



Amanda Ramoutar

A Framework to Guide

Special Education Practice in Small Schools



Special education is an approach to providing equitable learning for students with identified disabilities through specially designed instruction.¹ The approach is often criticized for demanding too many resources, including specially trained teachers, dedicated settings, and specialized equipment.² As such, small schools may typically appear less than capable of implementing special education practices. These schools are characterized by a small student population, few staff members, and multigrade classrooms.

Often, teachers working in small private schools raise concerns about what constitutes special education practice, what types of evidence count as such practice, and the practical ways these can be identified. Classroom teachers working in small private schools can implement special education pedagogical practices and meet the individual needs of learners in a myriad of ways, even within the confines of limited resources. The framework shared below can help capture evidence of special education in action. This tool is theoretically informed and can be used to fit the context of small schools.

The Teacher's Dilemma: Examples From Small Schools

Leanna³ is a 3rd- and 4th-grade teacher of all subjects except music and physical education. Despite being in her eighth year of teaching, she feels unprepared with knowledge in special education other than having taken one class for her undergraduate degree. She has a strong desire to learn all that she can to gain better tools to help her students succeed. She has recognized over the years that she continues to face more and more students with special needs.

Peter has taught kindergarten through 2nd grade and 5th through 8th grade over the past 15 years. At his small school, he is often called upon to take on a variety of roles when issues arise. For example, he is the resident mediator and is often called upon to help de-escalate classroom disruptions, some of which are triggered by a student's needs not being met. Sometimes he serves as a counselor, providing a listening ear to peers unsure of how to meet the needs of learners. As a result, he has felt frustration and helplessness as he watched students in lower grades with emerging special needs but not knowing exactly what to do or when to begin interventions.

Bridget works at an early-childhood education through 8th-grade school where she teaches English as a second language, Spanish, and music to approximately 140 students. She has noted that through the past decade, more and more students have been struggling to connect or process the information she teaches. She wants to find ways for her classroom to be a safe environment for students, and she wants them to enjoy their experiences in her classroom.

All of the three teachers in the examples above have experienced being unable to successfully meet their learners' needs as they would have liked. Research suggests that while there continues to be a level of concern related to the increased workload that results from responding to the needs of students with special needs in classrooms, generally, teachers working in small schools are in support of accepting students with mild disabilities into their setting. Still, teachers desire validation that they are indeed using the right kinds of strategies and other instructional resources.⁴ It is evident that few small schools have clearly defined procedures for assisting students with special educational needs.

What Counts as Evidence of Special Education in Small Schools?

In the United States, some private schools benefit from collaborative partnerships for special education services provision with public school districts due to the intentional efforts of school administrators who have worked to develop this relationship. However, services for students placed in private schools by parents are not legally guaranteed. In public schools, however, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)⁵ mandates the supports and services that must be offered in order to ensure that the needs of learners with disabilities are met. Upon recognizing that a student is not responding to instruction successfully, the teacher can initiate a referral, after which the school district intervenes to have the child evaluated. If he or she is deemed eligible for special education, an entire multidisciplinary

team is involved in creating and implementing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the student to receive services (where necessary) and tailored instruction. All of this includes parental involvement and is provided at no cost to the families because of the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) principle of IDEA. (See Sidebar.)

Unlike structured systems in public schools, small private schools are often challenged by an overwhel-

Sidebar. Essential Facts About Special Education

Special education should be recognized as a service and not as a place, such as a specific classroom or with a specific teacher. There are 13 disability categories identified by the U.S. Department of Education's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Research indicates that of the 13 disability categories recognized by the IDEA, learning disabilities are most prevalent in classrooms across the United States when compared to the other categories. These categories alert educators that special education services should be provided for students whose educational performance is impacted as a result of their disability. Disabilities can range in severity from mild to profound, and the categories are: (1) emotional disturbance, also known as emotional/behavioral disorders, (2) deaf-blindness, (3) autism spectrum disorder, (4) hearing impairment, (5) visual impairment, (6) multiple disabilities, (7) intellectual disability, (8) other health impairment, (9) specific learning disability, (10) speech or language impairment, (11) traumatic brain injury, (12) orthopedic impairment, and (13) developmental delay. Special education services are also provided for students identified as being gifted/talented in some states. Learn more about IDEA and types of special-needs students may be diagnosed with from the U.S. Department of Education by visiting <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>.

For students with diagnosed special needs, consideration is usually given to a continuum of options for educational placement, ranging from the least-restrictive environment (general education classroom) to most-restrictive environment (residential care/treatment facility). A significant guideline of IDEA is that learners with identified disabilities should be included in general education classes along with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible.

Students with severe and profound disabilities are often not served in the general education setting because their needs cannot be met satisfactorily there. Educators working in small, private schools should note that students with mild high-incidence needs such as high-functioning autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disability, emotional/behavioral disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (classified under other health impairments), and mild intellectual disability may be included for learning in their classrooms. Learn more at <https://www.ncl.org/news/newsroom/the-state-of-ld-understanding-the-1-in-5/> and <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>.

ming lack of resources, so enacting such a multi-faceted response may be difficult. This by no means suggests that small schools cannot or should not respond. So, how can special education be done in small private schools? Special education in action is about good teaching, and good teaching is based on instructional best practices. Therefore, any teacher willing to enact best practices for the delivery of instruction will be providing special education for his or her students. Best practices are most often applied after engaging in specialized teacher preparation training or professional development related to special education. Such opportunities for training are available through university degree programs and short courses. For teachers with little time and financial resources to invest in ongoing development, options such as online learning, open-access courses, and scholarship opportunities may be explored.

As educators in small schools consider distinctive teaching and learning decisions, they make in support of their commitment to “work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord . . . ,”⁶ the Special Education in Action Framework presented on page 51 can be used.

Framework to Evidence Special Education Practice

The Special Education In Action Framework is a tool for analysis that permits teachers to move past a description of theoretical ideas toward a deeper understanding of the practical ways they can implement special-education pedagogy. With the knowledge that small schools and multigrade classrooms are powerful and productive starting points for providing high-quality instruction,⁷ this framework links evidence-based best practices to the features of classrooms and observable teaching practices.

Furthermore, the framework

documents the link between theory and practice. Using the framework, teachers can show how they are responsive to identified needs and provide specially designed instruction. As can be seen, the framework links classroom practices that are within reach of any teacher, even those with limited financial and human resources, with the assumptions that underpin them based on the ethos of education. These are aligned with concepts that are relevant to best practices in education and challenges believed to inhibit the provision of special education.



The Special Education in Action Framework

Assumption	Related Concept	Key Challenge	Classroom Practice Evidence
1. Each student is of inestimable value.	Human-rights conventions proposed by the United Nations detail that everyone has the right to education, should be treated with dignity, and that education should prepare students for life. ⁸	Giving focus to personnel and infrastructural limitations.	<p>The teacher creates a classroom environment that encourages a sense of belonging, highlights students' strengths, and provides meaningful opportunities for students to improve on identified weaknesses.</p> <p>The teacher does not complain to students about how difficult teaching them is or that he or she lacks the necessary support and services.</p> <p>The teacher sets high yet reasonable expectations for students to allow them to maximize their potential.</p>
2. The teacher frequently assesses learning and is aware of each student's progress or lack thereof.	Response to Intervention (RTI) uses a teach-and-assess approach in the general education classroom to document progressively intensive interventions or strategies that have been used with the student. ⁹	Lack of knowledge about what to do when a student is not showing progress.	<p>The teacher keeps a log of each student's performance after an assessment is given. This data is used to determine if concepts must be retaught.</p> <p>When concepts are retaught, the teacher researches another method to get the concepts across to the students, understanding that the original approach was ineffective. This is repeated multiple times until progress is achieved.</p> <p>The teacher provides clear demonstrations of skills and examples of concepts and provides students with multiple opportunities to practice what they have learned.</p>
3. Lesson planning occurs with students' needs in mind.	Differentiated instruction (DI) is based on equity pedagogy and is a response to diverse learner needs through the provision of accommodations and modifications. ¹⁰	Aiming to cover curricular content and insufficiently adapting instruction to student differences.	<p>The teacher gives accommodations to students who require them.</p> <p>The teacher makes modifications to lesson outcome expectations for learners with identified needs.</p> <p>The teacher measures students' success based on predetermined individualized expectations and not in comparison to peers.</p>
4. Others are willing to help.	Collaborative consultation is an ongoing process and is interactive in such that expertise, knowledge, and experience are shared voluntarily for the purpose of problem-solving. ¹¹	Making the right connections with those who can help.	<p>The teacher brainstorms about effective instructional approaches with other educators. On-location and remote consultations are utilized as necessary.</p> <p>The teacher makes use of technological and pedagogical resources accessible through the World Wide Web.</p> <p>The teacher seeks out professional-development opportunities to further build instructional competencies.</p>
5. Families are willing to partner with the school.	Family-school partnership involves collaboration to support and improve the learning and development of the student. ¹²	Parents and other family members defer to the school or are unengaged.	<p>The teacher communicates regularly with parents about the student's progress and alerts them to what instructional goals are being worked on.</p> <p>The teacher empowers families to support the learner by providing strategies they can utilize at home.</p> <p>The teacher advocates for the child by making recommendations of external service providers that families can access to further support the learner's development.</p>

It is important to remember that while all the combined evidence outlined in on page 51 represents special education provisions, even when enacted in part, they still make a significant difference to the quality of instruction students receive. Simple actions on the part of the classroom teacher that serve to provide special education are a step in the right direction of meeting the needs of students.

Note also that some suggestions listed as classroom practice evidence may not directly solve the problems of lack of support, services, and personnel but are designed to not exacerbate the learning situation. The aim should be to respond to identified needs in the best possible way.

There are two main ways teachers in small schools can identify a student's educational needs. The first is through informal teacher observation during the delivery of instruction. The second is through formal, comprehensive evaluation reports, which can be accessed privately and paid for by parents, and the results can be shared with the school. In addition, a teacher may be able to identify which consultants might be helpful by reaching out to their public school district or completing an Internet search for resources available in their area. Educators in both large and small schools should also seek to develop professional-learning communities, which can serve as a resource for information sharing.

The variety of differences among learners—those considered nondisabled and those with mild disabilities in general education classrooms—begs consideration for making sure that responding to these differences becomes a regular part of classroom practice. Even in small private schools, each student should be given an equitable opportunity to achieve his or her full potential and not experience exclusion from participation. Remember that research-based strategies for working with learners in the classroom constitute special education practice. Also, note that any actions a teacher takes in the classroom to respond to identified needs count as evidence of special education practice. Additionally, a practical starting point for engaging in special education practice is that teachers should perform their duties from the viewpoint that each student is valuable; that students' progress should be monitored; that planning is needed to meet any student's needs; that others may be willing to help; and that families should be seen as partners in this work. ✍

This resource article has been peer reviewed.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. There are several definitions of special education that focus on meeting the identified individual needs of learners with disabilities. These include labels such as specific learning disability, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and emotional and behavioral disorder. Typically, students receive special-education support and services when their needs impact their educational performance.

2. James M. Kauffman et al., *Special Education: What It Is and Why We Need It* (London: Routledge, 2018).

3. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

4. Marcel A. A. Sargeant and Donna Berkner, "Seventh-day Adventist Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusion Classrooms and Identification of Challenges to Their Implementation," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 24:3 (2015): 224-251.

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6. Colossians 3:23, 24 Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

7. Jerome Thayer, Martha Havens, and Elissa Kido, "Small Schools: How Effective Are the Academics?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 77:3 (February/March 2015): 15: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201577031505.pdf>.

8. Mike Cole, ed., *Education, Equality and Human Rights: Issues of Gender, "Race," Sexuality, Disability and Social Class* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022).

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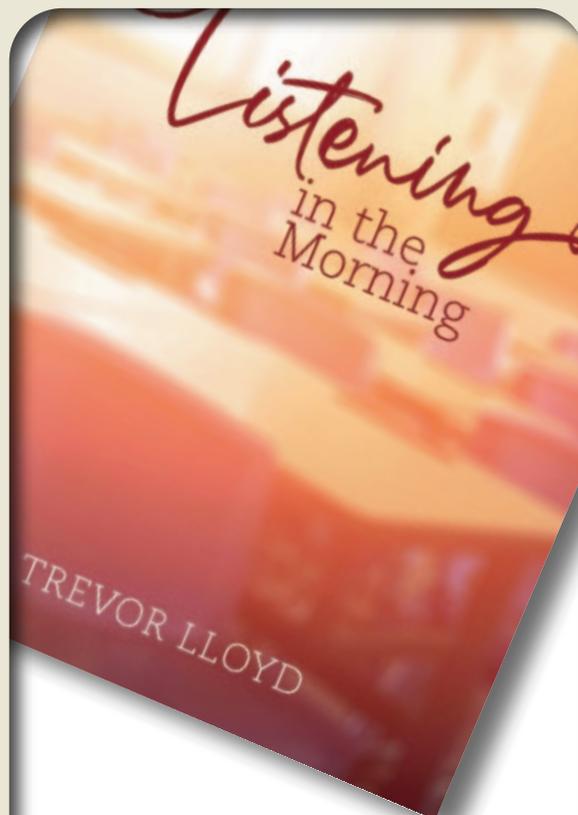


Thula Norton Lambert

In this collection of 80 devotional readings, Trevor Lloyd has skillfully interwoven the stories of biblical heroes along with the stories of Seventh-day Adventist education pioneers. Educators can gain fresh insights from the lives of familiar Bible characters such as Elijah, Jacob, Samson, and David to inspire change both in their personal and professional lives. Gleaning from Jacob's encounter in the wilderness, every classroom can become, as Lloyd aptly describes, a "house of God and a gateway to heaven" (p. 90).

Lloyd also chronicles the experiences of well-known Adventist education pioneers, including Ellen White, Goodloe Harper Bell, W. C. G. Murdoch, and Arthur Spaulding, alongside educators such as Robert Parr, Fernando and Ana Stahl, as well as Denton and Florence Rebok. They planted the seeds of education in far-flung mission fields. These stories provide the reader with a timely reminder of the humble beginnings of Adventist schooling 150 years ago and its ongoing rich heritage.

The book's stated purpose is to help staff at Adventist schools, colleges, and universities rise to the challenge, in this time of crisis, of faithfully maintaining



**Trevor Lloyd,
*Listening in the Morning:
Devotional Readings for Teachers***

(Warburton, Victoria, Australia: Signs Publishing Co., 2022). ISBN 9781922373670 (Print) and 9781922373687 (E-book). 200 pages. US\$9.99.
Available from Amazon

the heritage of a century and a half of Bible-based Adventist teaching and learning.

Each entry concludes with discussion questions addressing relevant education issues, best practices, or educational theories. The theories and approaches of Maria Montessori, John Frederick Oberlin, Jean Piaget, and Jerome Bruner are presented in a way that encourages the reader to explore further his or her compatibility with the plan for wholistic educa-

tion as outlined in the book *Education*.

The readings are set in a variety of cultural settings and cover an array of topics. Entries can be read as standalone readings or can be read consecutively over several days. For example, school leaders can explore topics such as the importance of crafting a mission statement, servant leadership, or the overall design and plan for Adventist education. The book also includes topics of an interpersonal nature, such as dealing with resentment and bitterness among staff. Other topics specific to teaching and learning are also presented, including building rapport with students, alternate approaches to schooling, and the importance of manual labor in the curriculum.

The book also includes stories that contain more overtly, deeply spiritual themes such as waiting quietly on God, God's answers to prayer, Christ's sacrifice, and Christian service. Much like the Master Teacher Himself, the author skillfully uses stories and discussion questions, taking readers much beyond the initial story and inviting them to engage in a thoughtful examination of their values and practices.

Lloyd seamlessly integrates fictional stories and allegories to encourage reflection and call attention to universal values. The story of The Ring of Gyges, set in ancient Greece, points readers to Jesus' selfless sacrifice. In the tale of "John Pettigrew's Mirror," the characters all see themselves reflected in a new light. Lloyd's use of this tale parallels the view of writer and educator Parker Palmer, for whom good teaching emerges from teachers' identity and integrity, their *inwardness*.

Lloyd's use of fiction occurs throughout the book. The French medieval tale of Gudule is used to introduce a discussion on resentment and bitterness among staff at church schools. Lloyd includes a scene from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* to symbolize the Christian's assurance of salvation in Christ. By including fictional stories in this manner, Lloyd demonstrates, perhaps unintentionally, a method for introducing fictional works into the curriculum.

In addition to such stories, Lloyd draws on his own rich personal experience as an educator to inspire readers through his use of personal anecdotes. Entries such as "Hope That Begets Hope," "Two Pastors, Two Daughters," and "Princess at the Gate" inspire hope, compassion, gratitude, and contentment.

Entries also address larger philosophical issues. The author echoes pre-eminent Adventist historian George Knight, who has also urged Adventist educators to engage in ongoing evaluation to ensure that their practices remain aligned with the original plan for education. *Listening in the Morning* fills a void at a moment where Adventist institutions in many areas of the world are facing unique challenges.

Published during the year marking the 150th anniversary of the founding of the first official Adventist school, this book is highly relevant to the challenges faced by modern Adventist educators. In addition to the issue of maintaining the unique character and mission of Adventist education, Lloyd addresses issues such as improving the Bible curriculum for non-Adventist students and retaining Adventist youth in the church.

The entry entitled "A Day of Small Beginnings" recounts the providential meeting between Edson White and Goodloe Harper Bell, the first salaried Adventist

teacher, and the humble beginnings of Adventist education. Lloyd concludes this reading by asking, "What safeguards and checks might be put in place to ensure that the objectives of Adventist education are not pushed out of sight?" He offers an answer to this fundamental question several entries later in the chapter entitled "China Follows 'The Blueprint'"—the story of how Denton Rebok, pioneer educator and missionary to China, consulted "the blueprint" for Adventist education.

Listening in the Morning is original, inclusive, and engaging. It is the first devotional book written specifically for Adventist educators that uses this combination of personal biography, Bible stories, fictional tales, and Ellen White's writings to discuss larger issues in Adventist education. There is something for everyone—from novice to more-experienced teachers and school leaders.

I highly recommend *Listening in the Morning* as a devotional book for educators. It is well-documented, using a combination of internal references or footnotes at the end of each chapter. A few well-placed illustrations would have perhaps made the book more visually appealing. The author also recounts several secondhand anecdotes from memory in cases where sources cannot be referenced; however, these observations do not detract from the overall message: God has been speaking to Adventist educators over the past 150 years. The essential question is: Are we still listening? 

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Guest Editorial *Continued from page 3*

variety of educators in the field, from university researchers to local volunteers, each providing their expertise in support of pursuing excellence in small schools.

- Coria-Navia et al. highlight excellence in Adventist education as documented through observations and interviews with educators and educational administrators throughout the North American Division. The authors emphasize the significant role small schools serve within the ecology of Seventh-day educational institutions.

- Garcia, Slikkers, and Bailey discuss what it means to be trauma-informed educators. They also consider how small schools can intentionally create learning environments that help students feel safe and supported—emotionally, socially, and academically. Their work provides strategies for the multigrade teacher’s toolbox to support student learning in the face of the challenges students face today.

- Imasiku et al. explore a feature that, in recent years, most teachers have needed to grapple with—online education. Their study explores pragmatic approaches specifically for the unique circumstances of small schools and teachers—considering how to meet student learning needs utilizing online resources, discussing collaboration, artificial intelligence, open educational resources, and asynchronous learning that addresses the unique circumstances of small schools.

- Using her background in elementary education, Scott provides recommendations for teachers in small schools as they consider how best to run their library program, highlighting the impact of a well-stocked library on student achievement.

- Berry writes from the perspective of one of the essential members of the small-school support team—the volunteer. She shares practical suggestions for assisting within the library environment.

- Wallace, Bowlby, and Clements explore Problem-based Learning, entrepreneurship, and innovation as a tool for teachers in small schools to involve students across multiple grade levels, simultaneously helping them take ownership of their learning experiences and preparing them for real-life opportunities.

- Ramoutar considers what specially designed instruction might look like for students with special needs within the small-school environment. She presents a framework that captures evidence of special education in action and explores how classroom teachers working in small private schools can enact special-education pedagogical practices.

- The issue also includes Ward’s perspective on a three-story approach to teaching Scripture and engaging youth and young adults, and Norton Lambert’s review of Trevor Lloyd’s *Listening in the Morning—Devotional Readings for Teachers*.

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the small-school environment is unique. While it presents challenges, it also provides opportunities that make it an asset to Adventist education worldwide. We hope readers take from this issue principles and best practices that will enhance teaching and learning, grow faith, and promote excellence in all schools.

Anneris Coria-Navia, EdD, is Associate Provost and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. She studies K-12 Seventh-day Adventist schools, professional development in liberal-arts institutions in higher education, and effective teaching in the higher-education classroom. Dr. Coria-Navia has experience teaching in K-20 settings and is currently co-leading the Higher Ed Adventist Society, a platform hosted by the Adventist Learning Community that fosters cross-institutional connection and collaboration among faculty in the North American Division.

Maria Bastien Valenca, PhD, is Dean and Associate Professor in the School of Education and Psychology at Walla Walla University, in College Place, Washington, U.S.A., as well as Co-Director of the Center for Educational Equity and Diversity. As the current chair of the faculty-development committee, she also works to support faculty through ongoing professional development opportunities. Bastien Valenca’s current areas of research and study include best practices for small schools and multigrade classrooms.

The JAE staff express heartfelt appreciation for the many hours Drs. Coria-Navia and Bastien Valenca devoted to selecting topics and authors, providing input on article content, and promptly responding to the editor’s questions during the planning and production of this issue.

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