING AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES

Edited by Bryan G. Cook,
Melody Tankersley and Timothy J. Landrum

ADVANCES IN LEARNING
AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES

VOLUME 31

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Series Editors: Bryan G. Cook, Melody Tankersley
and Timothy J. Landrum

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ADVANCES IN LEARNING AND BEHAVIORAL
DISABILITIES VOLUME 31

THE NEXT BIG THING IN LEARNING AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES

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THE NEXT BIG THING IN LEARNING AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES: INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

Bryan G. Cook, Melody Tankersley
and Timothy J. Landrum

ABSTRACT

In this volume of Advances in Learning and Behavioral Disabilities, we explore the next big things that will shape the field. We asked chapter authors to predict what they believe will be influential ideas and reforms in the near future and to describe how to implement them to generate positive effects. Although change is constant, it comes in many forms and does not always result in progress or bring about desired outcomes. Thus, carefully considering and planning for the next big things that will shape the field is critical. In this introductory chapter, we provide an overview of change and big ideas in the field of learning and behavioral disabilities and preview the 11 subsequent chapters in the volume.

“It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” Versions of this quote have been attributed to Mark Twain, Groucho Marks, Yogi Berra, Neils Bohr, and others. Regardless of who said it originally, the quote exemplifies the difficulties of predicting an uncertain future. The world is so complex and, well, unpredictable that predictions, even by experts in their areas of expertise, often miss the mark ([Freedman, 2010](#); [Gardner, 2010](#)). In fact, people are generally inaccurate predictors of even their own behavior and feelings. For example, [Quoidbach, Gilbert, and Wilson \(2013\)](#) reported a series of studies with thousands of adults (ages 18–68) who predicted how their personalities, values, and preferences would change in the next 10 years and reflected on how their

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personalities, values, and preferences actually had changed in the previous 10 years. Across the age ranges of participants, people predicted significantly less change in their future personalities, values, and preferences than those 10 years older reported actually having occurred in the previous 10 years. For example, people who were 30 predicted markedly less change in the coming decade than people who were 40 reported occurring in their lives in the previous 10 years. Quoidbach et al. referred to this as the end-of-history illusion, in which people typically believe that the future is less likely to change than it actually will.

Its foibles notwithstanding, prognosticating important future trends seem to have an irresistible pull. Trade publications and blogs are filled with predictions about the next big thing in various fields. A Google search on May 22, 2020 for “the next big thing” returned about 17,700,000 hits. Especially because change often occurs suddenly rather than gradually (e.g., paradigm shifts; [Kuhn, 1962](#)), it is important to consider and prepare for what is frequently an unexpected future. As the adage holds, failing to prepare is preparing to fail. As in other fields, change and reform in education is ubiquitous (e.g., [Cuban, 1990](#)), with educational policies and practices constantly evolving in reaction to new social and political directions, legal mandates, policy reforms, and research findings. For example, in recent decades, special educators have found their professional roles and activities changed meaningfully by reforms and developments that were the next big things of their day: inclusion, evidence-based practice, online learning, multitiered systems of support, charter schools, and social-emotional learning – just to name a few. As the field continues to grapple with these and other ongoing changes, special educators may, like the participants in [Quoidbach et al.’s \(2013\)](#) studies, erroneously conclude that the biggest shifts in the field are behind us, with the future imagined as relatively steady. Such a perspective puts special educators at risk of being unprepared for the changes that are already beginning to occur. Thus, the focus of this volume of *Advances in Learning and Behavioral Disabilities* is the next big thing. That is, we ask the question: What important changes do experts predict related to the education of students with learning and behavioral disabilities for which stakeholders should prepare?

CHANGE AND NEXT BIG THING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Change is omnipresent, whether in our daily lives or in the profession of special education. Yet change comes in many forms and types. [Jalagat \(2016\)](#) concluded that organizational change can be organization-wide or specific to subsystems, transformational or incremental, development (i.e., focused on developing a strength) or remedial (i.e., focused on remediating or problem), planned or unplanned, and may have positive and/or negative consequences for multiple stakeholders. Thus, as the authors of the chapters in this volume suggest, the next big things in special education are likely to take many different forms and have a variety of effects, both intended and unintended, on special education policy, practice, and research. Despite the different types of change that may be

represented among the next big things in special education, the impact of change in the field is undeniable and therefore worthy of our careful consideration.

Meaningful change is critical to the effective education of students with learning and behavioral disabilities in at least three ways. First, current practice, though generally more effective than educational policies and practices of past decades and centuries, is far from ideal. One only need to consider the research base examining the outcomes of individuals with learning and behavioral disabilities in and out of school to realize that reform and continued progress are needed. For example, although the graduation rate of students with disabilities is increasing, it continues to lag far behind that of students without disabilities ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2019](#)). Moreover, the gap between research and practice in classrooms and schools is still pervasive, resulting in students with disabilities not consistently receiving the most effective instruction ([Cook & Farley, 2019](#)). Thus, significant room for improvement remains and remedial change is needed to address shortcomings in the field. Relatedly, the strengths of the field (e.g., identification of evidence-based practices using rigorous experimental research) need to be amplified and accelerated (i.e., developmental change). Thus, the field requires big changes to accelerate the positive trajectory of progress established for students with learning and behavioral disabilities.

Another reason that meaningful change in special education is desirable is that the field needs to stay abreast of the ongoing developments in the legal, cultural, and social contexts in which the field exists. That is, special education is influenced by and exists within changing legal mandates and broad sociocultural trends, which directly and indirectly shape the field. For example, recent reauthorizations of both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act require that educational programs, curricula, and practices be based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable in the United States (see [Yell & Rozalski, 2013](#)). In response to this legislation, evidence-based practice has become a major reform movement in general and special education, with special education researchers developing standards for identifying evidence-based practices (i.e., instructional practices shown to be effective by bodies of scientifically based research) and special education practitioners informing instructional decisions with evidence from the best available research ([Cook et al., 2014](#)). As the sociocultural and legal context of special education evolves, the field will need to change in order to appropriately and effectively educate students with disabilities.

Finally, change is inevitable. The history of special education reflects a series of big ideas and reforms that have helped foster improved treatment of, attitudes toward, and instruction of children and youth with disabilities ([Osgood, 2008](#); [Winzer, 1993](#)). However, it is important to recognize that although change sometimes brings about desired and positive outcomes, significant change is often less effective than it might be and, indeed, sometimes has harmful effects. Unfortunately, as [Kauffman \(1993\)](#) noted, “Most reform movements in education have led to disappointment and a predictable reversal of direction, rather than to progress” (p. 6). That is, rather than instill long-standing change and meaningful improvements, new trends and reforms often seem to just waste time and energy – resulting in “reform fatigue” ([Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally, &](#)

McLeskey, 2018, p. 70) among many special educators who have seen one next big thing after another come and go with little lasting effect. Thus, it is important that special educators be aware of and carefully examine what the next big changes in the field are likely to be, in order to take proactive steps to (1) minimize potential negative effects and (2) maximize their positive effects. Careful consideration of and preparation for emerging trends in the field by special education researchers, administrators, practitioners, parents, and other stakeholders can help maximize their positive effects by, for example, developing and providing training and support for implementing reforms appropriately.

With the goal of helping to inform special education stakeholders about important innovations and coming reforms related to policy, practice, and research, this volume is dedicated to identifying and discussing the next big things in the education of students with learning and behavioral disabilities. We asked special education scholars to consider what important developments are emerging in their areas of expertise that they expect to become influential and about which it will be important for special education stakeholders to be aware.

PREVIEW OF VOLUME

We thank the authors of the chapters in this volume for going out on the proverbial limb and making predictions about what will be among the next big things in special education, particularly for students with learning and behavioral disabilities. In the second chapter, Chovanes et al. describe the landmark US Supreme Court ruling in the Endrew F. case and lay out its implications for the education of students with disabilities, particularly related to (1) Individual Education Plans and (2) Free and Appropriate Public Education – two fundamental elements of special education in the United States under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Although the authors suggest that the ruling could be a game changer for how schools provide an individualized and appropriate education for students with disabilities, they caution that further case law is needed to see how courts interpret and apply the ruling.

The next two chapters in the volume focus on how bridging the research-to-practice gap may be the next big thing in special education. The research-to-practice gap refers to the discrepancy between what is known according to scientific research and typical instruction provided in classrooms. Students with learning and behavioral disabilities deserve to be taught using the most effective instructional practices, but often are not – which results in depressed learning outcomes. Buren and colleagues report the findings of a qualitative study to examine special educators' perceptions of research in Chapter 3. The authors report that although teachers value evidence-based practices, they tend to use less trustworthy resources (e.g., social media) due to efficiency and accessibility. The authors provide recommendations for bridging the research-to-practice gap based on their findings and participant comments. Beahm and Cook propose that using practice-based evidence may be the key to bridging the research-to-practice gap in Chapter 4. Consistent with the findings of Buren et al., Beahm and Cook suggest

that special educators want information that they perceive as trustworthy, usable, and accessible. Rather than provide training to teachers that reports and is based directly on research findings, the authors recommend using practice-based evidence, such as stories from other teachers, to heighten the appeal of evidence-based practices to practitioners.

Cook and colleagues also focus on special education research when making their prediction about the next big thing in Chapter 5. The authors provide a rationale for and description of open-science practices, which have become increasingly popular in fields such as psychology, but are still nascent in special education research. Cook et al. propose that although research is the most trustworthy approach for determining the effects of instructional practices for students with learning and behavioral disabilities, research studies can be biased and findings misleading; and many studies are inaccessible behind publisher paywalls. Making the research process in special education more transparent and open – by using open practices such as preregistration, registered reports, open data and materials, and open access – is proposed to minimize bias and increase the accessibility and impact of research.

In Chapter 6, Lam et al. propose that breaking down the wall between neuroscience and special education may be the next big thing and can result in meaningful advances in both fields. Although the two fields have much to learn from each other and special education can be improved by understanding and applying neuroscientific findings, neuroscience has unique research methods and terms that are not well understood by most special education researchers or practitioners. The authors provide an easy-to-understand overview of common neuroscientific concepts, methods, and findings for special educators and make recommendations for how special educators and neuroscientists can learn from and complement each other, with the end goal of improving the instruction provided to and outcomes of students with learning disabilities and differences.

In Chapter 7, VanUitert and colleagues focus on a different approach for fostering the application of highly effective, evidence-based practices in classrooms for students with learning and behavioral disabilities. The authors propose that developing and delivering new and more effective ways of providing professional development to teachers will be one of the next big things in special education. VanUitert et al. review literature indicating the need for effective professional development to enable teachers of students with learning and behavioral to improve the effectiveness of their instruction. Toward that end, they delineate components of effective professional development, such as coaching, and how to develop a program of research to develop, refine, and evaluate the effects of professional development approaches. In particular, the authors explore the role of technology in providing effective professional development.

Kilgus and Klingbeil provide another perspective on how an innovative approach to applying evidence-based practices may be the next big thing in educating students with learning and behavioral disabilities in Chapter 8. In their chapter, they describe a process for delivering adapted Tier-2 supports (i.e., intensive, research-based interventions) for students at risk for social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. In a multitier-system-of-supports

approach, Tier-2 interventions are typically provided in small groups to students who have been identified as at risk and in need of additional support. Traditionally, Tier-2 interventions have been delivered according to a standard protocol in order to maximize efficiency and treatment fidelity. However, Kilgus and Klingbeil suggest that such a one-size-fits-all approach is not realistic or effective and provide an overview of emerging approaches for applying adaptive Tier-2 interventions that are matched with student needs and responsive to intervention.

In Chapter 9, Kauffman et al. detail multiple next big things for the field of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) related to values, technologies, neuroscience, and law/policy. Specifically, the authors propose a return to an emphasis on effective, research-based instruction as a core value of special education. They likewise suggest that technological advances, such as artificial intelligence, will drive the field forward. Similar to the prediction by Lam et al. regarding students with learning disabilities, Kauffman et al. propose that neuroscience will be one of the next big things in the education of students with EBD. Finally, the authors agree with Chovanec et al. that the *Endrew* ruling will drive meaningful changes in law and policy and describe the implications of the ruling specifically for students with EBD.

In Chapter 10, Solari and colleagues focus on the potential next big thing for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Considerable attention and research has been focused on students with ASD in recent years, a trend which is expected to continue. Much of the research conducted with these learners traditionally has focused on the behavioral and social characteristics associated with ASD. However, as Solari et al. point out, many students with ASD also experience low outcomes in academic areas, especially in the critical skill of reading comprehension. The authors review research on key cognitive and language skills associated with reading development for individuals with ASD, including emergent literacy skills, word reading and decoding, reading fluency, oral language, and social cognition. The authors conclude with recommendations for research to establish evidence-based practices for teaching reading comprehension specifically for students with ASD.

Although writing tends not to garner as much attention among educational practitioners and researchers as reading, Lembke and colleagues suggest that writing is emerging as a critical area of focus in Chapter 11. Given the growing recognition of the importance of writing for success both in and out of school, the authors predict that instruction and assessment targeting early writing skills will be one of the next big things in special education. Drawing on the simple view of writing, Lembke et al. review research-based instructional approaches for students with intensive writing needs and describe the frequently ineffective ways many teachers learn about and teach writing. The authors propose an innovative approach for preparing teachers to effectively teach writing that emphasizes the process of data-based instruction.

In the final chapter of the volume, Forbes et al. raise an important cautionary note when considering the next big things in special education. It is easy to get excited about the future of special education when reading about potential

innovations and developments in the field in the previous chapters. But Forbes and colleagues note the tendency for fads to be embraced in special education and the dangers of adopting fads for the field and to the outcomes of students with learning and behavioral disabilities. It is important to realize, the authors suggest, that the next big thing may do more harm than good if it is not based on sound scientific evidence. They recommend that special educators look to the slow and iterative process of developing and applying a scientific research base as the next big thing in the field, rather than pin false hopes to unsubstantiated fads.

CONCLUSION

Authors of the chapters in this volume combined careful scholarship rooted in the history and science of the field with imagining what the future may hold for the education of students with learning and behavioral disabilities. We hope that their ideas described in the subsequent chapters provide an impetus for readers to consider, plan for, and help shape an effective and improved future for students with learning and behavioral disabilities. Although not all of the predictions made in the volume are likely to come to pass, we expect many will. The authors have provided the field with important guidance for thinking about, preparing for, and shaping a future that maximizes the positive effects of the next big things in the education of students with learning and behavioral disabilities.

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