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Let's Talk About It: Special Education Communication

Barriers with General Education Teachers

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Author Note

I would like to acknowledge everyone who played a role in my academic accomplishments. First of all my husband Andres Diaz and my family for their love and support. Secondly, the Liberal Studies Department for their guidance in preparing me to write this paper. And finally the Associated Student Body Committee for granting financial assistance to make this project possible.

Abstract

The focus of this Capstone Project is on the communication barriers between Special Education and General Education educators, due to a lack of time for collaboration during the school year. Poor communication between teachers can negatively impact special education students' academic achievement. Unfortunately, this issue has been around for decades, yet no effective solutions have been implemented. Solutions that have been considered include more teacher training, peer-mediated instruction, and co-teaching. Data was collected from interviews conducted with one administrator, two Special Education teachers and three General Education teachers from a local high school. Surveys were also taken from Special Education students and analyzed. The major themes that emerged from an analysis of the data lead to three action options. Based on the findings, an action was undertaken to help improve the communication between Special and General Education teachers.

Keywords: Special Education teachers, General Education teachers, collaboration, barriers, Individual learning plan (IEP).

Let's Talk About It: Special Education Communication Barriers with General Education Teachers

In the 2014 school year I started working as a special education instructional aide (paraprofessional) in a middle school in Gonzales, California. My job duties were to assist the special education teacher and assist the special education students when they were out in the general education classes. Our students at the time spent about 60% of their time in the general education classroom. Most of the students went out for science, language arts, math, and physical education. Because the school served fifth to eighth grade I had to rotate to different classrooms during each period which lasted about 50 minutes. When the students returned to the special education classroom period at the end of the day they did not know what to do or what were the assignments that needed to be completed in their general education classroom. I held this job position for 2 ½ years and every year this issue kept occurring.

At the beginning of the school year, part of my job was to give a folder to each general educator who had a student with an individual education plan (IEP) at the beginning of the school year. This folder was then collected at the end of the school year and whenever the students plan changed a copy of the new IEP was given to the general educator to file in this folder. Many of the times the folder was never opened by the general educator or when the school year ended and the folder needed to be recollected the general educator could not find it, for they had forgotten where they had put it. It became apparent to me that general educators did not receive instruction on how important IEPs are. Due to the problem that the general educator did not know the students IEP, the general education teacher could not fully assist the special education student in the general education setting.

The other problem was that the teachers did not take advantage of the special education teacher. They did not fully read, understand, or implement the student's IEP or seek guidance

from the special education teacher on ways to communicate with each other about their student's instructional curriculum. If the general education teacher would have understood the IEP, I believe she would have sent the students to test or finish an assignment to the special education classroom when the student needed extra time. Or they would have taken or facilitated note taking for the student that had needed that extra help in note-taking. Unfortunately, the only time we would really hear from a general educator was when they would complain about a student's behavior. Because I was the person that would come and go from class to class many times, the general educator would ask me to pass a message along. I would inform my supervising special education teacher and she would respond to there concern via email. Later, when I returned to the classroom the general educator would ask me again. Apparently, they had not seen the special educators message because they were too busy. Therefore, the message would not get across and end there.

Lastly, one big concern I always noticed was that the special and general educators never met for collaboration meetings throughout the school year and would hardly ever communicate verbally, or electronically. Therefore, the special education teacher almost never knew what the special education student was working on. Now the special education teacher has access to the special education students grades and is able to see when a student was failing or missing an assignment. But the special educator cannot see the specific instructions on the assignments. Nor can she tell if the special education student is having a special accommodation or modification in the assignment.

As one can notice the special education department has always stood on its own and the general education teachers have not embraced them into their departments. This is why special education teachers and students miss out of special events taking place in the school because

even the front office forgets about the special education classroom. In my opinion it is time for districts to recognize the special education department and fully integrate them to the school.

One way, in my opinion, is to allow more time for the teachers in both the special education and general education department to collaborate and communicate throughout the entire school year.

As a future general education educator, I want to be work closely with the special education department and construct a curriculum that will help close the achievement gap of special education students, because I know that special education teachers are specialist and me as a general education teacher can learn from them. 1

Literature Review: What are the collaborative challenges Special Educators face?

Special Education teachers specialize in teaching students with disabilities. They arrange meetings between parents, guardians and general educators (educators that teach the general curriculum to students in a general classroom), set up Individual Education Plans (IEP) to help students with disabilities set reachable goals in the school curriculum. However, with the 1997 and 2004 amendments to “IDEA” Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, “The progress and performance of students with disabilities is now a shared responsibility of General and Special Education teachers” (Cortiella, 2004, para. 22). This significant change gives both educators shared responsibility, but special Education teachers and general education teachers are having difficulty collaborating and communicating. There is research of different ways educators can attempt to work together, but there are various obstacles that do not allow the collaboration to take place throughout the school year.

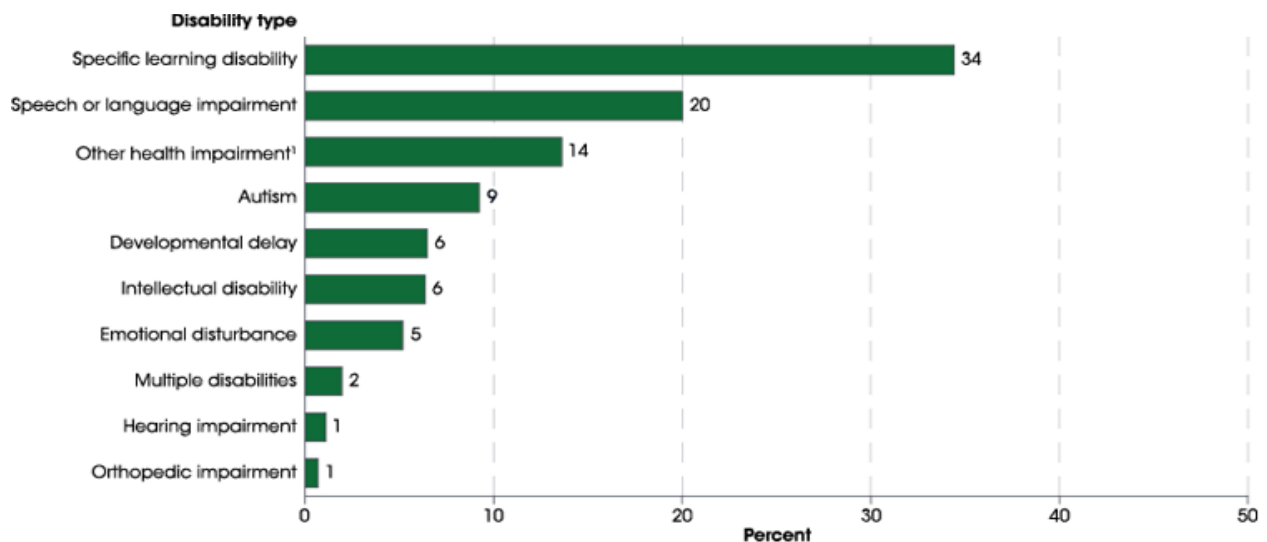
What is the problem?

Due to the enactment in 1975, with the IDEA act, formerly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, mandates the provision of a free and appropriate public school

education for eligible students ages 3–21 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, para. 1). Furthermore, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 provides further support for the participation of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum by requiring their involvement in an accountability system which is a system that documents progress and performance for every child including students with disabilities (NCLB, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) in the United States registers 6.7 million children who receive special education services. In Monterey County there were 7,622 students enrolled in Special Education services, a total of 77,517 students and 437 first year teachers and 294 second year teachers serving in the 2016-2017 school year (Ed Data). The types of disabilities reported (where?) in the 2015-2016 school year are listed in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, a specific learning disability ranked highest. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), (2018) describes it to be “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (para. 5).

Figure 1.

Percent of School Children by Type of Disability in 2015-2016



Note. Reprinted from The National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education. by Unknown Author. Retrieved from

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp

As more students are being diagnosed and placed in general education classes, Special Education teachers are not able to fully comply and assist their students due to the lack of communication/collaboration between General Education teachers. This is made clear when Heaston, Kenney, McGruder, Nelson, Puckett, and Zwald, (2003) wrote “As schools began to implement general and special education collaborative teaching, it became apparent that teacher preparation programs had not prepared their teacher education candidates to work collaboratively” (para. 1). With the new laws in effect, the roles of special education teachers and general education teachers are changing and inclusion is requiring educators to collaborate and co-teach yet, “effective methods of communication or joint planning time for special educators with general educators are scarce” (Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008, p. 143). There are many types of disabilities that special education teachers and general education teachers need to serve and the data indicate that the quality of inclusion time is not beneficial due to the ineffectiveness of teacher collaboration. According to Jones (2012) the “Research has shown that effective communication is one of the biggest hurdles in the collaborative effort and that attempts at overcoming these barriers need to focus on opening the lines of communication among professionals” (p. 306).

Why is it an issue?

There is no real formal training set in place to help special education teachers and general education teachers to collaborate with one another and as Griffin et al. (2008) wrote

“unfortunately, children are affected in negative ways when relationships between teachers are unfavorable. A lack of collaboration and communication can also contribute to feelings of isolation, or worse, to a lack of knowledge of school events and activities” (p.11). Therefore, if there is no collaboration and communication between these two departments both the teachers and students suffer. This is not the first time the issue has been brought up and in fact Dicken-Smith (1995) researched that staff development is the key to success of inclusion and that team building is the main issue because both the regular education teacher and the special education teacher will have to work together.

An important part of this issue is how students are being affected by the poor support they receive. Part of the reason as Mater (2018) reported is the lack of school funds, and special education falling under a broad umbrella for Special Education laws. This is not surprising for Special Education laws started in 1975 but were not really reviewed until 1995, and today there is still uncertainty about who should do what to get special education students on track to graduate. Mater also (2018) reported that “65% of students graduate on time, well below the 83% four year rate for American students overall” (p.2).

Adding to this issue, it is clear and it has been acknowledged as Mejia wrote “Increased general education placements may also lead to poorer and predicted performance when such placements are not well implemented” (2015, p. 18). Currently there are alternative programs in place to help special education students receive their diploma, but they do not fully prepare a student for higher education. Research shows that the percent of students with disabilities graduate at a lower rate than other students (see Figure 2), including English learners (EL) which are students that learned English as their second language and have a different mother tongue.

Figure 2.

Monterey County Graduation Rates From 2014-2015 to 2016-2017

Type	2014-15		2015-16		2016-17		2015 to 2017
	Rate	Cohort Graduates	Rate	Cohort Graduates	Rate	Cohort Graduates	Percent Point Change
All Students	84.5%	4,172	85.5%	4,274	83.9%	4,347	-0.6
Hispanic/Latino	82.9%	3,013	84.1%	3,130	82.7%	3,170	-0.2
Asian	92.2%	106	93.8%	75	89.7%	104	-2.5
Filipino	87.8%	108	94.8%	146	93.9%	124	+6.1
African American/Black	86.2%	94	86.3%	69	85.4%	82	-0.8
White	89.2%	723	88.8%	699	87.0%	709	-2.2
English Learners	73.1%	980	75.0%	1,048	68.7%	800	-4.4
Migrant Ed	79.4%	313	80.7%	305	73.3%	258	-6.1
Students w/ Disabilities	65.5%	331	65.7%	325	65.9%	337	+0.4
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	82.3%	3,210	83.8%	3,250	81.0%	3,228	-1.3

Note. Retrieved from <http://www.monterey.k12.ca.us/about/press-releases/monterey-county-2017-graduation-rates-outpace-the-state>.

If teachers do not collaborate the consequences will be detrimental. For example, a postgraduate student gave her account of how at age 34 she felt the system had failed her. Even though she did attend college, her understanding of grammar and writing remained very poor, because when she was in high school she was placed in remedial core subjects courses which did not really support her education needs (Mader, 2018, para. 20). This issue is also made clear by Mejia (2015) when he wrote “For if mainstreaming is not done correctly, then there will be negative effects such as distractions and the inability to learn by all the students” (p. 20).

Furthermore, as Jones (2012) wrote general education teachers who fail to implement student’s

IEPs can have the consequences of negative teacher evaluations, due process hearings, personal lawsuits and compensatory and punitive damages (p. 298).

What should be done?

The research points out that close collaboration among professionals is the successful way to implement collaborative teaching. All students benefit from collaborative practices that teachers set in place, but both general and special education teachers will have a more positive school year if they share ideas and plan together (Mejia, 2015; Heaston, et al., 2003). School districts can help special education teachers and general education teachers become one department by offering pre- service days, professional development, and allowing both special education and general education teachers to conduct meetings throughout the school year to specifically address special education needs. As noted by Heaston, et al., (2003) Administrators agree that the major benefits of collaborative teaching for teachers were team building with the sharing of ideas, planning together, and communicating with one another because there was a lack of understanding regarding what collaborative teaching really is (p. 3).

Mejia also noted that many special education teachers who attempted to communicate and collaborate with General education teachers improved their understanding of long-range planning, and curriculum and instruction. Mejia (2015) wrote “The teachers also become better if they work together and share their craft” (2015, p.18), because special educators are education specialists and have training that general educators do not.

Currently there is a program that attempts to get General and Special Education Teachers to communicate with one another throughout the school year. Jones (2012) introduced the Special Education Students at a Glance Approach (SESG) as a technique to help both General and Special Educators. This approach consists of three forms, one is done at the beginning of the

year, at the end of the year and there is one inclusion running record form that can be used to help increase collaboration between the two departments (p. 298). This is done throughout the school year and planning time will be needed, but going over a special education student file will benefit everyone. Jones (2012) also mentions the need of professional development for the instructional assistants, citing a mismatch between responsibilities and training and a lack of adequate guidance.

Continuing with collaboration throughout the school year, another opportunity to help with this is offering staff development to all teachers before the school year starts, and throughout the school year which will benefit the entire school. As Ripley (1997) wrote "Planning should take place at the district and building levels, as well as at the classroom level... principals play an extremely important leadership role in facilitating collaborative efforts by instructional personnel" (p.3). It is also noted in her research that schools that practice collaborative benefit teaching have both special education and general education students. She also cites Angle (1996) who wrote that all students win by being challenged by collaborating teachers who believe they are responsible for all children in the classroom (p.5).

This issue can also be tied to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory which aims for student achievement while providing appropriate assistance from the "more knowledgeable other." This is made clear by Neff (n.d) when he wrote "Consequently, instructional strategies that promote the distribution of expert knowledge where students collaboratively work together to conduct research, share their results, and perform or produce a final project, help to create a collaborative community of learners" (para. 6). Scaffolding done the correct way will lead to a much better learning environment because when students are provided with appropriate support they can complete assignments that otherwise would be too

difficult for them to complete on their own. Similarly, both the General Educator and Special Educator is the more knowledgeable person in their specific core subject and they can help the other gain proper learning skills. Another way to help Special Education Teachers become included in the general education curriculum is to co-teach (Dickens-Smith, 1995; Mejia, 2015). When both teachers can communicate and collaborate on lesson plans, IEPs are respected and accomplished, plus general education students also benefit from this practice. Co-teaching allows teachers to give each other support which leads to better relationships among themselves and some of the burden of adjusting or modifying a lesson is handled with less stress (Heaston et al., 2003).

All of the approaches require administrative support to help implement the time necessary for all special and general education teachers to be able to collaborate and communicate with one another (Heaston et al, 2003; Griffin et al., 2008; Dickens-Smith, 1995; Jones, 2012).

Conclusion

Special education teachers are the experts in special education and if they are allowed to collaborate and communicate with general education teachers, a better learning environment for all will be more likely. As pointed out, "Including students in the general education classroom successfully requires multi professional coordination" (Eccleston 2010; Voltz, 1992; Voltz et al., 1994). The professionals are composed of special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators collaborating together. By all of them sharing their expertise a learning community will be built. These professionals are all knowledgeable in their subjects and the others have some common known language if they encourage and help each other by collaborating they will build a better collaboration/communication community.

Method¹

This research investigated how High School Special Education teachers and General Education high school teachers viewed communication between their departments and what they thought could be done to improve it. Based on the analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, we used what was learned to formulate an action that responded to the focus issue in a way that inspired, informed, or involved a particular audience. After interviewing High School Special Education teachers and General Education teachers, we used what we learned to improve communication between these two departments. An extra step we took to gain more insight on the issue was to get information from Special Education students. This was performed with a survey done with permission of our collaborating Special Education teacher. This issue is important because currently Special educators and General educators are seen as different departments and special education students struggle to live normal lives, especially as adults. Being in an inclusive classroom could help prepare them for life after high school. Expected benefits include an opportunity for participants to reflect on High School Special Education teachers and General Education teachers and provide concrete suggestions for improvement that may be translated into action.

SECTION IV: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Context

This research took place at “Bayside Sharks” High School². This school is in the Monterey Peninsula Unified school district located in California. It is located near Cannery Row

¹ From the Capstone Project of Edith D, Clarissa C., and Claire G. (FA 18)

² Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

in Monterey which is a small livable city 115 miles south of San Francisco with 27,810 residents. The city of Monterey was founded in 1770 (City of Monterey.Org). “Bayside Sharks” High opened in 1980 and is one of the four high schools in the “Sea Otter” School District (Ed Data, 2018). The school has been around for many years with few upgrades to the campus and classrooms. It serves students from 9 to 12th grade. In the 2017-2018 school year 1,280 students were enrolled. 45.6 % of students are Hispanic, 30.5% are white, 1.6% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 5.3% Black or African American, 5.5% Asian, 3% Filipino, 8.2% has two more more races. 45.2% of students participate in the Free and Reduced Price meal program. 6.6% of the student population are English learners. There are 60 teachers and 4 of them make up the special education department. In the 2016-2017 school year 16 first year teachers were reported and 8 second year teachers. The average class size is 20 students per teacher. (Ed Data, 2018).

Participants and Participant Selection

We interviewed two High School Special Education teachers, three General Education teachers and one administrator to participate in this study. This group of prospective participants is being invited to participate because their relevant, knowledgeable experience and expertise in the teaching field will be useful to our research. These teachers know their membership roles and responsibilities by law.

Mr. Jelly. A white male in his thirties who has a Social Studies and Special Education credential. Currently, he has been teaching Special Education for seven years in a high school setting. Mr. Jelly received an honorarium for working with our group the entire semester. Mr. Jelly believes general education teachers need more empathy towards Special Education students. He hopes this capstone project will help the school build a better collaboration team.

Mr. Sand. An experienced white male teaching social studies in a high school setting. He was chosen to be a participant for our study because of his experience in both Special and General education. Mr. Sand was a Special Education teacher for five years, and now teaches General Education Social Studies. Sadly, Mr. Sand confirmed he does not read students “passports” because he feels he gives all his students extra accommodations if they belong to General or Special education.

Mrs. Shell. A white female teacher who teaches sports medicine, health careers, and anatomy. Mrs. Shell was willing to be interviewed even though she did not teach or have any Special Education students. Mrs. Shell gave us insight on how difficult it would be for her to teach kinesiology to a Special Education student because she did not believe this subject could be watered down.

Mr. Shark. An administrator for about three years Mr. Shark welcomed our team into his school. Mr. Shark wanted both the General and Special Education Departments to integrate and work together. Mr. Shark felt his hands were tied due to the union not allowing him to mandate integration and collaboration times between the two departments.

Mrs. Sea. A white female who has been teaching Special Education for ten years. Mrs. Sea was selected because of her experience working with Special and General Education teachers and students. Mrs. Sea also had previous experience working as an instructional aide before she received her Special Education credential.

Mr. Wave. A white male teacher who teaches Social Studies. Mr. Wave allowed us to interview him and informed us how frustrating it was to not have sufficient training to support Special Education Teachers. Mr. Wave is a Social Studies teacher who has been there for ten years. He works alongside many students with disabilities and IEPs.

We realize most of our interviewees are Social Studies General Education teachers. But unfortunately, after attempting to contact General Education teachers from the Math and Science department various times and due to time constraints we had to interview the participants that actually replied.

Researcher

Edith. This project is important to me because as a future elementary school teacher I want to find a solution to this communication issue between Special Education teachers and General Education teachers. My work experience, in my opinion, helps with this project because I have worked for two different school districts and have served my community hours in four different schools in Salinas in grades K-12. I worked as a Special Education aide in a middle school for 2 years and I witnessed the struggle Special Education teachers have in trying to help their special education students in core subject's assignments. Sadly, many students fall behind due to the inability of the teachers to communicate expectations, and assignments to the students and special education lead teacher. While working or volunteering I also witnessed the work environment between all school personnel (e.g., secretaries, aides, librarians, teachers and administrators). Currently I am on route to become a general education elementary school teacher and want to find a solution to the communication issue between school departments.

Clarissa: This project topic is important and personal to me for two reasons. The first one being that I was in special education classes from a young age. I felt that in high school there could have been so much more done to help me and my peers. Second, my career goal is to be become a special education teacher and this issue it will be a topic I will be facing in the field. My background as a Special Education student qualifies me to carry out this project. I have also done service learning in Special Education classes that has given me experience in this line of

work and topic. By doing service learning it gave me a different mindset on how to look at this topic from a professional view. My ability to see both sides of the issue will be helpful because I am able to see all perspectives of each stakeholder involved with this project.

Claire. When I am a teacher it will be my goal to educate all of my students, catering to each individual's unique needs. For some Special Education students, being in an inclusive classroom is going to be their best opportunity at getting a better education. This topic is important to me because I want to be able to teach these students just as well as I can teach any other student, and learning to better communicate with special ed. teachers is key to that. In my service learning experience, I have worked with Special Education students in a General Education setting. I have seen how challenging these students can sometime be and how important it is for the General Education and Special Education teachers to unite and support their students.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

The following questions were asked to the general educators:

Their background: schooling, credentials, and subject department info.

How would you describe the communication between the two departments?

What do you see as the problem or is there a problem with communication between these two departments?

What is currently being done to improve communication between these two departments- by whom - and do you think this is good, bad, or indifferent? Why?

Do have any concerns about when it comes to communication between these two departments? What are suggestions you may have for teachers working together that may not agree with the integration of SPED students in general classes?

Describe the impact that you see how communication between you and the Special Education teachers can affect the the SPED students in the class? (Do you have examples that benefited you or the students).

What positive experiences have you had collaborating with SPED teachers when it comes to your SPED students? What negative experiences have you had?

What do you think SPED teachers are doing that are helpful and which are not when it comes to the SPED students in your class?

What is your option on co-teaching?

If you have done co teaching what you type of training did you have?

If you have never done co teaching would you be interested in doing so?

Would co-teaching be more helpful if it was with a sped teacher?

Do you think a co-teaching training session would be beneficial? How so?

Do you believe a workshop on special education and/or co teaching would be helpful?

Kahoot Survey Questions: Given to Special Education Students

Do you know what IEP stands for?

Do you understand what is in your IEP?

Which accommodation do you find yourself using the most?

What would you like to be added or recognized by your IEP or teachers?

Do you feel that your Special Education Teacher advocates for you?

Do you feel that your General Education Teachers understand your need for an IEP?

Would you like to have your own passport; a notecard or sheet of paper with your accommodations?

Do you advocate for yourself to both General and Special Education Teachers?

Do you think there is a lack of communication between your General and Special Education teachers?

Procedure

We invited 60 teachers via email but only two Special Education and three General Education teachers replied. We attempted to contact General Education teachers from the Math and Science department but had no response. The principal was approached face to face and he

agreed immediately to help us in whatever he could. All interviews were done individually of Special Education and General Education teachers as well as the administrator. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place at “Bayside Sharks” High School. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee.

Between interviewing General and Special Education Teachers we also had the opportunity to present a Kahoot survey to the Special Education students. We did this to get insight on how well students knew their IEP rights. A Pre-Kahoot survey was done with two Special Education periods, but it was noticeable that the students did not understand what was being asked. Therefore, a lesson for students was created with the help of our Special Education Teacher who helped us the entire semester. Close to the end of the semester he taught a lesson to four of his Special Education high school periods. After each lesson a Post-Kahoot survey was given to his Special Education students so that we could compare and contrast how well they knew and understood their IEP rights after the lesson had been taught.

Data Analysis

Student surveys and transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, High School Special Education and General Education teachers were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve communication and collaboration between their departments. This is important because currently Special Educators and General Educators are seen as different departments. Special Education students often

struggle to live normal lives, especially as adults, so being in an inclusive classroom could help prepare them for life after high school. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: Time, Cost and Impact. Finding time to do everything that needs to be done can be difficult as a teacher. Since *time* is already scarce it is important that the chosen action does not take away any unnecessary time from the teachers, staff, or students. Money is not plentiful in most schools, so it is critical that the *cost* of the chosen action is not a financial burden to the school. Because both of these criteria are so valuable to schools, it is of course important that the chosen action is impactful and *reaches* as many people as possible, so that the schools' time and money is not wasted. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	COST	TIME	REACH
Co-Teaching Workshops between Special and General educators.	3	2	1
Integrating the SPED department at least once a week during collaboration department meetings.	2	2	2
Increased knowledge for student passport and empower them to voice their needs.	3	3	2

Based on a 1-3 scale. 1 is the less beneficial on the scale, and 3 is the most beneficial.

Option 1: Improving and helping understand what co-teaching entails/Co-teaching.

After observing both General and Special education teachers participate in what they call co-teaching we realized they were not using this procedure appropriately and that is why it is recommended. In our research, we learned that co-teaching allows teachers to give each other support which leads to better relationships among themselves and some of the burdens of adjusting or modifying a lesson is handled with less stress (Heaston et al., 2003). We truly believe that if teachers implement co-teaching appropriately not only will it be beneficial to the teachers but to the students as well.

According to Population Education (2018), the average *cost* of this option would be ranging from honorarium fees between \$250 for a 2-hour workshop up to \$700 for a full day session; Materials fees are could also range between \$5-15 per person. It should be taken into consideration that this payment would only occur once or twice a year.

The *time* needed is about four to six hours at the beginning of the school year in August and at the return of the new year in January when the teachers return from Summer and Winter break during one of the teachers return work day.

The *reach* would impact stakeholders such as General Education teachers from all departments and Special Education teachers. This reach would vary by attendance rate.

Option 2: Integrating all the departments/Increased collaboration.

After our interviews, we learned that teachers have weekly Wednesday collaboration meetings with their departments. This is beneficial for teachers but Special Education teachers do not have an opportunity to collaborate with teachers who have their Special Education students. With the new laws in effect, the roles of Special Education teachers and General Education teachers are changing and inclusion is requiring educators to collaborate and co-teach yet, “effective methods of communication or joint planning time for special educators with general

educators are scarce” (Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008, p. 143). The recommendation is for one meeting a month during collaborative department meetings instead of Special Education teachers only meeting with each other. Special Education teachers would spread out to other departments so that they have time to discuss their mutual students. This type of collaboration would make up one out of the four monthly meetings. All departments would benefit from increased communication throughout with the faculty.

The *cost* for this option is free, as the time has already been set aside for meetings. There would just be a shift in who is meeting with who. There could be small costs if the principal or staff feel additional materials would be helpful and necessary.

The *time* required would be once a month during the schools’ teacher collaboration days, which are already set in place. Extra time does not need to set aside for this change to happen.

The *reach* for this option would be moderate, assuming the teachers involved use the time to focus on their mutual Special Education students. The stakeholders who would be affected the most with this option would be the Special Education and General Education teachers because having the extra time to communicate and collaborate could help their integrated classrooms run more smoothly. The Special Education students would also be affected because their teachers would be more in sync with each other and better able to meet student needs.

Option 3: Improving the “Passport” system/ Empowering SPED students.

After interviewing both the Special Education and General Education teachers we realized that this “passport” aka IEP at a glance was being lost in the General Education teachers desk. And after the Pre-Kahoot survey given to Special Education students we also gained insight that Special Education students did not know what a passport, their IEP accommodations were. In our research, we learned that this passport system ranges in format throughout the

country. Jones in her 2012 research paper introduced the Special Education Students at a Glance Approach (SESG) as a technique to help both General and Special Educators collaborate with one another and help learn about each student's disabilities, accommodations and expectations.

This third option is to improve the "Passport System" that the high school has in place already. The *cost* for this option is free unless the instructor feels materials would be helpful and necessary. Some costs may include paper to print out each student's passport with each individualized accommodation and the cost to laminate them. (Most schools own laminate machines).

The *time* it would take for this option to be in place is low because most of the information on the passport is already filed in a computer system in which the Special Education Teacher can copy and paste. This option is recommended at the beginning of the school year in August, at the return of the new year in January and after every student IEP meeting. The lesson given to students could take about one to two days during their regular special education class period. Usually, teachers return to school before the students and they can have each passport printed out before the students return from break. Paraprofessionals can also help print and laminate the student's passport. This option is given after a teacher said: "The passport system is in place, but it gets lost in the process due to confidentiality issues."

The *reach* would be moderate because it would benefit all Special Education students and teachers but only reach General Education teachers who have Special Education students. Special Education students would learn exactly what their IEP accommodations are and be empowered to speak up and make sure their IEPs are being followed. General Education teachers would also benefit because they would rely on the student to speak up versus having to remember each Special Education student's accommodations.

Conclusion

It is our recommendation that all three actions take place to help General and Special Education teachers collaborate with one another. But we realize that due to time and money the first step would be to empower students and teach them to advocate for themselves. Therefore, the first step would be to start on the passport system. Special Education students would be taught a lesson about what an IEP is and their accommodation rights. This lesson would be given upon their return from Summer and Winter break. Special Education students would be the bridge in connecting the General and Special Education teachers. The second recommendation, co-teaching and monthly collaboration meetings go hand in hand. We believe Special and General Education teachers should learn how to co-teach with one another first and start Wednesday collaboration meetings right after they learn what role they have. "Because as author Cortiella (2004) wrote "The progress and performance of students with disabilities is now a shared responsibility of General and Special Education teachers (para. 22). We realize that if teachers do not know or understand how to co-teach and communicate with one another it may be redundant to meet with each other to collaborate. With the passport system, we hope that it will empower the students to be the bridge between the two departments and help the General and Special Education teachers to work and communicate with one another. We realize that this system effectiveness relies on the Special Education students actually carrying and advocating for their IEP rights. But it is our strong belief that the Special Education students will learn and build a bridge between these two departments. It would also be recommended that General Education teachers also learn about the IEP lesson with the same Power Point lesson that was taught to the Special Education students by the Special Education Department teachers and that they are aware that the Special Education students carry their passports with them.

Limitations

Co-teaching and integration of different departments strongly creates a bridge for communication between the two department, but the time and money a district has may not make this action option possible. With the passport system students would be the ones who would most benefit but General and Special Education teachers will lack face to face communication. Students may also not use the passport effectively, lose it or never use it to advocate for themselves. Another limitation to the passport system is the time the Special Education department has to create the passports. Unfortunately, sometimes the district has planed collaborating meetings for the first in service workdays. With the passport system the school administration needs to give the Special Education department time to create and print.

Recommendation

Despite acknowledging that there is a limitation with the passport system the recommendation is to start with empowering the Special Education students. Teaching Special Education students to advocate for themselves early on will prepare them to do so when they start attending college and have to seek special accommodations for themselves. Special Education students can also help to educate General Education teachers with IEPs.

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

In Monterey County, there are 7693 Special Education students enrolled in public schools. In "Bayside Sharks" High School there were 83 students enrolled in the 2017-2018 school year. Their disabilities were mild to moderate ones. Those disabilities ranked higher with a 34% in a specific learning disability such as the inability to listen, speak, think, read, write, spell or do math calculations. Speech or language impairments had 20% of students in this category. When I entered my partner school my focus question was the following: What are the collaborative challenges Special Educators face? To answer this question we interviewed two Special

Education Teachers, three General Education teachers, and one principal. But my team and I wanted to get insight knowledge from the Special Education students and see their point in this matter as well. As a result the three emerging themes came up from the teachers: First the teachers were unhappy with the current communication efforts, second both department teachers felt they did not have enough support and training, third they were frustrated with the students and finally, they all mentioned the “passport system.” The themes that came up with the Special Education students were the following: First, students were confused about what an IEP was, second the students were unsure about their own IEP, third the students wanted more support from all of their teachers and the fourth theme was an interest in having a “passport” for themselves versus the “passport” being given to their General Education teachers by the Special Education teachers at the beginning of the school year. After thoroughly analyzing the literature, the teachers interviews and the Special Education students responses, the three actions options emerged. The first action was funding a co-teaching workshops for both the General and Special Education teachers so they learn the appropriate way and what role they played in co-teaching strategies. The second action option was to integrate the Special Education department once a month to the General Education department meetings so they could collaborate and communicate with one another. Lastly, the third action option entailed providing Special Education students with a student friendly “passport” of their own which they could carry with them at all times. This third action option of empowering Special Education high school students was chosen ultimately due to time constraints and because we firmly believe the students can be the bridge that unites both the Special and General Education departments.

In order to make the student “passport” work the Special Education teachers need to teach their students about the IEP process, what their accommodations are and what self advocacy is. This lesson is recommended to be taught after the Summer and Winter break. The

“passport” would also be given to the Special Education high school students after their Summer and Winter breaks and every time their IEP meeting takes place.

Student Name: _____ Student # _____	
Case Manager: _____	
<u>About Me:</u>	
<u>Class Accommodations:</u>	<u>Testing Accommodations:</u>

Figure 3. An example of a student’s passport. Please note the student’s disability is not written out anywhere due to confidentiality reasons or the possibility of the form being misplaced or lost.

Critical Reflection

When I started this capstone project I never expected that our result was going to be geared to empowering Special Education students. However, after completing this project I feel

that I was able to make a difference. My team and I shared the results with the Special Education department who blamed the General Education department for the lack of effort to attempt to communicate and collaborate with one another. But we open the doors and laid the first building block for a steady possible gradual change.

One of the most prevalent themes was MLO 1: Developing Educator. In my opinion, I applied my thinking, writing, and speaking skills to culminate this project. Another theme that impacted my professional development was MLO 2: Diversity and Multicultural Scholar. Me attending California State University Monterey Bay gave me the opportunity of interacting with other nationalities outside of my own. My project involved Special Education students from a public high school with 45% white students. In CSUMB I was given the opportunity to see the other side of the shoe because all my life I attended schools with 97% Mexican students. Additionally, MLO 4: Social Justice Collaborator. As a future educator, I gained skills that will allow me effectively pursue social change and advocate for social justice for the stakeholders in this project.

In order to become the professional I, envision being, I must continue to educate myself in social justice matters because knowledge is power. By learning to advocate for all students and teaching them how to advocate for themselves I will ensure that free accessible public education for all becomes a reality for everyone including students with disabilities.

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