Supporting students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES
IN THE
GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM

By
VIVIAN MOE MICHAEL
SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES
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This study could not have been completed without the help and support of numerous family members, friends, colleagues and students. To all of you, your encouragement, understanding, patience and time will always be appreciated. I now offer my presence at any activity of your choosing!
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Anne Michaele.

I miss you still.
Abstract

Current mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act places students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent possible with general education students. At the secondary level, this mandate challenges both general education teachers and students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. The purpose of this study is to understand the needs of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities and their general education teachers in an effort to move toward academic engagement and achievement through differentiated instruction. This study took place in a small coastal California high school where teachers were surveyed about their knowledge, understanding, and implementation of differentiated instruction. A teacher’s focus group was also formed and met with the researcher in an effort to determine a better understanding of the principles and support needed for practicing differentiated instruction. Finally, high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities were interviewed to determine the support they perceived as essential for achieving academic success in general education classrooms. The results showed that while many of the teachers knew the principles and components of differentiated instruction, many of the myths were also believed to be true. During the focus group many of the common barriers to inclusion were found to be present. A lack of time to plan for differentiated instruction proved to be the most frequently mentioned barrier. The most common need for the students with mild to moderate learning disabilities is for general education teachers to be aware of the students’ different learning styles so their strengths could be utilized and appreciated. This was closely followed by the need for approachable teachers and friends to satisfy the feeling of community and belonging. Until schools begin to identify ways to truly include students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in general education classrooms, the likelihood increases that genuine inclusion will not take place.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of our educational history students recognized as having learning disabilities have been segregated from the mainstream student population. With the 1975 enactment of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, students were at times placed within the general education classroom in an effort to conform to the least restrictive environment mandated by this law. A quarter of a century later the federal government passed Public Law 107-110, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which states that all students are to be taught by highly qualified teachers and are expected to achieve at a predetermined level of proficiency. Also through NCLB, and even more recently, California’s Title 5 Regulations mandate that special education teachers must hold a special education credential as well as show proof of subject matter knowledge for the subject they teach in order to teach at the secondary level. This legislation created an urgency to place students with learning disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers in the general education classroom to be educated by highly qualified teachers with conforming credentials. Thus, students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, who at one time were able to work in small groups, learn at their own pace, and have new concepts repeated until familiar, have since been placed in the complex, fast-paced classroom with non-disabled peers. Although integration and inclusion sound fair and just, “The social-cultural realities of integration are such that one group is viewed as the “mainstream” and one group is not; where one group must push-in to the activities and setting occupied by the other” (Salisbury, 1991).
Statement of the Problem

According to the least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with learning disabilities should be afforded an opportunity to participate to the maximum extent possible in general education (IDEA, 2004). Although the law provides the legal foundation for including students with disabilities in general education classrooms, it does not mandate a specific service delivery model. As a result, school districts and individual schools interpret the mandate in a manner they see fit under the guise that students with disabilities are indeed participating in the LRE. Students with learning disabilities, while placed in core curriculum content classes with their non-disabled peers, are still excluded from participation in the inclusionary process, lacking the necessary support to enable adequate understanding of content. Courses at the high school level are content driven and general educators are content specialists. As a result, students with learning disabilities often suffer the consequences of academic failure which can lead to low self-esteem and oftentimes leads to dropping out of school entirely (Batchelor, 2012). Therefore, there is a need to identify issues and barriers that prevent students with mild to moderate learning disabilities from active and sustained inclusion in secondary general education classrooms. More importantly, it is the student with the disability who needs to give input into the type of effective instruction that will most likely increase academic engagement and performance.

Considerable progress has been made since the enactment of PL 94-142 and IDEA. However, the LRE mandate continues to stimulate an ongoing debate regarding the setting in which students with mild to moderate learning disabilities should be educated. Often the absence of defined expectations of how to best provide services to students with mild to moderate disabilities in the general education setting that makes successful inclusion difficult.
Unfortunately, this difficulty is compounded at the secondary level where teachers are subject oriented rather than whole child oriented. This coupled with a lack of understanding from the student's perspective on what meets his/her needs within a content class at the high school level, causes academic failure within the school system.

The Purpose of the Study

The least restrictive mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act directs that students with disabilities participate to the maximum extent in general education environment. There is a gap between the philosophy and the practical implementation of this mandate at the secondary level. Studies show that high school teachers are content specialists and at times find it difficult to consider the development of the student as a whole (Bintz, 1997). Few studies give voice to high school students with learning disabilities regarding their own needs and desires in the general education classroom. This study will add to the research by surveying teaching staff and interviewing both students and teachers in an attempt to uncover, compare, and support the needs of both so that differential instruction can be implemented successfully within the general education classroom.

The purpose of this study is to understand the needs of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities and their general education teachers in an effort to move toward academic engagement and achievement through differentiated instruction. This particular coastal California high school was recently visited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). WASC determined that few, if any, teachers at the site use Differentiated instruction. After a week of interviewing teachers, administrators, parents, and students, and observing classrooms, WASC cautioned administration to consider differentiated instruction as a means to address all students' needs. It was this review and a look at current literature that established a
purpose for further study in the area of differentiated instruction. Research illustrates that educators continue to explore ways in which to successfully reach diverse population of students, including those with learning disabilities, in the inclusive classroom.

It is the hope of this special education researcher that key themes and similarities in academic essentials will be identified by interviewing students with learning disabilities and their general education teachers. Once the needs of both of these populations are identified, special education support staff could step in and assist. Supporting the general education teacher with his/her needs to implement differentiated instruction in an effort to engage students with learning disabilities can only have a positive effect on the inclusionary classroom.

Dr. Virgil Ward, the grandfather of differential education, and Russian constructionist, Lev Vygotsky are germinal researchers in this study. The empirical evidence of Ward’s differentiated instruction was developed with the gifted student in mind. However, consider that the pedagogical principals behind differential education allow for participation at the student’s level of cognition using his/her unique learning characteristics; one would question why this should not be used for all classrooms for all students. Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism shows academic engagement is possible for all students within the inclusive classroom setting when instruction is tailored to individual needs. This theory suggests students learn from social interaction first and then develop internally. We often see this theory played out when students work with partners and groups in the classroom setting as the teacher monitors with guidance. It is Vygotsky’s belief that the process of learning is discovered through social interaction, and eventually internalized to build on the students’ knowledge and abilities. It is the observations and theories of both Ward and Vygotsky that students learn best when starting at his/her own level of understanding, learning style and pace, allowing for the uniqueness of the individual.
Research Questions

This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the general education high school teachers’ perceptions of differentiated instruction?

2. What do general education high school teachers perceive is needed for differentiated instruction to be better implemented into the inclusionary classroom?

3. What do high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities perceive is needed for positive academic engagement in the inclusionary classroom?
Definition of Terms

Academic engagement – Academic engagement is identified by on-task behaviors that signal a serious psychological investment in class work; these include attentiveness, doing the assigned work, and showing enthusiasm for this work by taking initiative to raise questions, contribute to group activities and help peers (DETE education, 2013). A buzz word from the nineties, it has become an indicator of successful classroom learning.

Accommodation – According to the LDonline definition, accommodations are alterations in the way tasks are presented that allow children with learning disabilities to complete the same assignments as other students. Accommodations do not alter the content of assignments, give students an unfair advantage or in the case of assessments, change what a test measures. They do make it possible for students with LD to show what they know without being impeded by their disability.

Differentiated Education – Differentiated education, also referred to as differentiated instruction, is a response by the teacher to individual student’s needs by focusing on the essentials in learning and adjusting academic content, the learning process, and the end product to student’s readiness, interests, and learning profile. The goal is to maximize student growth and individual success (Tomlinson, 2000).

Inclusive classroom – In IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA it is clear that students with disabilities must be educated in regular education settings to the maximum extent appropriate in light of their needs, and prohibit their exclusion unless education there cannot be achieved satisfactorily even with appropriate supplementary aids and services.

Learning disabilities – Learning disabilities are problems that affect the brain’s ability to receive, process, analyze, or store information. These problems can make it difficult for a student to learn
as quickly as someone who isn't affected by learning disabilities (Healthy Kids, 2010). In 1963, Dr. Samuel Kirk, a professor of special education at the University of Illinois, in a conference of concerned parents coined the term learning disabilities (Woolley, 2007).

Least restrictive environment (LRE) —According to the US Department of Education (2004), the least restrictive environment is defined as: To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In 1786, Thomas Jefferson reflected:

I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness...Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish & improve the law for educating the common people.

(Monticello, 2013)

The United States was built on the belief that education is a necessity for the continued growth and prosperity of our nation (USDE, 2013). During colonial times, education for youth was in the form of apprenticeships and later developed into the reading and writing of biblical passages to guarantee moral values were learned (Steelman, 2000). By 1918, though age and amount of hours varied, every state in the United States had compulsory schooling laws in place (Steelman, Powell & Carini, 2000). One exception to this mandate was children with mental disabilities (Danforth & Taff, 2004).

The following chapter will take a small snapshot of education for students with mild to moderate disabilities. This review of the literature is organized into four sections. The first section is historical background, the second is facilitating learning, the third is differentiated instruction in general education, and the final section is students with learning disabilities.

Historical Background

Although Congress added Title VI to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 thus creating a Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, public schools were never mandated to educate students with learning disabilities. Most children were placed in private,
segregated schools usually run by charities; or left at home without being educated. It was only through the civil rights movement when people began to look at the rights of women and minorities, that individuals with learning disabilities were given their rights (Kaufman, 2003).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was enacted to protect individuals from discrimination based on their disability, yet still there was little discussion of this pertaining to public schools (Peterson, 2007). It was not until two years later that the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142, now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), mandated that individual states provide an appropriate public education for every school-aged child regardless of his/her disability. This act, written with a social justice agenda, specifies that students with learning disabilities be taught in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Dunn & Griggs, 2004; Katims & Harris, 1997).

The term *learning disability* has caused much debate among researchers. Some concern themselves with the legitimacy of the term which came about as a federally designated category in the late 1960's (Blatt, 1979; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983; Hahn, 1989; Kavale, 2002; Skrtic, 1991). In 1986, C.E.E. Sleeter described a learning disability as simply a term that has been established by a society unwilling to adapt instruction to the needs of diverse populations. Kavale and Forness (2000) feel that the term simply labels a student and actually hinders the pursuit of better understanding the individual's academic needs. However, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) believes learning disability to be a legitimate term and in 1984 offered the following definition:

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking,
reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction.

Even though learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors); it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.

(p. 699)

In 2004, the US Department of Education, added section 602(30) with IDEA-2004, clarifying its definition of learning disability using three criteria:

(A) In general.--The term specific learning disability means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

(B) Disorders included.--Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(C) Disorders not included.--Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

(USDE, 2013)
Another debate emerges over the least restrictive environment (LRE). The US Department of Education offers this definition:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

(IDEA, 2004)

Depending on the school-site interpretation, IDEA led either to the placement of students with learning disabilities into the small-group setting of a segregated special education resource classroom, or integrated students into the general education classroom. Some districts used a mixture of the two approaches, pulling students with learning disabilities into the resource classroom for intense instruction in an attempt to narrow the academic gap and then pushing them back into the mainstream for a few classes, sometimes after a few years. If students failed in the general education classroom, they were pulled back into the special education classroom (Zigmond, 2000).

One must consider the impact of the LRE on the education of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities (Swanson & Vaughn, 2008). There are studies exhibiting students with learning disabilities that often show improvement in behavior, motivation, and grades when placed in the inclusive classroom (Brady, 2005). There are other studies that reveal concern toward this being the right choice for this population of students (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009).
Kauffman (1995) sees a serious threat to the educational welfare of these students if they are dropped into a full-inclusion setting without any more thought than they were originally dropped into a separate class setting. The US Department of Education’s Equity and Excellence Commission acknowledges that students with disabilities are finding it difficult to be successful in the general education classroom. Suspensions are at disproportionately high rates and a lack of appropriate instructional differentiation aligned with their abilities was found to exist (EEC, 2013).

Dr. Rita Dunn, Professor of Education and Director of the Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles at St. John’s University in Jamaica, New York, had been working with “handicapped” children in the late sixties and early seventies when segregation from general education classes was the norm. Dunn and her husband, Dr. Kenneth Dunn, began developing ways to improve the effectiveness of instruction for students who were not making acceptable progress in the classroom. Dunn and Dunn dedicated their lives to researching learning styles to assist teachers with student learning. Simply defined, learning styles are “the way in which each learner begins to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information” (Dunn & Griggs, 2004; Koch, 2004; Tenedero, 2009).

When the Education for All Handicapped Children bill was written, Dunn, an active participant in the writing of the first special education bill, asserted that learning styles be part of the mandate. She maintained that a least restrictive environment would require teachers to adapt new teaching strategies: a differentiated instruction that suited more than one group of learners. In an interview nearly three decades after it was written, Dunn lamented, “So, the first bill, 94-142, has learning style requirements in it, but many professionals are not doing it the way it should be done” (Koch, 2004). Research suggests that any new legislation is difficult for those
expected to implement and support it without being given the tools to understand the means in which this should be done (Fullan, 2007; Sansosti, Noltemeyer & Goss, 2010).

Whether the diversity of a classroom is created through learning abilities, language barriers, socio-economic factors, or cultures, schools must be concerned that all students are being treated fairly (Cox, 2005; Hall, Strangman & Meyer, 2002; Wiley & Brunner, 2013).

Facilitating Learning

The study and development of learning styles during the sixties acknowledges differences in the ways individual students absorb new information. This supports the idea that learning happens when the child is ready and has the opportunity to build on what is already known with others more knowledgeable (Dunn, Dunn & Price, 1981; McLeod, 2007, 2009, 2012).

Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, believed that a teacher’s role should be to facilitate learning (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). Vygotsky’s experiments compared student’s reasoning when working alone or working with a more competent person. His findings were that children learn through communicating while involved in social activities with more capable beings, asserting that students should be instructed within learning environments which encourage interaction. It is when students are able to reflect and build on what is already known that learning takes place. Vygotsky’s theory results in an approach to learning where students, after being guided by one more knowledgeable, continue to transform internally into educated beings (McLeod, 2007).

There are two basic principles that go along with Vygotsky’s theory. One is the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), which is defined as anyone or thing that the student interacts with and has more knowledge than the student about a particular topic. In schools we would expect this to be the teacher, but also could be any number of things, such as friends, the internet, or
books. MKO is intertwined with Vygotsky’s other principle, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (McLeod, 2007).

ZPD is a critical moment when the student is met at his/her level of understanding and can make the jump to a higher level. It distinguishes between what the student can learn independently and what he can learn with guidance from the MKO. The ZPD is where students learn competence and strategies for future learning. Evidence of Vygotsky’s research has been established in multiple studies. It is the basis for small cooperative learning groups seen in classrooms where students are paired with others who can help them through the process of learning with teacher as facilitator (McLeod, 2007).

**Differentiated Instruction in General Education**

Dr. Virgil Ward coined the phrase *differential education* in 1961 as he looked for ways to provide suitable education for gifted and talented students (1980). It was his thought that “…we could best maximize student growth by beginning our work with children based on where they were (what they knew and how they best learned), and helping them to progress from there” (Purcell and Leppien, 1998). Although Ward’s focus was on gifted learners, it has proven to be applicable to all learners for over fifty years (Bender, 2008; Bravmann, 2004; Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Differentiated education, also referred to as differentiated instruction, is a responsive method of teaching used in successful inclusionary classrooms. Differentiated education considers the students’ needs and learning styles, and creates activities in the classroom to match those needs (Bender, 2009; McKenzie, 2009; Sousa, 2006). In a 2001 interview, Waldron and McLeskey explained that differentiated instruction means “…teachers will create different levels of expectations for task completion within a lesson or unit” (Walther-Thomas & Brownell,
Through constant assessments, the teacher identifies the level of student’s ability and understanding. This recognition of students’ learning needs provides for proper modifications or scaffolding to allow for student access to grade level materials (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

In 2008, W. N. Bender introduced his book, *Differentiating Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities: Best Teaching Practices for General and Special Educators*, with the assurance that decades of studies in differentiated instruction have presented a number of good strategies, based on federal regulations found in IDEA, to use for all student achievement. Access to materials is found through technology, added structure to lessons with clear expectations and examples, personal assistance, and a systematic breakdown of strategies (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Through these, and other adaptations, students of all abilities are challenged with a personalized instruction that is interactive and interesting (Tomlinson, 2001). As a facilitator of learning, the teacher eventually fades the modifications as the student’s skills strengthen (McLeod, 2007, Thousand et al., 2002; Shepard, 2000).

The General Education Teacher

All teachers must meet the *highly qualified* regulation set by Public Law 107-110, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). At the secondary level this means holding proof of subject matter knowledge in the subject one is teaching (USDE, 2005). Secondary general education teachers are content specialists and are accustomed to fast paced instruction, high expectations, and rigorous requirements to meet high-stakes testing (Kozik, Cooney, Vinciguerra, Gradel, & Black, 2009; Mastropieri & Scruggs; 2001). The inclusion of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities into the demanding general education arena can leave
general education teachers feeling ill-prepared and less than enthusiastic (Horne, 1983; Sansosti, Noltemeyer & Goss, 2010).

In *Teachers Views on Inclusion* Schumm and Vaughn surveyed the perceptions of general educators for teaching students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom (1992). The survey included general education teachers from kindergarten through high school. “98% rated their knowledge and skills for planning for general education students as either excellent or good, yet a mere 39% rated their planning for inclusive students with learning disabilities as excellent or good” (Schumm & Vaughn, 1992). Further, in a 1996 study, *Teacher Perceptions of Mainstreaming/Inclusion, 1958-1995: A Research Synthesis*, Scruggs and Mastropieri found “…that teachers regard students with disabilities in the context of procedural classroom concerns (which have improved little if any in recent decades), rather than in the context of social prejudice and attitudes toward social integration which appear to have improved somewhat in recent decades.”

Many teachers have concerns and reservations about inclusion and believe that substantial supports are necessary to enable these efforts to succeed. This suggests that those who have the greatest responsibility of teaching students with disabilities are also the most troubled in how this should be accomplished (Schumm & Vaughn, 1991).

*The Four Top Barriers to Inclusion*

General education teachers most often site time for preparing and collaborating, severity of the student’s disability, equity for all students, and lack of training as the most troubling aspects of the inclusive classroom (Sansosti, Noltemeyer & Goss, 2010).

The first most common and always a valid barrier for general educators teaching within an inclusive classroom is time. At the secondary level, where subject content is delivered at a
rigorous pace to meet standardized testing and prepare for the next level of classes, teachers
often find it difficult to accommodate for students with learning disabilities (Gersten &
Woodward, 1990; Santoli & Martin, 2012; Schumm & Vaughn, 1991; Vaughn, Reiss, Rothlein,
& Hughes, 1998). Collinson and Cook, in their 2001 survey of secondary teachers found that,
"the concept of time is more complex and dynamic than the literature implies." It is not just the
teacher’s individual planning time that is needed, but collaboration time with the special educator
is necessary to communicate the needs and strengths of students with learning disabilities and
reflect on appropriate pedagogy for classroom engagement. (Eisenberger, Bertrando, & Conti-
D'Antonio, 2000; Kozleski & Jackson, 1993). Lack of planning time can greatly inhibit the
success of inclusion.

A second barrier to inclusion is the severity of the disability of the student. The term
learning disability is an umbrella for a diverse population of learners with any number of
disorders described by IDEA. Using the one term can often be misleading in suggesting there is a
one-size-fits-all solution to accommodating these students. Students with learning disabilities
have diverse cognitive and affective developments (Cole & McLeskey, 1997). The type or
severity of the disability will absolutely affect student progress, which entangles with the first
barrier of time.

Often, students with learning disabilities have difficulty with organization and studying
strategies which can be frustrating for both student and teacher. This is especially significant at
the secondary level, where students move between several classes in a day allowing for a greater
chance of assignments and papers being easily misplaced and recollection of material learned left
behind.
A student’s learning disability can also affect the math classroom. It is important to note that, “…the average 17-year-old student with a learning disability in math, is functioning at a level expected for the average 10-year-old student without a disability” (Kotering, deBettencourt, Braziel, 2005). Because incoming freshmen with learning disabilities average 15 years of age, one may deduce that the 10-year-old functioning level may be a bit high. This math deficit not only hinders the student in the math classroom, but also influences student’s eligibility for sciences requiring algebra proficiency, sports, and a diploma.

Learning disabilities can manifest in any number of ways. Students with a deficit in cognition struggle to learn course content which often leads to poor academic achievement when not accommodated. Student comprehension when reading grade level texts can complicate authentic learning. Students who have difficulty with oral or written expression, lose points on class participation and on tests, and suffer in silence instead of approaching teachers to discuss problems in the class.

A third complication perceived by general education teachers as a barrier to inclusion is equity. If one seeks a definition for equity in any dictionary, the word fairness is bound to appear. General education teachers often hesitate to implement accommodations for students with learning disabilities because the very idea of an accommodation somehow feels unfair. (Ernst, 2009; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, & Saumell, 1996). Other teachers feel that with too many accommodations in the school setting, students with learning disabilities will not be prepared for post-graduation life and will find it too difficult to cope in a world without accommodations (Ernst & Rogers, 2009). There is fear that providing for students with learning disabilities means watering down the material, often to the point of no longer meeting grade level standards, thus harming all students in the class (Benbow & Stanley, 1996).
The final barrier to inclusion is lack of training. General education teachers and researchers alike list adequate training as the number one concern for student success in the inclusive classroom (Ernst & Rogers 2009; Deno, 1973; Short & Martin, 2005; Meikamp & Russell, 1996). When legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) mandates that general education teachers be responsible for the performance of all students, including those with learning disabilities in the inclusive classroom, one would expect guidance in preparation (Casale-Giannola, 2011). Without suitable training little differentiated instruction is planned and most teachers simply provide extra help to students with learning disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Professional development is key to ensure student academic engagement in the LRE for students with learning disabilities (Dunn, 2004; Konecni-Upton, 2010). When educators feel that they have the appropriate knowledge and strategies to successfully teach students with learning disabilities, their attitude toward the inclusive classroom changes dramatically (Ernst & Rogers, 2009; Konecni-Upton, 2010; Short & Martin, 2005; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2000).

**Secondary Students with Learning Disabilities**

It is time for all students in public education to benefit from the general education content specialists rather than facing isolation through immovable education practices (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Educators request time for collaborating and training in ways in which to teach a diverse population of students. And what do the students want? Deci & Ryan (1991) found people have three basic needs: autonomy, belonging, and competence. These identified needs have since evolved into the Self Determination Theory (SDT). Many theories on developing intrinsic motivation in students have centered on meeting these three needs of SDT (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Osterman, 2000; Ryan, 2012).
The ABC's of Motivation: An Alternative Framework for Preservice Teachers, suggests that teachers can provide autonomy to students by "...encouraging a sense of personal control for successes and failures, tapping into students' interests and reasons for valuing content, giving positive choices and allowing self-direction, and de-emphasizing extrinsic rewards, such as grades, as much as possible (Anderman & Leake, 2005). Students need to feel a sense of control and self-determination. Most secondary classrooms are not set up to allow for this basic need.

Besides autonomy, students want a sense of belonging. It is critical that students feel accepted by peers and teachers to develop a positive self-worth (Konecni-Upton, 2010). Classrooms can develop a sense of belonging by promoting mutual respect, allowing social interaction, and by ensuring equal participation and opportunities for all students (Konecni-Upton, 2010; Ryan, 2012; Stanton, 2011). Studies show that secondary students with learning disabilities prefer the inclusive classroom setting (Brady, 2005; Dyches, 1996). When placed in with non-disabled peers, rather than secluded in a special education classroom these students report a feeling of belonging to the school community, an increase in social acceptance, and higher self-esteem (Brady, 2005; Dreisbach, 1995).

Competency, which is the third basic need of students, may be more difficult for students with learning disabilities to attain in the general education classroom. Teachers, who set challenging but attainable goals for students, provide effective, confidential feedback on goal attainment, and use appropriate models to build self-efficacy provide a feeling of competency for students (Stanton, 2011). Students need to feel capable of succeeding.

Autonomy develops through self-determination, goal-setting, and self-regulation. Belonging is related to a feeling of autonomy through community and peer connection, and communication skills. These feelings build toward competency in that self-determination and
peer/community connection motivates one to build skills. Deci and Ryan (1991) imply that if these basic needs, autonomy, belonging, and competence are met by students, a natural curiosity for learning will develop and students will be engaged in schooling.

Summary

Our founding fathers gave all Americans the right to a free and equitable education. Researchers have labored their lives for ways in which a heterogeneous group of learners can find maximum growth in the inclusive classroom. Teachers push against the barriers set within public education while students with learning disabilities long for basic needs to stay motivated. The next step in this study was to develop a methodology to further this research.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand the needs of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities and their general education teachers in an effort to move toward academic engagement and achievement through differentiated instruction. This study interviewed high school students with disabilities in an attempt to better understand their needs in the inclusive classroom. Teachers were surveyed and interviewed in regards to their knowledge of and needs for teaching students with diverse learning abilities. Information learned from this study will be offered to the education community to consider further ways to break down the barriers and build on the successes of the inclusionary classroom at the secondary level. Student data will help determine ways in which they can be provided a comfortable, safe, least restrictive learning environment where they can find autonomy, belonging, and competency. By identifying key themes in the responses, and identifying similarities in academic essentials, students and teachers may be guided toward a paradigm shift to meet the needs of both within the inclusionary classroom.

This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the general education high school teachers’ perceptions of differentiated instruction?

2. What do general education high school teachers perceive is needed for differentiated instruction to be better implemented into in the inclusionary classroom?

3. What do high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities perceive is needed for positive academic engagement in the inclusionary classroom?
Setting

Founded in the late 1800’s, this small central California coastal high school is a four-year comprehensive school serving the small affluent community in which it stands. Authorization to use this site for research was granted by the principal of the school (Appendix A). This school is a Basic Aid district. It is currently staffed by twenty-six full-time and three part-time general education teachers. The average length of tenure is sixteen years, providing a veteran staff. Fourteen teachers hold master’s degrees and one has a Ph.D. There are seventeen male and twelve female teachers. All teachers are Caucasian except for one male Asian-American male, and one African-American female. All teachers are board-certified and properly credentialed for their assignments. All twenty-nine teachers possess CLAD-certification (WASC, 2012).

The academic achievements of this high school are noteworthy. It annually meets the Federal Accountability, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) target; in 2012 the school’s Academic Performance Index (API) score was 863 (CA Dept. of Education, 2013). CST, SAT, and AP scores are all high. The standardized test results show this high school is teaching to the standards and is getting strong overall ratings (WASC, 2012).

Participants

Participants include twenty-nine general education teachers at this central coast high school and nineteen students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.

All twenty-nine general education teachers at this school were asked to complete a survey in an effort to get an overall picture of staff knowledge and understanding of differentiated instruction.
The second group was made up of teachers who consented to be part of the focus group (Appendix B & C). This was a subgroup from the same twenty-nine teachers mentioned above, and dependent on volunteerism.

This researcher attempted to interview all nineteen students with mild to moderate learning disabilities currently on her caseload. However, this number was dependent upon acquiring parent consent (Appendix D & E) and student assent (Appendix F). Of the nineteen students ages fourteen to eighteen, seven were female and twelve were male. Females included one freshman, four sophomores, one junior, and one senior. Of these students, one sophomore was of Hispanic descent and one senior was of African descent, all others are Caucasian. Male students include two freshmen, six sophomores, two juniors and two seniors. One male was of Asian descent, all others were Caucasian. This was a direct reflection of the school demographics.

Procedures

This study included a survey completed by fourteen teachers, a teacher focus group numbering five, and eleven student interviews.

The twenty-nine general education teachers in this small central coastal California high school were asked to complete a confidential eighteen-question survey (Appendix G). The survey is adapted from a 2008 study by Brenda Logan, *Examining Differentiated Instruction for Novices: Teachers Respond* (Logan, 2008).

Logan developed this questionnaire from the works of Jacobsen, Eggen, Kauchak, 2006; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999; and Wormeli, 2005 (Logan, 2008). The first section of the questionnaire consists of six questions regarding demographics. Participants were asked to fill in or check the appropriate items including:
content area and grade level taught, number of years of teaching experience, and gender. The second section of the survey asks participants to choose and circle a response. Some examples of the survey questions are “differentiated instruction should focus on essential skills and ideas in each content area” and “differentiating instruction in the classroom will not prepare students to compete in the real world.” The survey responses contained a Likert-style scale consisting of strongly agree, moderately agree, mildly agree, neither agree nor disagree, mildly disagree, moderately disagree, and strongly disagree. A third section of this survey was added by this researcher asking for level of interest in learning more about differentiated instruction, the frequency the respondent presently uses differentiated instruction in the classroom, and interest in joining a one-time focus group for further discussion. There will be no personal identifying information on these surveys to maintain anonymity, except for those signing their names to join the focus group.

All twenty-nine general education teachers on staff were asked to participate in a lunch time focus group to answer specific questions regarding differentiated instruction (Appendix H). These questions, along with those found in the student interview were developed by the researcher in collaboration with Dr. Irene Nares-Guzicki, research advisor.

The researcher has nineteen students who have been identified with mild-to-moderate learning disabilities on her caseload. Eleven of these students agreed to be interviewed to collect data on perceived student likes, dislikes, and needs for maximum academic engagement in the general education classroom. Interviews included seventeen questions (Appendix I). Each student was interviewed during the consultation time of his/her weekly study support class. The interview did not last more than fifteen minutes.
Data Collection

Interviews were transcribed from the replay of the interview recordings. The data was organized into three parts, the first section was the teacher survey, the second section was data from the teacher focus group interviews, and the third consisted of student interview data.

Data from the general education teachers’ survey questions was organized to reflect teacher understanding of the principles, essential components, and myths surrounding differentiated instruction. Data was placed into a spreadsheet and displayed as percentages reflecting teachers’ understanding of differentiated instruction.

The five general education teachers who volunteered their time to establish the focus group were asked questions regarding the use of differentiated instruction in their classrooms. This discussion was audio recorded to allow accurate data collection. Reappearing themes were extracted from the data to allow for analysis of teacher’s common needs for differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Interviews of high school students with mild-to-moderate learning disabilities were reviewed and data gathered on a spreadsheet to identify common needs for support in the general education inclusive classroom.

Data Analysis

This study was based on a qualitative content analysis, a procedure which allows for developing patterns from collected data (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). Although content of analysis can be time consuming, it allows for rich data (Busch, De Maret, Flynn, Kellum, Le, Meyers, 1994-2012). For this study, the researcher coded for the frequency of learning strategies and styles found in both the teacher focus group and student
interviews. The number of categories coded remained flexible to include any concept that repeatedly appeared and added depth and significance to the data. Because frequency of a concept suggests importance, data was collected based on frequency rather than existence. Coding was done manually by researcher to recognize patterns and categories more accurately. Finally, researcher examined the data and attempted to extrapolate trends in an effort to answer the second and third research questions regarding student and teacher perceptions of needs in the inclusive classroom.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the needs of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities and their general education teachers in an effort to move toward academic engagement and achievement through differentiated instruction at the secondary level. By identifying key themes in the responses, and identifying similarities in academic essentials, students and teachers may be guided toward a paradigm shift to meet the needs of both within the inclusionary classroom.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the general education teachers' understanding of differentiated instruction; current practices and needs in the classroom through teacher perceptions and to identify the self-perceived needs of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in the inclusionary classroom of a central coast California high school.

Research Questions

1. What are the general education high school teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction?
2. What do general education high school teachers perceive is needed for differentiated instruction to be implemented into in the inclusionary classroom?
3. What do high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities perceive is needed for positive academic engagement in the inclusionary classroom?

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected from the completed teacher survey, the teacher focus group, and the individual student interviews. The data will be presented and analyzed through a discussion; implications of this research and possibilities for further research will also be reviewed.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

All twenty-nine teachers at this small central coast high school were given the survey. A total of fourteen surveys were returned completed. The first six questions of the survey covered teacher demographics (Table 1).

The ratio of female to male teachers answering the survey was 2:5. The average class size held by 42.9% of the teachers was less than 25 students. 50% of the teachers had an average class size between 26-30 students, while 7.1% had over 30 students as an average class. Years of
service: 21% had less than 10 years, 35.7% had between 26 and 30 years, while 7.1% had more than 31. Most teachers (64.3%) worked with all four grade levels, freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. 14.3% worked with three grade levels of students, while 7.1 worked with two grade levels. 14.3% of the teachers worked with a single grade level: 7.1% with sophomores and 7.1% with juniors. Content area for the teachers responding to the survey was 28.6% in the sciences, 21.4% English language arts, 14.3% each for foreign languages, social studies, and fine arts, with 7.1% representing the math department. Post-graduate education included courses related to differentiated instruction with 92.8% of the staff who answered the survey.

Table 1
Teacher Demographic Information from Survey (N = 14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n  (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 (28.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 (71.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Size</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 25</td>
<td>6 (42.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>7 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 31</td>
<td>1 (07.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Service</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>3 (21.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>5 (35.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 21</td>
<td>6 (42.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Levels (9th, 10th, 11th, 12th)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Four</td>
<td>8 (64.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>2 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1 (07.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>2 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>3 (21.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>2 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>2 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>1 (07.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>4 (28.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>2 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated Instruction Training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13 (92.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 (07.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1

What are the general education high school teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction?

After the first six demographic questions, the survey continued with sixteen statements along with a 7-point Likert scale. Choices went from strongly agree, moderately agree, mildly agree, neither agree/disagree, mildly disagree, moderately disagree, and strongly disagree. Due to some statements not being rated by teachers answering the survey, the data collection has an additional category of no answer. Teachers were directed to rate the items in terms of their own knowledge and understanding of differentiated instruction by circling one answer for each statement.

The survey was comprised of sixteen statements: four basic principles of differentiated instruction, four essential components, and eight myths. First we will look at the data from statements reflecting basic principles of differentiated instruction: survey statements 1, 2, 15 and 16 (Table 2). Number 1 stated that differentiated instruction should focus on essential ideas and skills in each content area. 92.86% of the teachers surveyed agreed with this statement. 7.14% neither agreed nor disagreed. It is true that differentiated instruction focusses on the essentials in each content area. The second statement on the survey was: Differentiated instruction should be responsive to individual student differences. 92.86% of the teachers answered this with agreement, while 7.14% disagreed. This statement is true. Statement number 15 was the third principle of differentiated instruction in this survey. That statement was: Teachers collaborate with students about their learning in the differentiated instructed classroom. 71.43% of teachers agreed, with 21.43% disagreeing, and 7.14% opting out of answering. Statement 16 declared that teachers must show respect for their learners' commonalities and differences in many ways in the differentiated instructed classroom. It is answered with 78.57% of teachers agreeing, 14.29%
disagreeing and 7.14% giving no answer. All of these statements should be agreed with if one understands common principles of differentiated instruction; it appears the majority of teachers at this small coastal high school understand these principles.

**Table 2**  
*Principles of Differentiated Instruction (N=14)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Statement (s)</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Focus essentials of content area</td>
<td>92.86%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Responsive to student differences</td>
<td>92.86%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#15 Teacher/Student collaboration</td>
<td>71.43%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21.43%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#16 Respect both commonalities/differences</td>
<td>78.57%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next data drawn from the survey was that of essential components of differentiated instruction (Table 3). Statement number 4: Differentiated instruction demands a constant reconfiguring of content and materials to meet individual students' levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression style. Teachers in agreement with this statement totaled out at 92.86%, while 7.14% did not agree nor disagree. Statement number 5 suggested that differentiated instruction demands a constant reconfiguring of the processes used for teaching to meet individual students' levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression style.
85.71% of the teachers agreed with this statement while 14.29% disagreed. Number 6 follows that up with: differentiated instruction demands a constant reconfiguring of final products/assessments offered to meet individual students' levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression style. 78.57% agreed while 14.29% was neutral and another 7.14% disagreed. The 14th statement says that in the differentiated instructed classroom, the teacher should assess each student's readiness level, interest level, and learning profile/style. 57.14% of teachers agreed with this while 14.29% were neutral, 21.43% disagreed, and a final 7.14% did not answer. A strong understanding of the components of differentiated instruction is the key to success. These components must be continuously reconfigured to meet students' levels of knowledge, critical thinking skills, and expression style. These are all true statements and should be answered with a high degree of agreement.

Table 3
*Components of Differentiated Instruction (N=14)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Statement (s)</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#4 Content &amp; Materials</td>
<td>92.86%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 Processes uses</td>
<td>85.71%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Final Products</td>
<td>78.57%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#14 Assessing</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>21.43%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, the last set of data from this survey consists of eight common myths that surround differentiated instruction (Table 4). These myths begin with statement 3: Differentiated instruction in the classroom is determined from teacher assessments. 57.14% of the teachers agreed with this, 21.43% neither agreed nor disagreed, 14.29% disagreed, and 7.14% did not answer. While the teacher’s assessment is one part of differentiated instruction, other factors should be taken into consideration when creating curriculum. Statement 7 states that using differentiated instruction in the classroom will not prepare students to take standardized tests. Survey responses show that 28.57% agreed with this statement, another 28.57% were neutral on the matter, with 42.86% disagreed. Statement 8 refers to differentiated instruction simply being individualized instruction. To this, 42.86% agreed, 7.14% were neutral, and 50% disagreed. Statement 9 stated: Teachers in differentiated instructed classrooms do not use whole group instruction because students work individually or in small groups. 7.14% teachers agreed, and 92.86% disagreed. Statement 10 maintained that within the differentiated instructed classroom, all students must demonstrate mastery on the same day of grading because it is unfair to give them the same full credit if they do not. Teachers agreed with this at a 14.29%. Another 14.29% felt neutral, while 71.43% disagreed. Statement 11 asserted that differentiating instruction in the classroom will not prepare students to compete in the real world. 14.29% of the teachers agreed with this statement, while 21.43% were neutral. 64.29% were in disagreement. Statement 12 declared that when teachers differentiate instruction, they create unfair workloads among students. 7.14% agreed, 14.29% were neutral, and 78.57% disagreed. Statement 13 affirmed that there is only one way to differentiate instruction. 7.14% responses were neutral and 92.86% disagreed with this myth.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Statement (s)</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#3 Teacher Assessments</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
<td>21.43%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 Standardized Tests</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>42.86%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 Individual instruction</td>
<td>42.86%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9 Whole group work</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92.86%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10 Time for mastery</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>71.43%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#11 Real world preparation</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>21.43%</td>
<td>64.29%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#12 Unfair workloads</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>78.57%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#13 Only one way</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>92.86%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last two statements on the survey concerned interest in learning more about differentiated instruction and current usage in the classroom. Statement 17 collected data regarding interest in learning more about differentiated instruction. 35.71% showed interest, 14.29% were neutral, 14.29% were disinterested, and 7.14% did not answer the question. Question 18 asked how often differentiated instruction was used in the classroom. 42.86% responded with daily and another 42.86% answered with weekly, 7.14% replied with seldom, while another 7.14% did not respond.
Discussion

As mentioned earlier, when the LRE was placed into bill 94-142, differentiated instruction was a requirement with the understanding that there was a need to address more than one group of learners. In 2004, we saw Dunn lament that it was not being done properly (Koch, 2004). This survey indicates it is still not being done properly at this school site. Out of the eight myths of differentiated instruction, only two were strongly recognized by this select group of secondary teachers.

The recognition of myths began to waver as the concept of equity in differentiated instruction was explored. While the majority of teachers acknowledged that differentiated instruction does not create unfair workloads, even a small number of individuals not recognizing this as myth is cause for concern. Waldron and McLeskey's definition of differentiated instruction states clearly that teachers will create different levels of expectations for task completion (Walther-Thomas & Brownell, 2001). Furthermore, to penalize students for their inability to demonstrate mastery of the same information on the same day is not acceptable in the differentiated classroom. The essence of differentiated instruction is responding to assessments by re-teaching rather than penalizing.

Just over half the teachers surveyed understood that differentiated instruction does prepare students for the real world. In fact, one comment was written, “The real world IS differentiated.” Conversely, an almost equal amount of teachers were either unsure of this or believed it to be false. On a side note, one respondent crossed out real world and put UC in its place, thereby suggesting that the job of a high school teacher is to prepare all students for a California University. Equally disappointing is that more than half of the teachers surveyed felt differentiated instruction would not prepare students for standardized testing. This seems to
align with the difficulty highly-qualified content specialists at the secondary level have with looking at the child as a whole. This, as found in the Sansosti, Noltemeyer, and Goss study, makes it difficult to accept students with learning disabilities into the classroom (2010).

In addition, the survey that the participants of this study completed shows a high percentage of teachers using differentiated instruction in their classroom on at least a weekly basis. However, this is distressing when one sees that nearly that same number of respondents also believe that teacher assessments determine the way differentiated instruction is used. Assessment is but one way to determine the curriculum for any classroom or student. Further, half of the respondents agreed that differentiated instruction is the same as individualized instruction, showing a lack of understanding of either of these methods.

The results of this survey show that although the teachers at this particular high school are highly qualified, veteran educators, who have, for the most part, had training in differentiated instruction, they still do not have a strong understanding of differentiated instruction. More training is needed, as is teacher buy-in, if this is a true goal of the school. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of teachers specified interest in learning more about this method of teaching. Without specific training in differentiated instruction and thereby proper utilization of the method, classes will continue as they have with top students doing well, and struggling students, including those with learning disabilities, continuing to miss out on a proper education.

**Research Question 2**

What do general education high school teachers perceive is needed for differentiated instruction to be implemented into the inclusionary classroom?

Though all twenty-nine teachers were invited, only five teachers consented to participating in the teacher focus group (Appendix B). Three were male teachers while two were
female. All teachers are highly qualified (teaching within their content area) and except for one teacher who has taught six years, all are veteran teachers falling within the eighteen year to thirty-two year range. Subject areas include science, foreign language, language arts, and visual art. (See Table 1.)

The opening question asked for ways in which teachers use differentiated instruction for students with learning disabilities in their classrooms. The use of different learning styles became the main topic of the conversation. Two of the teachers mentioned being visual learners themselves and therefore felt that they would be a good match for any student who is a visual learner, learning disabled or not. A third teacher spoke up about differentiated instruction in his class. He pointed out that his classes systematically have a wide range of skills. Students enroll in his class either because they want to learn to express themselves through art or because they are looking for a non-stress class. It is his goal to see that every student learn in his classroom. Last week he demonstrated perspective to the whole class. He explained that he went around and watched as students tried to follow the steps presented in the demonstration. He stopped at each table and presented a mini step-by-step demonstration when needed. Students able to grasp the concept continued drawing in details while he worked with smaller groups. He then took out rulers and had students use specific measurements to redraw the corner angle. A few more understood and he left them to start putting in details. He then helped the still struggling students find magazine pictures showing perspective. They traced the lines in the picture and re-drew those same lines on their own piece of paper, carefully taking measurements. Everyone in the class has now learned the essential knowledge behind lines of perspective.

The next question asked for an example of a way tests are used to determine if more learning is needed. Only three of the five responded. Discussion centered on new software
installed district wide at the beginning of this school year called *Illuminate Education*. One of the features of this software allows for quick assessments to be read by a camera so students and teacher get immediate feedback, presumably allowing for re-teaching as needed. The first teacher to speak stated that she uses this program to check for student understanding. She knows immediately if a concept has been missed. If it has, she goes back to reteach what is needed. A comment from another teacher was in reference to his tests. If he notices that all of the kids are missing a particular question, he double checks to make sure the question is clear. He will sometimes throw the question out and give students the extra point. “However,” he continued, “students have plenty of sources to study from…my notes on line…student notes…and the internet. Part of learning is using those resources.” Another teacher joined the discussion saying she used the new program a few times. But continued, “I know where my students are without a formal assessment. I walk around while they are working.” A fourth teacher responded, “I know that unless students do their homework, reading the book, answering the questions, they are going to fail the tests.”

The third question was in regards to how often differentiating instruction is utilized for students unable to grasp a particular concept. The first teacher to speak stated that there is no excuse for students to attend his class and not understand. He lectures, he shows videos, and the information is on his website. He, himself, has to read things two or three times before he understands and students need to do the same. He does not have time to teach middle school science to students entering his high school anatomy class. They needed to take advantage of the education offered and if they didn’t, they need to step it up on their own time. A second teacher spoke up saying that it is impossible to know what the child is dealing with outside of school. “Their home life is going to have a huge effect on what they can absorb in a day.” She continued
with her own example of differentiated instruction for students at different levels of understanding. "I always offer students choices in projects. we just finished a unit on ecology and students were able to take on any issue they chose." This allowed for the students to work at their own level and pace on a topic of interest while still meeting the standard expectations of the assignment. "A couple of students made jewelry out of aluminum cans and another researched the regulations of biotechnology products and its effect on farm soil. Others did everything imaginable in between."

When asked how differentiated instruction looks in their classrooms, the art teacher again had something to share. A second teacher interrupted to point out that it was easy for art to differentiate because there are no standardized tests and because students are not counting on art to prepare them for college. Another teacher stepped in to discuss the different learning styles integrated into his assignments. He prompts students to write essays about their family, but at the same time lets them use visual creativity create a coat of arms and a family tree. Two of his annual essays allow students to pick from two different prompts. He also allows students to turn in late work without penalty. There is no reason that any student should not have the same expectations as the others in the class. If he sees the student has not done his homework, he extends the time, and holds off giving the test to this child until after the homework is completed. "I give them all the time in the world to turn assignments in." Some students, many of them with learning disabilities, are still turning in homework and taking tests for three novels back. "We move on. I do not go back if kids are too preoccupied to study." A fourth teacher jumped into the conversation saying he never accepts late work. He gives assignments out a week before the due date, so there is no excuse for it being late. "Being late is not acceptable anywhere in our society. Why would we teach students otherwise?" The fifth teacher came into the conversation at this
point to state that we really do not know why a student might be late with homework, but there could be many reasons. And then she spoke of a girl who had a tough home life going between angry divorced parents, who would sometimes come to school without having eaten since lunch the day before. “So we never know what a kid is going through.” The rebuttal was, “That doesn’t happen around here very often.” The conversation moved away from differentiated instruction to a reach-out program started by the current principal. All teachers around the table wondered why it was not addressed this school year. This is where I saw the compassion for the student who is unable to connect to the school community. Every teacher reflected on a student they had reached out to in the past.

The next question of this focus group asked that if prep time and personnel were not an issue, how these teachers would like to see differentiated instruction utilized in your classroom? One teacher stated that she always builds up her program through the summer, keeping it fresh. Another teacher asked where he would get the time. “There is never enough time.” The conversation quickly digressed into current union negotiations regarding the addition of another work day to the school calendar.

We moved on to the next question. Most textbooks now offer guidance toward differentiated instruction. The question asked how helpful these textbook suggestions are to the teacher. The first teacher who spoke up said he does not always use a textbook in all of his classes. The second teacher said that she has worked with English language learners and the guidelines in the text do not always understand the problem. Her experience is that some students, when language is an issue, do not understand some words we think are common vocabulary. One time she had a student who knew the slope formula, but did not know what the word steep meant, so was unable to understand the question. She had the girl go through and
circle all of the words in the text that she didn’t know and this teacher helped her learn those words. Another teacher spoke up to say that her textbook comes with additional practice available online. Students have access to videos that reteach the lesson of the day. It also has video games that build on the lesson.

The next question asked the likelihood of differentiated instruction being more available in the classroom if special education staff were able to support the classroom. The first teacher to speak referred to one student with a learning disability she has in her room and was thrilled that someone might be in the room to nudge him back on task when needed. She often has students pair up to work together but he and his partner just fool around. She felt another adult in the room would be helpful. A second teacher said it all depended on the staff person. The group was off topic again, the recorder was turned off.

In summary, the data from this focus group was analyzed for common themes. Those that surfaced can be seen in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5</th>
<th>Frequent &amp; Common Themes from Focus Group Needs (N=5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEMES</strong></td>
<td><strong>RESPONSES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Styles &amp; Strategies</td>
<td>Lectures, videos, website, whole class demonstration, small group, partners, reteach step by step, hands on labs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Reasons for Student Failure</td>
<td>Not doing homework, not reading materials, failing tests, not taking advantage of earlier education opportunities (middle school), negative home life, some kids are just non-doers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Excuses</td>
<td>Students must read over and over until they get it. No late work is accepted (Why teach them something that is not accepted in our society?). Same class = Same assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Supports</td>
<td>Notes online, students encouraged to take notes, the internet as a resource, video lessons available for review on line, internet games of education, teacher office hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Support Currently in Place</td>
<td>Software for quickly assessing student knowledge after a lesson, summers off to revamp/refresh classroom materials, SPED support to prompt students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Barriers to Differentiated Instruction</td>
<td>Must teach for standardized testing scores, must teach for college expectations, no time for procedural changes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The focus group was gathered to find more detailed information on what was needed to implement differentiated instruction. The data collected shows participating teachers understand learning styles and three of the five spoke of regularly moving between whole group and small group teaching.

The inclusion of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities into the general education classroom does not appear to have produced any procedural changes in the curriculum presented by these teachers. This is in line with the findings of Scruggs and Mastropieri in their 1996 study of teacher perceptions. The understanding of the student’s right to be in the classroom is accepted, but not necessarily embraced as cause to rethink the classroom curriculum.

You may remember that the four top barriers to inclusion, as perceived by general educators, are time, severity of disability, equity, and lack of training. The availability of time and support personnel did not sway the teachers to consider utilizing differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Three of the five teachers already have the support of instructional aides in their classrooms; they are used to keep students on task and to provide lecture notes as needed. The aides’ current role may actually keep the teachers from envisioning greater possibilities.

The severity of the disability, another barrier found by Scruggs and Mastropieri was not approached as an issue during this focus group. One teacher stated that he does not recognize students with learning disabilities as being any different than other students. However, this teacher did place students into two groups: those who do and those who do not. If a child cannot read well, he is expected to read it over and over until it makes sense. Rather than differentiating
the instruction, all of the five teachers offer office hours for the non-doers to catch up. This aligns with Schruggs and Mastropieri's (1996) finding which states that without training, teachers simply provide extra help to students with learning disabilities. Two teachers from this focus group, being fed up with nonperformers, have started using a software program, DoJo, that allows teachers at any time during class to click on a student's name to automatically send an email home indicating that the child is not participating, is being disruptive, is not on task, has no homework, or has gone to the bathroom. It does not appear to be the disability of a student that is an issue at this school, but the inability for some teachers to understand and accommodate for individual student needs.

Equity, the third most common barrier to inclusion, came up during the focus group. While three of the five understood that students do not enter the room with the same knowledge and abilities, the remaining two feel it is irrelevant to the high expectations they hold. All high school students need to have a predetermined level of knowledge when they enter their classrooms and a strong work ethic or they will fail. When asked to consider the students who are three novels behind in class, the response is, "Office hours are available for struggling students, but the assignments and tests remain the same. It is only fair."

The last of the top four barriers found by Sansosti, Notemeyer and Goss, was a lack of training (2010). All teachers in this focus group had been trained; however the amount of training and the length of time since that training were not measured. More training is needed.

Research Question 3

What do high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities perceive is needed for positive academic engagement in the inclusionary classroom?
Nineteen of the students with learning disabilities at this small central coast high school were invited to be interviewed. Parental consent and student assent were obtained by eleven. Three were female students: one sophomore, one junior, and one senior. The male students included two freshmen, three sophomores, two juniors, and one senior.

Each student was interviewed during his/her consultation time in the study support classroom to explore the likes, dislikes, and academic needs for each. The interview questions were well accepted by the students and did not take more than the fifteen minutes allotted. Responses were audio recorded and transcribed to allow for accurate data collection. Data was gathered in an effort to better understand what is needed for positive academic engagement in the inclusionary classroom. Some direct quotes are used to provide richer data.

When asked what they like about school, five out of eleven students with mild to moderate learning disabilities responded with the idea of getting an education. Friends and sports came up several times. One sophomore added, “It keeps me safe and out of trouble.” One junior took it a little further by describing the surroundings, “I love the natural environment; it’s open to the forest without fences and gates. Most every morning there are deer on campus.”

Students with mild to moderate learning disabilities were mostly all able to choose a favorite class. One freshman student could not decide, stating, “I never thought to have a favorite. I just have to come here.” Math, history, and art were the most common choices (each chosen twice). English, marine science, physical education, and sports medicine each were mentioned by the remaining students. When asked why this class stood out as a favorite, one male sophomore responded, “I like learning the timeline of our world. Each history class lets me put more things on the timeline in my head.” The sophomore girl, who had chosen art as a favorite class, believed, “It is relaxing. I can do whatever I want in there; we have freedom. It
also lets me realize emotions I have.” The junior who chose English as a favorite class said, “We do fun stuff I like. The books we read...we just finished The Great Gatsby. It is one of my favorite books now.” A junior boy who has been integrated into his second academic general education classroom just this year from a self-contained special education classroom stated that, “Any class that is not special is fun to be in.”

When asked about a best day in the classroom, two students had no response; three others said each day was the best. The students who answered chose kinesthetic-type activities as their reasons. “I spray painted a t-shirt using stencils and there were crazy colors I could use...” “We were acting out parts of a novel. I got to be an old man.” “We have labs where we get to dissect and learn about marine life. We have been down to the beach counting sand craps for the state too. That’s a fun day.”

Everyone was able to respond to the question regarding what has been learned in his/her favorite class: “How to get my body stronger.” “I write papers better and my vocabulary is getting better.” “I can tape an injured ankle.” The freshman who had very little to say about school in general, brightened with this question saying he had learned to speak Spanish. Learning strategies and styles are organized on Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Flashcards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Reading over and over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chapters/guidelines/handouts/directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Ask friends (most common choice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Ask teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Read guidelines slowly until clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do one step at a time instead of worrying about everything</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Basic) Learning Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Auditory</th>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>Kinesthetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talking about the lesson to a friend</td>
<td>Timelines</td>
<td>Learning to tape an ankle by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have a good memory when people tell me things</td>
<td>Watching a documentary</td>
<td>watching and doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish we had headphones to connect to an audio system. It wouldn't matter if other kids are</td>
<td>Power points with pictures</td>
<td>Lab dissections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talking about the lesson to a friend</td>
<td>Drawing, making posters or</td>
<td>Working out/ Playing sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have a good memory when people tell me things</td>
<td>displays instead of writing</td>
<td>Beach count of sand crabs for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish we had headphones to connect to an audio system. It wouldn't matter if other kids are</td>
<td>essays</td>
<td>research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish we had headphones to connect to an audio system. It wouldn't matter if other kids are</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Acting out a character from a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish we had headphones to connect to an audio system. It wouldn't matter if other kids are</td>
<td></td>
<td>novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish we had headphones to connect to an audio system. It wouldn't matter if other kids are</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paper mache</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows responses from student interviews regarding learning strategies and styles.

Most participants in this study understood their learning style is their strength. There were no negative responses to suggest that a student felt unable to learn. Most all had ideas on how they could better acquire information in classes.

Identified learning needs and stressors are found on Table 7. This lists ways in which students would like to see a classroom run. Along with this information, many stressors came up and are listed in the second half of the table.

“I would like to have a teacher who speaks to all of the students. If it were me, I would ask if everyone knows the information, then I would walk around and make everyone give me an example. Then I would go back again to see if they really knew it and were working.”

“I would like a teacher who would focus on me more since I have a learning disability. Just check in, check that I understand, like a friend would.”

“I would try to change teachers’ way of teaching. Ease down on the homework and not rush
through everything. Ease up on the grading. Don’t pay so much attention to tests and let homework and projects count towards my grade too.”

Table 7
*Identified Needs & Stressors as Perceived by Students with Learning Disabilities (N=11)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Needs</th>
<th>Stress Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Guidance</td>
<td>• Failing a test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o One on one</td>
<td>• Falling below a C in a class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Someone to answer my questions while I am working</td>
<td>• Teachers who yell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Someone to tell me I can do it.</td>
<td>• Being called on when I wasn’t listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Being given class notes</td>
<td>• Math. No matter what, I don’t understand it but I need it for a diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Time</td>
<td>• Teachers who think I know stuff that I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Time to absorb what is being taught</td>
<td>• Critical people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Prompt for in-class essays the night before</td>
<td>• Dolphins are being killed and I don’t know what to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(for planning time)</td>
<td>• Mean people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Testing</td>
<td>• Having things written about you on bathroom walls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Multiple choice (instead of short answers)</td>
<td>• Teachers who say they treat us like juniors, but we are only freshmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Word banks for fill-ins.</td>
<td>• Some kids don’t want to learn and won’t do anything and then the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o More time (to think)</td>
<td>gets mad at me when I just don’t know how to do it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Allowed use of math formulas and steps on note</td>
<td>• Getting pulled from a class so everyone thinks I’m retarded. I would rather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>card (too hard to remember)</td>
<td>fail the test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Tests more often (less material to memorize)</td>
<td>• Bullies. I am going to the continuation school next year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classroom Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Friends (It’s awful when I don’t know anyone)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Interesting teachers (monotone voice makes me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fall asleep)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Break things up (the block schedule classes are</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too long—I get restless)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Quiet room (for concentration)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o More visuals, less writing, more pictures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Freedom to make choices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Safe and relaxing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

As discussed earlier in this research, Deci and Ryan found people have a basic need for autonomy, belonging, and competency (1991). These needs have since evolved into the Self Determination Theory (SDT), ways in which intrinsic motivation can be built in students (Ryan, 2012). Interviews with secondary students with mild to moderate learning disabilities conducted in this study show a desire for these very needs.

This research question looked for the perceived needs of high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities for positive academic engagement. Though it manifests differently for each student, every response fell easily into one of those needs found in the SDT. When student interview responses were organized by frequency into these three basic needs, autonomy needs reached 37%, the need to belong reached 22%, and competency topped out at 41%. Stanton’s 2011 study found that finding competency in the inclusive classroom is the most difficult issue for students with learning disabilities. The responses by participants align with that finding. Figure 1 shows the perceived needs for academic engagement in the inclusive general education classroom.

Figure 1

Needs as Perceived by Secondary Students with Mild to Moderate Learning Disabilities

- Autonomy
- Belonging
- Competency

41% 37% 22%
One student, a female junior, stated she was transferring over to the community high school for her senior year. Many of her responses indicated that after three years at her current high school she has not found these three needs to be fulfilled. While she could appreciate the natural environment of the school and never had a bad day in her favorite class, she feels bullied and harassed by her peers. She has given up on ever learning math and understands this will keep her from meeting requirements for a diploma at this school. Her perception is one of not being accepted by her peers, of not being capable of success, and of not belonging at this school.

Implications for Further Research

As with any study, one is often led to ask more questions and find larger issues to consider. There are several recommendations for future research. While this study is a good beginning, it is simply a snapshot of current practices and beliefs at this high school.

The results of the teacher survey and the focus group appear to align with many of the barriers found in the secondary inclusionary classroom. When in the classroom, highly qualified, secondary level, content specialists focus specifically on teaching their subject. However, outside of the classroom these same teachers reach out to nurture the continuing growth of the student as a whole. Further research is needed to understand ways in which to promote the whole-student growth within the classroom of highly qualified content specialists.

Second, it would be advantageous to give the teachers at this site training in differentiated instruction, time to implement it into the classroom, and go through the focus group process again to measure any paradigm shift in curriculum or methods of facilitating learning.

The perceived needs gathered during the student interviews do align to the research on what is considered necessary to build intrinsic motivation and academic engagement. Built on the theories of scholars, differentiated instruction is designed to meet the student at his or her
level of understanding and build on that knowledge. Learning styles are utilized to assure engagement, understanding, and achievement. Assessments should be used as a tool to gauge student learning rather than a punishment for not studying. The students are looking for the very things that differentiated instruction has to offer: autonomy, belonging and competency.

If the staff was to be trained and changes made toward differentiated instruction, a third possibility in further research would be to study changes in student engagement, competence, and overall successes at this site. This is a high testing results school already. However, given the opportunity to learn in a way that matches their learning style through differentiated instruction, perhaps students with learning disabilities could move toward deeper understanding, higher testing scores, and learning success. A fourth possible research idea would be to review standardized test scores for progress made by students with learning disabilities in secondary schools after using differentiated instruction to see if significant growth is noticeable. Perhaps this study could also encompass the graduation rates of students with learning disabilities when compared to years without differentiated instruction.

One final thought would be to interview school administrators on their knowledge of differentiated instruction and determine ways in which they could implement this method of teaching in their school. This could expand to interviewing superintendents and school board members who are not enforcing differentiated instruction in the classrooms in an effort to understand steps they have taken to insure students with mild to moderate learning disabilities are getting the quality of education promised.

Summary

Data collection shows that most of the components and principles of differentiated instruction were familiar to the highly qualified secondary teachers who participated in this
study. The myths proved to be less easily recognized, showing a need for training in
differentiated instruction. The focus group of five general education teachers showed that
training and planning time will be the highest priority if differentiated instruction were to be
implemented into in the inclusionary classroom at this school site. Students with mild to
moderate learning disabilities who participated in this study identified autonomy, a sense of
belonging, and academic competency as needs toward positive academic engagement in the
inclusionary classroom.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

Current mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act places students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent. At the secondary level, this mandate challenges both general education teachers and students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. The purpose of this study was to determine the general education teachers’ understanding of differentiated instruction, to identify teachers’ perceptions of current practices and needs in the classroom, and to identify the self-perceived academic needs of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in the inclusionary classroom of a high ranking central coast California high school.

Fourteen general education teachers at the secondary level anonymously completed a survey showing their knowledge of differentiated instruction. Five of these teachers later joined a focus group to further discuss their understanding and utilization of differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Eleven students were interviewed by the researcher to gather data on their perceived needs to remain academically engaged.

The results show, that while many of the teachers know the principles and concepts of differentiated instruction, many of the myths are still believed to be true. During the focus group many of the common barriers to inclusion were found to be present. Of these barriers training is a priority if this school’s goal is to support all students. Students are clear on their needs. Most common were different learning styles where their strengths can be utilized and appreciated. A second frequent need is approachable teachers and friends to satisfy the feeling of community and belonging.
The United States believes that education is necessary for the growth and prosperity of our nation. Public Law 94-104 guarantees an education for students with learning disabilities. No Child Left Behind has promised these students the opportunity to learn from highly qualified content specialists. Decades of research indicate that the assimilation of knowledge is maximized by starting at the current level of the student, identifying individual learning styles, and building from there. In 2013, the Equity and Excellence Commission acknowledged that the lack of appropriate instruction aligned with student abilities negatively affects students with learning disabilities in the inclusionary classroom.

School districts and individual high schools often struggle to implement the tenets of the law. When forward thinking high school administrators along with motivated general and special education teachers begin to identify ways to truly include students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in general education classrooms, the likelihood increases that genuine inclusion will take place. To that end, I offer differentiated instruction.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

A-I
APPENDIX A

SITE AUTHORIZATION
January 30, 2013

Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects
c/o: Sponsored Programs Office
Cal State Monterey Bay
100 Campus Center, Alumni & Visitor’s Center
Seaside, CA 93933

Dear CPHS Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, “Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities in the General Education Classroom”, presented by Vivian Michaele, student of the Master of Arts in Education program at California State University, Monterey Bay, I am granting permission for the study to be conducted at XXXXXXXXX High School.

I understand the purpose of the project is to determine how best to support students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in the general education classroom. The primary activity at our school will be to surveys and interviews. The following students/staff/other are eligible to participate: Students with mild to moderate learning disabilities (upon parental consent and student assent), as well as general education teachers willing to consent.

I understand that surveys will be given to staff at the end of a staff meeting to complete on their own time. Students’ interviews will take place during their time in the study support class, but will not exceed two 15 minute interviews. Teacher focus group will take place at lunch, during teachers’ duty free break. All of these activities will be completed within a three week period during the second semester of the current school year.

I understand that Vivian will obtain parental/guardian consent for all participants, and assent from the minors participating. I have confirmed that Vivian has the cooperation of the classroom teachers. Vivian has agreed to provide to my office a copy of all CSUMB CPHS-approved protocol materials including the approved consent documents before she recruits participants on campus. Any data collected by Vivian will be kept confidential and will be stored in a secure location per the approved protocol. Vivian has also agreed to provide to us a copy of the aggregate results of the research.

If the CPHS has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number &/or email address listed below.

Sincerely,
APPENDIX B

TEACHER CONSENT
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH APPROVED PROJECT:

Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

We would like you to participate in a research study conducted by Vivian Michaele, resource specialist at XXXXXXXXXX High School to be used for a Master of Arts in Education thesis at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB).

The purpose of this research is to examine ways in which students with mild to moderate learning disabilities are able to find success in the high school general education classroom.

You were selected as a participant in this study because you are a teacher of at least one student with a mild to moderate learning disability. Participation in this study is both autonomous and voluntary. Even if you choose to participate and later change your mind, you will be released without obligation.

The benefits of participating in this project include the opportunity to reflect on and voice your professional opinion on the inclusionary model for students with disabilities. Information gathered from you may serve to guide other secondary teachers to better support special education students in their education.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to join a handful of colleagues for a short (twenty minute), one time focus group interview utilizing an audio recorder. This interview will take place at lunch on the XXXX campus with a light lunch being available for all participants. You may pass on any question. This is strictly voluntary. There are no other obligations.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your written or witnessed verbal permission or as required by law. Your privacy is important to me. Although there will be an audio recording of the interviews for accuracy in data collection, the recording will be deleted once it has been transcribed. I will be the only person to listen to the recordings. I anticipate transcribing will be completed and recording erased within one week of participation. As a participant, you do have the right to review your words on the recording and edit as needed. Your words will only be used to search for patterns of highly qualified educators in the secondary inclusionary model. No names will be linked, in writing or verbally, to any of the statements. However, due to the group interview, even with participants being cautioned not to share outside the collection setting, I cannot guarantee full confidentiality.

Taking part in this project is entirely up to you. You can choose whether or not to be in the study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in
the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

If you want to know more about this research project or have questions or concerns, please call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email me at vmichaele@csumb.edu. You may also call Dr. Irene Nares-Guzicki at 831-582-5081, or you may email her at inares-guzicki@csumb.edu.

The project has been reviewed and accepted by the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) California State University Monterey Bay’s review board for research involving humans as subjects. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

If you have questions about CSUMB’s guidelines and policies for human subject research, they’re posted online at: http://grants.csumb.edu/human-subjects-research. To speak with someone about human subjects, please contact the CPHS Chair, Dr. Chip Lenno, at (831) 582-4799, or in person at CSUMB, 100 Campus Center, Media Learning Center (Building 18), Seaside CA 93955.

You will get a copy of this consent form. Thank you for considering participation.

Sincerely,

Vivian Michaele

XXX-XXX-XXXX

Consent Statement

I understand the procedures described. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I freely agree to participate in this study. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any time.

I have been given a copy of this Consent Form.
APPENDIX C

AUDIO CONSENT - TEACHER
AUDIO/VIDEO SUPPLEMENTARY CONSENT FOR HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

APPROVED PROJECT:
Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

As part of this project, I will be making an audio recording of you during the research. Please indicate what uses of these tapes you are willing to permit by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to and sign the form at the end.

This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the tapes in ways you agree. In any use of the tapes, you will not be identified by name.

The tapes can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.

The tapes can be used for educational purposes.

Consent Statement

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the tapes as indicated by my initials above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I freely agree to participate in this study. I know that I can stop taping at any time.

I have been given a copy of this Consent Form.

Signature ___________________________ Date __________________

Signature of Researcher

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Researcher ___________________________ Date __________________
APPENDIX D

PARENT CONSENT
PARENTAL/LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT
FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

APPROVED PROJECT:
Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

We would like your child to participate in a research study conducted by Vivian Michaele, resource specialist at XXXXXXXXXX High School to be used for a Master of Arts in Education thesis at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB).

The purpose of this research is to examine ways in which students with mild to moderate learning disabilities are able to find success in high school general education classroom.

Your child was selected as a participant in this study because he/she is a student with a specific learning disability in my caseload, attending XXXXXXXXXX High School, and currently taking general education classes. Participation in this study is both autonomous and voluntary.

The benefit of your child's participation in this project includes the opportunity to reflect on and voice his/her thoughts, concerns, and feelings regarding found successes in the general education classroom. This reflection may open your child to recognize his or her own strengths and look for like occasions in other classes and throughout his/her life. Information gathered from your child may serve to guide other high school students with learning disabilities to find success within the general education classroom.

If you decide to allow your child to participate in this research, he/she will be asked five questions regarding learning successes in the general education classroom. These questions will be asked individually during the study support class. Because length of answers will vary, the interview will be stopped at fifteen minutes to keep from fatiguing the student, or interfering with study time. If all questions have not been answered during the first interview, a second interview will be arranged for another day, adhering to the fifteen minute time limit. There will be a minimum of one interview and a maximum of two.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your child will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your written or witnessed verbal permission or as required by law. Your privacy, and that of your child, is important to me. Although there will be an audio recording of the interviews for accuracy in the data collection, the recording will be deleted once it has been transcribed. I anticipate transcribing will be completed and the recording erased within one week of participation. Your child has the right to review his/her words on the recording and edit if he/she so chooses. Information will not be released to any other party for any reason. Student initials, grade level, and specific learning disability will be linked to the data while it is being collected and analyzed. No names will be used. The final data will be reported in aggregate. No individuals will be identified.

Allowing your child to take part in this project is entirely up to you. You can choose whether or not to allow your child to participate. If you consent to your child's participation in this study, you may withdraw that consent at any time without consequences of any kind. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions he/she does not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw your child from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.
If you want to know more about this research project or have questions or concerns, please call me XXX-XXX-XXXX or email me at vmichaele@csumb.edu. You may also contact Dr. Nares-Guzicki at 831-582-5081 or email her at inares-guzicki@csumb.edu.

The project has been reviewed and accepted by the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) California State University Monterey Bay's review board for research involving humans as subjects. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

If you have questions about CSUMB's guidelines and policies for human subject research, they're posted online at: http://grants.csumb.edu/human-subjects-research. To speak with someone about human subjects, please contact the CPHS Chair, Dr. Chip Lenno, at (831) 582-4799, or in person at CSUMB, 100 Campus Center, Media Learning Center (Building 18), Seaside CA 93955.

You will get a copy of this consent form. Thank you for considering participation.

Sincerely,

Vivian Michaele
XXX-XXX-XXXX

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**Parental Consent Statement**

I have read the contents of this consent form. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I freely give my permission for my child to participate in this study. I know that I can withdraw my consent at any time.

I have been given a copy of this form.

_________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature                                           Date

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**Signature of Researcher**

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

_________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Researcher                                           Date
APPENDIX E

AUDIO CONSENT PARENT
AUDIO/VIDEO SUPPLEMENTARY CONSENT FOR HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

APPROVED PROJECT:
Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

As part of this project, I will be making an audio recording of your child during the research. Please indicate what uses of these tapes you are willing to permit by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to and sign the form at the end.

This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the tapes in ways you agree. In any use of the tapes, your child will not be identified by name.

The tapes can be studied by the research team for use in the research project. ________

The tapes can be used for educational purposes. ________

Consent Statement

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the tapes as indicated by my initials above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I freely agree to participate in this study. I know that I can stop taping at any time.

I have been given a copy of this Consent Form.

_________________________________________  _______________________
Signature  Date

Signature of Researcher

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

_________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of Researcher  Date
APPENDIX F

MINOR ASSENT
MINOR ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH

APPROVED PROJECT:

Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

My name is Vivian Michaele.

I would like you to take part in a research study I am working on to learn more about how high school students feel about the academic classes at XXXXXXXXXX High School.

If you agree to be a part of this study, you will be interviewed by me during study support. The interview consists of five questions. There are no right or wrong answers; I am only asking for your opinion. You will answer prompts such as, "What do you like about school?" You can skip any question that you do not want to answer. Because I do not want to take up too much of your time, we will not spend more than fifteen minutes at one time on the interview. If all of the questions have not been answered we will finish the interview on another day. That second interview will only be fifteen minutes as well. I will be audio-recording the interview so that I can accurately record your responses for my paper. No one will listen to these tapes except me. When I have finished writing your responses the recording will be erased. Your answers will be used in the research paper I write, however, your name will not be used. You can ask to stop the recording at any time. You can also get a copy of the research paper when it is completed by asking me.

During the interview we may talk about things that you find difficult in school. This may make you feel sad about how hard school can be at times. You may want to say things, but are afraid it will hurt my feelings. I promise to not let my feeling be hurt because I really need you to be as honest as you can. Answering the questions will also give you a chance to talk about ways that you find success in the academic classrooms. Other students may be able to learn from your experience. This interview will not change your grades in any class.

We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in this study. I want you to know that although your parents may agree to your participation in this study, you may decide to not participate. That is okay. I only want you to participate if YOU want to do so. If you start the interview, but decide you don't want to finish that is okay too. This is strictly a voluntary interview.

You can stop participating at any time by just telling me to stop.
Do you have any questions about this study? You can ask any questions about this study at any time. You can call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX, email me at vmichaele@csumb.edu, or come by my room to ask me questions.

Signing your name at the bottom of this form means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form.

**Assent Statement**

Please mark one of the choices below to tell us what you want to do:

_________ No, I do not want to be in this project.

_________ Yes, I do want to be in this project.

I understand the procedures described. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I freely agree to participate in this study. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any time.

I have been given a copy of this Assent Form.

__________________________________________  ______________________
Signature  Date

**Signature of Researcher**

I have read this form to the participant and/or the participant has read this form. I have provided (or will provide) the participant with a copy of the form. An explanation of the research was given and questions from the participant were solicited and answered to the participant’s satisfaction. In my judgment, the participant has demonstrated comprehension of the information.

__________________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Researcher  Date
APPENDIX G

TEACHER SURVEY
Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities in the General Education Classroom
RESEARCH PROJECT by Vivian Michaele for CSUMB Master Thesis 2013
General Education Teacher Survey on Differential Education

Please Return to Vivian Michaele

Demographics: (Optional)

1. Choose one: MALE FEMALE

2. What is your average class size? _________________

3. How many years have you been teaching? _________________

4. Grade levels you teach: FRESHMEN SOPHOMORES JUNIORS SENIORS

5. Did any of your post-graduate education include courses related to Differentiated Instruction? YES NO

6. Content area you are currently teaching: _________________

Please rate the items in terms of your knowledge and ideas about differentiated instruction by circling one answer for each statement:

1. Differentiated instruction should focus on essential ideas and skills in each content area.

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2. Differentiated instruction should be responsive to individual student differences.

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3. Differentiated instruction in the classroom is determined from teacher assessments.

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<td>Mildly disagree</td>
<td>Moderately disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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4. Differentiated instruction demands a constant reconfiguring of content and materials to meet individual students' levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression style.

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<td>Mildly disagree</td>
<td>Moderately disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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5. Differentiated instruction demands a constant reconfiguring of the processes used for teaching to meet individual students' levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression style.

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<td>Neither agree/disagree</td>
<td>Mildly disagree</td>
<td>Moderately disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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</table>
6. Differentiated instruction demands a constant reconfiguring of final products/assessments offered to meet individual students’ levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression style.


7. Using differentiated instruction in the classroom will not prepare students to take standardized tests.


8. Differentiated instruction is simply individualized instruction.


9. Teachers in differentiated instructed classrooms do not use whole group instruction because students work individually or in small groups.

10. In the differentiated instructed classroom, all students must demonstrate mastery on the same day of grading because it is unfair to give them the same full credit if they do not.

   1 Strongly agree
   2 Moderately agree
   3 Mildly agree
   4 Neither agree/disagree
   5 Mildly disagree
   6 Moderately disagree
   7 Strongly disagree

11. Differentiating instruction in the classroom will not prepare students to compete in the real world.

   1 Strongly agree
   2 Moderately agree
   3 Mildly agree
   4 Neither agree/disagree
   5 Mildly disagree
   6 Moderately disagree
   7 Strongly disagree

12. When teachers differentiate instruction, they create unfair workloads among students.

   1 Strongly agree
   2 Moderately agree
   3 Mildly agree
   4 Neither agree/disagree
   5 Mildly disagree
   6 Moderately disagree
   7 Strongly disagree

13. There is only one way to differentiate instruction.

   1 Strongly agree
   2 Moderately agree
   3 Mildly agree
   4 Neither agree/disagree
   5 Mildly disagree
   6 Moderately disagree
   7 Strongly disagree
14. In the differentiated instructed classroom, the teacher should assess each student's readiness level, interest level, and learning profile/style.

1
Strongly
agree

2
Moderately
agree

3
Mildly
agree/disagree

4
Neither
agree/disagree

5
Mildly
disagree

6
Moderately
disagree

7
Strongly
disagree

15. Teachers collaborate with students about their learning in the differentiated instructed classroom.

1
Strongly
agree

2
Moderately
agree

3
Mildly
agree/disagree

4
Neither
agree/disagree

5
Mildly
disagree

6
Moderately
disagree

7
Strongly
disagree

16. Teachers must show respect for their learners' commonalities and differences in many ways in the differentiated instructed classroom.

1
Strongly
agree

2
Moderately
agree

3
Mildly
agree/disagree

4
Neither
agree/disagree

5
Mildly
disagree

6
Moderately
disagree

7
Strongly
disagree

17. I am interested in learning more about differentiated instruction.

1
Strongly
agree

2
Moderately
agree

3
Mildly
agree/disagree

4
Neither
agree/disagree

5
Mildly
disagree

6
Moderately
disagree

7
Strongly
disagree

18. I use differentiated instruction in my classroom

DAILY
WEEKLY
EVERY 2-3 WEEKS
SELDOM
NEVER
APPENDIX H

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
Focus Group Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Give an example of a way that you have used differentiated instruction for a student with a learning disability in your classroom.

2. Give an example of a way that you have used a test to determine if more learning is needed for students in your classroom.

3. How often do you differentiate the instruction for students who do not seem able to grasp a particular concept?

4. What does that differential instruction look like in your classroom?

5. If prep time and personnel were not an issue, how would you like to see differentiated instruction utilized in your classroom?

6. Most textbooks offer ideas on differentiating the learning for students that are English language learners, at risk, or have learning disabilities. Do you find these helpful?

7. If you had the help of instructional aides or sped teachers, would you find the likelihood of differentiated instruction being more available in your classroom? If yes, how would that look?

8. Do you have any questions for me?
APPENDIX I

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Interview Questions for Students

Grade ______________

1. What do you like about school?
2. What is the worst thing about school?
3. What is your favorite class? Why?
4. Tell me about the best day you have had in that class. Why was that?
5. Tell me about the worst day you have had in that class. Why was that?
6. Can you tell me something you have learned in your favorite class? How did you learn it?
7. What is the best way that you learn?
8. If you could tell any teacher what you are good at, what would you say?
9. What grade are you getting in your favorite class?
10. What is your least favorite class? Why?
11. Tell me what was going on in that class last time you were in there.
12. Do you know the grade you are getting in your least favorite class?
13. Imagine you could make any changes you wanted in that class. What would those changes look like?
14. What is the most difficult part of being in a high school classroom?
15. What do you think would make it easier for students with learning disabilities to get through school?
16. Tell me something that you are really good at doing.
17. Do you have any questions that you want to ask me?