

Enhancing Curriculum Planning and Student Academic Performance in Special Schools Through Learning Progression Framework (LPF)

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) in Hong Kong as an assessment tool for evaluating the academic performance of students with intellectual disabilities. The LPF enables teachers to better understand student performance and strategically enhance curriculum planning, teaching, and learning, thereby improving the learning-teaching-assessment cycle. Given that students with intellectual disabilities may struggle with written tests, formative assessments are typically employed to gauge their abilities. However, formative assessments pose challenges, including subjectivity and consistency in evaluation. Developed by the Education Bureau (EDB) in 2007, the LPF aligns with high school curricula for these students and provides a common assessment framework to facilitate learning progress and inform future learning objectives. Despite its long-term implementation, there has been limited research on the impact of LPF on student learning, particularly in optimizing curricula and addressing learning differences. This research involved 170 students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities at TWGHs Tsui Tsin Tong School from 2021 to 2025. Results indicate significant improvements in students' academic performance following the implementation of LPF. Future studies could expand on these findings to explore how special schools can further enhance curriculum planning and academic outcomes through LPF. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how structured frameworks like LPF can facilitate better educational practices in special education, paving the way for improved academic achievements. This paper aims to provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in enhancing the educational landscape for students in special schools.

Keywords: special education, exceptional education, assessment, curriculum

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Introduction

In the dynamic education landscape, effective assessment strategies are crucial, particularly for students with special education needs. This study investigates the Learning Progression Framework (LPF), a framework adopted by the Hong Kong Education Bureau to tackle the specific challenges encountered by students with intellectual disabilities.

In mainstream schools in Hong Kong, standardized tests and various forms of assessments like formative and summative evaluations are commonly used to gauge academic performance. However, these traditional assessment tools often fail to encapsulate the abilities of students with special needs, given the diverse nature of their disabilities.

A significant number of students with intellectual disabilities encounter obstacles that traditional assessments cannot adequately address. For instance, some students may be unable to write, while others may be non-verbal or have visual impairments that hinder their ability to engage with standard assessment materials. Additionally, students with conditions such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia face severe challenges with tasks related to reading, number handling, and spelling. This highlights a critical gap in the educational system, as traditional standardized assessments do not provide a comprehensive understanding of these students' capabilities, learning progress, or academic levels.

In response to these challenges, the Hong Kong Education Bureau initiated the development of an assessment framework focused specifically on students with intellectual disabilities. Introduced in 2007, the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) serves as an innovative assessment system, offering a structured learning ladder that allows educators to systematically track and document the learning trajectories of their students. By implementing the LPF, this study aims to enhance curriculum planning and improve student academic performance in special schools. Through a detailed exploration of the LPF, this research seeks to contribute to more effective educational practices that recognize and nurture the unique learning needs of all students.

Literature Review

Learners with special educational needs are individuals whose educational requirements cannot be sufficiently met through conventional teaching methodologies (Gutuza et al., 2015).

Students with intellectual disabilities (ID) exhibit diverse characteristics that influence their learning and daily functioning, including cognitive limitations, leading to challenges in learning and understanding complex concepts, and academic difficulties in areas like reading, writing, and mathematics, necessitating specialized instruction (Kumar et al., 2024). Additionally, they may face limitations in adaptive behaviors, including conceptual, social, and practical skills, as well as communication challenges. Social and emotional development can also be impacted, affecting peer interactions and emotional regulation (Kumar et al., 2024). Some students may experience delayed motor skills and potential health issues, but they often thrive with concrete, hands-on learning experiences due to their unique learning styles (Kumar et al., 2024). To assess students' ability, teachers encounter the greatest challenges in assessing written tests, such as essays, and oral examinations (Mozetič Hussu & Strle, 2010). This calls for the implementation of teaching and learning methods that differ from traditional approaches, highlighting the need for educators to reevaluate their assessment methods.

In 2007, the Hong Kong Education Bureau launched the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) for core subjects (Curriculum Development Council, 2012). The primary objective was to create a unified language and structure for articulating students' learning progress and outcomes, serving as a shared reference point for teachers, parents, students, and educators to evaluate learning levels and progress (Curriculum Development Council, 2012). At its core, the framework aims to foster a common vocabulary that enhances discussions and understanding of the academic performance of students with intellectual disabilities, thereby supporting effective teaching practices and curriculum development, providing a clear learning ladder that enables educators to systematically track and record students' learning progress (Curriculum Development Council, 2012).

Students' learning is a continuous development process. The Learning Progression Framework (LPF) provides a reference for cognitive abilities, subject-specific skills, knowledge, and understanding to describe students' learning progress and levels. Developed through rigorous research, trials, and validation with the involvement of local and international consultants as well as frontline teachers, each subject's LPF consists of two main parts: "Initial Mastery Levels" and "Subject Specific Levels." These frameworks categorize learning levels into different stages, ranging from the earliest forms of learning (I1) to advanced subject-related outcomes (S9), illustrating the progression and overview of various learning levels (Curriculum Development Council, 2012).

The Learning Progression Framework (LPF) is based on the concept of "milestones," where each level signifies important learning achievements that correspond to specific key learning requirements. Each milestone is rooted in students' cognitive development, and within the "Subject Specific Levels," these milestones consider both the breadth and depth of subject content and the distinctive characteristics of each subject area. In summary, the LPF defines critical learning milestones that reflect students' cognitive progress while integrating the comprehensive aspects of each subject's curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2012).

Developed by the Education Bureau (EDB) in 2007, the LPF aligns with high school curricula and serves as a common assessment framework designed to facilitate learning progress while informing future learning objectives. Despite its long-term implementation, there has been limited research investigating the LPF's impact on student learning, particularly regarding its role in optimizing curricula and addressing learning differences.

Considering the identified research gap, this study focuses on examining the effectiveness of the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) in Hong Kong as an assessment tool for evaluating the academic performance of students with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, the subsequent methodology will outline the research design and techniques employed to explore the LPF's effectiveness, aiming to provide valuable insights that may enhance curriculum planning and improve academic outcomes for these students.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) in assessing academic performance among students with intellectual disabilities. The quantitative component focuses on analyzing the number of students reaching various proficiency levels across multiple years and examining the variations in median and highest levels attained. This analysis provides insights into the changes in student abilities over time. In parallel, the qualitative aspect

involves systematic evaluations of data recorded in minutes from reflective and annual subject meetings, along with teachers' comments on student performance during these meetings. Additionally, LPF analyses will be conducted across different subjects to quantify the impact of the framework. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative data, this research design aims to provide a robust understanding of how the LPF influences student learning outcomes and informs curriculum development.

In total, there are 62 special schools in Hong Kong, of which 43 cater specifically to students with intellectual disabilities, offering individualized learning programs that include modified curricula and life skills training. Additionally, the network includes 7 schools for students with physical disabilities, 8 focused on social development, 2 for visual impairments, 1 for hearing impairment, and 1 hospital school. This study was conducted at the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Tsui Tsin Tong School, a special school in Hong Kong that serves students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual disability (ID) is a condition defined by incomplete or stalled mental development, significantly characterized by a decline in concrete functioning across different developmental stages. This impairment impacts overall intelligence, affecting cognitive, language, motor, and socialization skills, which leads to difficulties in adapting to the environment (Katz & Lazcano-Ponce, 2008). The students participating in this study have mild to moderate ID, with IQ ranges of 52–69 for mild ID and 36–51 for moderate ID.

The research population for this study consists of 170 students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, ranging from Primary 1 (P.1) to Secondary 6 (S.6), aged between 6 and 20 years. These students are enrolled at TWGHs Tsui Tsin Tong School, which serves as the research site. Data have been collected annually as part of an ongoing process, with this study utilizing data from 2021 to 2025. Throughout this period, the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) has been systematically implemented across the curriculum. This targeted application of the LPF aims to strengthen curriculum planning and enhance academic performance for these students, offering valuable insights into the framework's effectiveness in meeting their unique educational needs.

The LPF operates by designating specific students as targets for tracking throughout their educational journey until graduation. Evidence of students' learning performance is collected, often through videos or photographs. During meetings, teachers present this evidence alongside the LPF levels assigned to the targeted students. Discussions then focus on evaluating student performance, aligning their achievements with the appropriate LPF levels. Teachers apply their professional judgment to determine grades for all students within the school. The subject panel head analyzes the collected data to provide an overview of student performance across various key stages.

The LPF is intricately linked with curriculum implementation, functioning as a crucial element within the school's assessment framework. This alignment ensures that the LPF informs instructional practices and evaluations, thus enhancing the teaching and learning processes. By observing specific learning behaviors and employing school-based assessment tools, educators can effectively assess students' learning progress and levels, generating valuable insights into each student's development to tailor support accordingly. Furthermore, the LPF fosters collaboration among teachers, students, and parents to establish or adjust learning goals and plans, serving not just as an assessment tool but as a dynamic system that promotes continuous learning.

The study focuses on the follow research questions:

1. How does the implementation of the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) influence the academic performance of students with intellectual disabilities over time?
2. What variations exist in the proficiency levels achieved by students with intellectual disabilities within the LPF framework across different key stages?
3. How do teachers' insights and professional judgments, informed by the LPF, impact curriculum planning and instructional practices for students with special educational needs?
4. In what ways can the LPF facilitate collaboration among educators, students, and parents to enhance students' learning goals and plans?

The study focuses on the follow research objectives:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of the LPF in improving the academic performance of students with intellectual disabilities by analyzing proficiency levels and trends over time.
2. To assess the distribution and variations in LPF levels attained by students across multiple years and key stages.
3. To explore how teachers utilize insights gained from the LPF to inform curriculum planning and adapt teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students.
4. To investigate the role of the LPF in promoting collaborative efforts among teachers, students, and parents in establishing or revising learning goals and enhancing continuous learning.

Results

Students' performance has been recorded and analyzed annually. The levels of students range from S1 to S9, each representing a distinct cognitive level achieved in two subjects. These cognitive levels are linked to specific subject areas, allowing for an assessment of how well students can perform in various categories of each subject. The nine Learning Progression Framework (LPF) levels are detailed as follows (Curriculum Development Council, 2012):

Table 1

Levels of Learning Progression Framework (LPF)

S1	Recognize	Students are able to recognize and name basic concepts, items, or terms within the subject. This foundational level indicates initial awareness and identification.
S2	Identify	At this level, students can correctly identify and label more specific concepts, demonstrating an understanding of the differences between items or ideas.
S3	Demonstrate	Students can exhibit practical skills related to the subject, applying their recognition and identification skills in real-world scenarios or tasks.
S4	Describe, Distinguish	Students can describe key characteristics of concepts and distinguish between similar ideas, showcasing their ability to articulate differences and details.
S5	Apply	Students are now able to apply their knowledge and understanding to practical situations, solving problems and carrying out tasks that require the use of learned skills.

S6	Explain	At this level, students can explain concepts and processes in their own words, demonstrating a deeper understanding and the ability to communicate their knowledge effectively.
S7	Outline	Students begin to organize their thoughts systematically, outlining main ideas and supporting details, which reflects their ability to structure information logically.
S8	Analyze	Students are capable of breaking down complex concepts and examining the relationships and components, showing critical thinking and evaluative skills.
S9	Evaluate, Comment	At the highest level, students can make judgments about information and ideas, evaluating the effectiveness or significance of various concepts, and providing reasoned commentary on their findings.

Additionally, students' performance in Chinese Language and Mathematics has been compared. Data for students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities are collected and analyzed separately to provide targeted insights into their academic progress. Students are evaluated across different categories to assess their capabilities in various areas. For Chinese Language, the four categories include reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In Mathematics, the categories consist of number and algebra, measurement, geometry and spatial sense, and data handling. This categorization allows for a comprehensive understanding of students' strengths and areas for growth.

Table 2

Comparison of Students' Performance on Chinese Language of Students of Mild Intellectual Disability

21/22					24/25				
KS1	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS1	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S3	S4	S4	S4	Median	S3	S3	S3	S4
Highest	S4	S5	S5	S5	Highest	S6	S6	S7	S6
KS2	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS2	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S4	S4	S4	S4	Median	S3/S4	S4/S5	S4	S5
Highest	S5	S5	S5	S5	Highest	S5	S6	S6	S6
KS3	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS3	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S4	S4	S5	S5	Median	S4	S5	S5	S5
Highest	S8	S8	S7	S6	Highest	S6	S8	S7	S8
KS4	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS4	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S5	S5/S6	S6	S5	Median	S5	S6	S6	S6
Highest	S9	S8	S9	S9	Highest	S9	S8	S9	S9

Table 3
Comparison of Students' Performance on Chinese Language of Students of Moderate Intellectual Disability

21/22					24/25				
KS1	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS1	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S3	S2	S2	S2	Median	S2/S3	S2	S2/S3	S2
Highest	S4	S3	S3	S3	Highest	S4	S5	S5	S4
KS2	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS2	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S2	S2	S2	S2	Median	S3	S2	S3	S2
Highest	S4	S4	S4	S4	Highest	S4	S5	S5	S5
KS3	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS3	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S2	S2	S3	S2	Median	S2/S3	S2	S3/S4	S2/S3
Highest	S5	S5	S5	S5	Highest	S5	S4	S5	S5
KS4	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KS4	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Median	S2	S2	S3	S2	Median	S3	S3	S3	S3
Highest	S4	S5	S4	S4	Highest	S5	S5	S6	S6

Table 4
Comparison of Students' Performance on Mathematics of Students of Mild Intellectual Disability

21/22					24/25				
KS1	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling	KS1	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling
Median	S5	S3	S3	S3	Median	S3	S3	S3	S3
Highest	S5	S4	S3	S3	Highest	S5	S4	S5	S5
KS2	~	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling	KS2	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling
Median	S5	S3	S4	S4	Median	S6	S8	S6	S4/S5
Highest	S5	S5	S5	S6	Highest	S6	S8	S7	S6
KS3	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling	KS3	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling
Median	S5	S4	S4	S5	Median	S6	S5	S6	S6
Highest	S7	S7	S6	S8	Highest	S8	S8	S8	S9

KS4	Numer and Algebra	Measurement, Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling		KS4	Numer and Algebra	Measurement, Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling
Median	S5	S5	S6		Median	S6	S5	S6
Highest	S8	S7	S9		Highest	S9	S8	S9

Table 5
Comparison of Students’ Performance on Mathematics of Students of Moderate Intellectual Disability

21/22					24/25				
KS1	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling	KS1	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling
Median	S2	S2	S3	S2	Median	S2/S3	S2	S2	S2
Highest	S4	S3	S4	S3	Highest	S4	S4	S4	S5
KS2	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling	KS2	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling
Median	S3	S2	S2	S3	Median	S3	S3	S3	S3
Highest	S4	S5	S4	S5	Highest	S5	S5	S4	S5
KS3	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling	KS3	Numer and Algebra	Measurement	Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling
Median	S3	S2	S3	S3	Median	S3	S3	S3	S3
Highest	S6	S7	S6	S6	Highest	S5	S6	S5	S7
KS4	Numer and Algebra	Measurement, Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling		KS4	Numer and Algebra	Measurement, Geometry and spacial sense	Data handling	
Median	S3	S3	S3		Median	S3	S3	S2	
Highest	S6	S6	S7		Highest	S7	S7	S6	

In the diagram above, “KS” refers to the “key stages” of students, with KS1, KS2, KS3, and KS4 corresponding to Primary 1 to 3, Primary 4 to 6, Secondary 1 to 3, and Secondary 4 to 6, respectively.

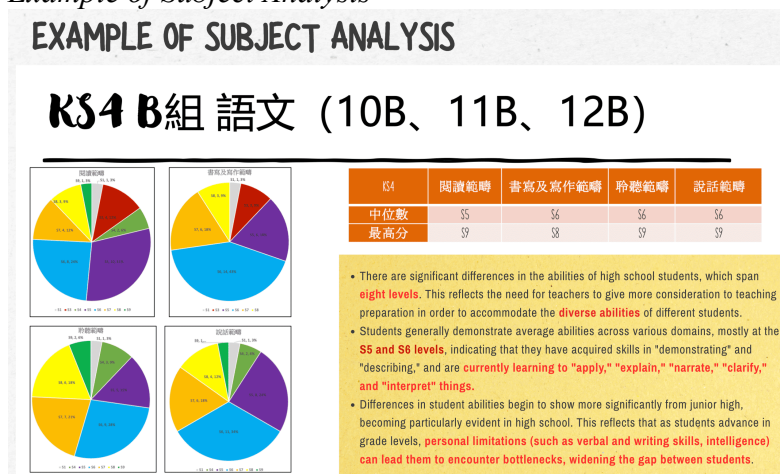
The data indicate significant improvement in students’ Learning Progression Framework (LPF) levels between the 2021–2022 and 2024–2025 academic years. More than half of the categories in both Chinese Language and Mathematics show notable advancements (highlighted in red).

The transition from KS2 to KS3 marks the most substantial progress overall. For instance, students with mild intellectual disabilities in KS2 and KS3 demonstrated improvement in Mathematics across all categories in the 2024–2025 year. Specifically, the median levels for KS2 students increased from S5 to S6 in general performance, while scores in specific categories rose from S2 to S8 and from S4 to S6. Similarly, KS3 students showed improvements from S5 to S6 and from S4 to S5, with growth noted in all four key areas.

However, a decline is evident in some KS1 levels, which is uncommon in other key stages. For example, the median score for KS1 students in the Chinese Language category dropped from S4 to S3 in writing and listening skills. A similar decrease was observed in Mathematics, where mild ID students' performance fell from S3 to S2 in geometry. Additionally, students in KS4 exhibited improvements in several areas, though the increases were less pronounced compared to those seen in KS2 and KS3.

These findings have been further analyzed and discussed during subject and panel meetings to enhance teaching practices and curriculum development.

Figure 1
Example of Subject Analysis



In addition to conducting cross-year analyses of student performance, subject panel heads also perform same-key-stage and cross-key-stage analyses utilizing Learning Progression Framework (LPF) data, as illustrated in the diagram above. This quantitative data provides valuable insights into the distribution of abilities within each class, enabling teachers to develop tailored teaching plans and materials that meet the diverse needs of their students. Furthermore, this analysis aids panel heads and curriculum leaders in reflecting on and refining the curriculum, ensuring it remains relevant and effective in promoting student learning. By using LPF data effectively, educators can make informed decisions that enhance instructional practices, support student growth, and align curriculum development with the varying proficiency levels of students in different key stages.

The qualitative component includes methodical assessments of data documented in the minutes from reflective and annual subject meetings, as well as teachers' feedback on student performance discussed during these sessions. Students' performance and trend of improvement have been discussed and further analyzed in meetings to find out reasons behind for further improvement in teaching and curriculum in the future.

The use of Learning Progression Framework (LPF) data assists teachers in understanding the current challenges and circumstances faced by students across various key stages. Reviewing the minutes from subject meetings reveals that teachers have gained substantial insights from analyzing LPF data. For instance, it has been noted that KS1 students may experience declines in several categories. During discussions, teachers reflected that this could be significantly influenced by the quality and capability of the student intake for that year, which impacts overall performance outcomes.

Furthermore, students with intellectual disabilities (ID) often require more time to show improvement, which is why notable progress is observed during KS2 and KS3. However, the degree of improvement in KS4 tends to be less pronounced. This is largely due to the limitations in ability that many ID students experience, preventing them from reaching the highest LPF levels as they progress to senior secondary education. Additionally, some ID students may be non-verbal or unable to write, making it challenging for them to meet the skill requirements associated with higher LPF levels. As highlighted in the minutes, subject teachers have proposed increasing the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools to enhance students' communication skills. These tools can support students in meeting the necessary criteria for higher achievement levels. Moreover, teachers have suggested incorporating a "Voice Input" feature into the curriculum, allowing students with limited motor skills to articulate their ideas verbally and "write" compositions through speech input, thereby facilitating their advancement to higher LPF levels and enhancing their overall capabilities. In addition, teachers affirmed the role of LPF in enabling same-key-stage and cross-key-stage analyses, allowing subject panels to gain a deeper understanding of student groupings, class structures, and individual abilities. This information is crucial for effectively facilitating both teaching and learning, ensuring that instruction is aligned with the unique needs of each student.

Discussion

The implementation of the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) has significantly contributed to improvements in students' academic performance in a variety of ways. First and foremost, the LPF has enhanced teachers' understanding of student performance by providing structured assessment tools that offer clear insights into individual capabilities. This deeper comprehension allows educators to tailor their instruction more effectively. As a result, curriculum planning has become more strategic and targeted, addressing the specific needs of students with intellectual disabilities. The alignment of teaching strategies with these needs fosters an environment conducive to learning. Over the course of the study, students exhibited measurable academic progress, underscoring the effectiveness of the LPF in driving better educational outcomes. By facilitating a continuous improvement cycle in the learning-teaching-assessment process, the LPF not only enhances curriculum planning and teaching practices but also enriches the overall educational experience, ensuring that students are supported in their diverse learning journeys.

Future research in the realm of the Learning Progression Framework (LPF) holds great potential for further enhancing curriculum planning and academic outcomes in special schools. Subsequent studies could build upon the findings of this thesis by investigating how the LPF can be more effectively utilized across various subjects, enabling educators to harness data from the framework to reflect student abilities comprehensively. Additionally, expanding the scope of research to include cross-school comparisons can provide valuable insights into whether students at different institutions, despite attaining similar proficiency levels, exhibit comparable abilities and underlying implications. Collaboration among special schools in

sharing data and findings could further facilitate effective teaching and curriculum planning, ultimately enhancing learning outcomes. Future inquiries may also delve deeper into specific mechanisms behind the LPF's effectiveness, allowing for a nuanced understanding of its impact. Exploring the broader application of the LPF across diverse special education contexts, as well as assessing the long-term effects on student achievement, will be critical in developing a robust evidence base that informs educational practices and policies in the field of special education.

Conclusion

The findings of this thesis demonstrate that significant improvements in students' academic performance are evident following the implementation of the Learning Progression Framework (LPF). One of the primary reasons for this positive outcome is that the LPF enables frontline teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their students' abilities, allowing them to design teaching materials that are more suitable and effective. Additionally, teachers gain insights into the distribution of student capabilities within their classes, facilitating more appropriate lesson design that meets diverse learning needs. Furthermore, the LPF equips subject panels with comprehensive information regarding students' strengths and weaknesses, enhancing their curriculum planning efforts. Looking ahead, future research should explore additional strategies for how special schools can further leverage the LPF to optimize curriculum planning and improve academic outcomes for students with special educational needs. By continuously refining and implementing the LPF, educators can foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment that supports the unique learning journeys of all students.

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