Students with mild to moderate disabilities perceptions of engagement in general education and self-contained educational settings

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Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities Perceptions of Engagement in General Education and Self-contained Educational Settings

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An Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education College of Professional Studies School of Education

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Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities Perceptions of Engagement in General Education and Self-contained Educational Settings

by

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Abstract

The legal framework for educating students with mild to moderate disabilities in the general education setting requires districts to shift towards a more inclusive model of education; however, many districts continue to educate students with mild to moderate disabilities in separate classrooms. This qualitative research study explores the constructs of learner engagement and students' perceived levels of engagement in both self-contained and general education settings through open-ended interviews. Questions focused on indicators of engagement and the students perceived levels of academic, cognitive, behavioral, and psychological engagement across settings. Student responses were analyzed and themes emerged indicating greater levels of engagement in inclusive settings and the need for further development of effective inclusionary practices. The findings suggest that while general education settings provide higher expectations and academic learner engagement for students with mild to moderate disabilities, they are not offering students the accommodations and individualized instruction that would foster a comfortable learning environment and strong psychological engagement. The findings also suggest that while self-contained settings provide students psychological engagement, they offer low academic learner engagement and expectations.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This study will analyze the perceptions of students with mild to moderate disabilities regarding their engagement in inclusive and self-contained content courses at the secondary level. Students that receive special education services can be placed in a variety of settings, such as inclusive, self-contained, or a combination of both, in order to best meet their needs (IDEA, 2004). Significant research has been completed to determine the effect of placement on academic progress and success, yet it has not reached a definitive conclusion (Swanson & Vaughn, 2010; Swanson, 2008). A national study on inclusion, based on data provided by school districts, reported that students placed in inclusive settings demonstrated improvement on standardized tests, grades, behavior and motivation (National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995). Yet, Zigmond, Kloo, and Volonino (2009) reviewed four different inclusion programs and documented significant concerns that students were not receiving the intense individualized instruction which they were entitled to under IDEA.

Placement has increasingly become influenced by federal legislation. IDEIA, the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, mandates that students are taught in the least restrictive environment (IDEIA; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). This requires school districts to educate students with disabilities in regular classrooms with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) stipulates that teachers considered highly qualified in their content area i.e., math or English, typically a general education teacher, teach students. The legal framework for educating students with mild to moderate disabilities in the general education setting requires districts to shift towards a more inclusive model of education; however, many districts continue to educate students with mild to moderate disabilities in separate classrooms.
Problem Statement

Students with mild to moderate disabilities face greater obstacles to graduation than their general education counterparts. They are less likely than their peers to complete high school (Bear, 2006). The statistics are a result of many factors, including poor attendance, low academic skills, satisfaction about reading and behavior, global self-worth, and perceptions of teachers. Graduation from high school is the ultimate indicator of student completion of the public educational system. As students with disabilities represent a sub-group with multiple factors inhibiting their academic and social progress, it is critical to address these obstacles to success.

Under NCLB and IDEIA secondary students with mild to moderate disabilities must participate in the core curriculum of study unless stated otherwise on the student’s IEP. The law asserts that the general education classroom provides the most suitable learning environment for students with mild to moderate disabilities to gain the content subject matter necessary for success in high school. Students with mild to moderate disabilities still find themselves in separate classrooms taught by special educators who may or may not possess the content knowledge of the general education teacher. When separated from their peers, student’s perceptions of capability and competence can be compromised often making it difficult to profit from instruction as well progress academically in the core curriculum. When educated in the same environment as their peers, it is imperative that students with mild to moderate disabilities receive an appropriate level of support and services from special educators to fully access the curriculum.

Moreover, research indicates that student perceptions of their learning environments are a strong indicator of student success and motivation. Students’ with mild to moderate perspectives of their educational experiences are critical to effectively evaluating the differences between
teaching students in inclusive general education and self-contained settings. Student perceptions also provide invaluable insight into the reason particular placements are or are not more engaging. Their feedback and viewpoints can provide educators information to modify and improve upon existing programs. Frequently IEP team placement decisions are driven by the established programs within the district, as well as parent and teacher input. The student’s role in the process is minimized and their ability to self-advocate greatly reduced.

As federal and state guidelines require moving students with disabilities into more inclusive settings, it is necessary for educators to constantly monitor the effectiveness and results of these changes. Assessing student engagement has emerged as a valuable indicator for gauging student success. Multiple instruments have been designed for both students and teachers to assess student engagement and identify factors present in engaging environments. Engagement includes academic, behavioral, cognitive, and psychological engagement. Levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement have been directly correlated to desirable academic and behavioral outcomes (Finn & Rock, 1997). While research has investigated student perceptions of inclusive and general education environments, there is a significant lack of studies which investigate students’ perceptions of their engagement in these environments. When questioned simply on their preferences, students may indicate an inclination for general education due to enhanced social opportunities compared to self-contained. As educators we need to elicit student responses and reflections related to the multiple components of engagement to gleam a more comprehensive picture of programmatic strengths and weaknesses.

Though schools are increasing the inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classes it continues to be important for educators to understand and analyze the instructional setting that promotes active student engagement for students with mild to moderate
disabilities. There is a lack of information pertaining to where high school students with learning disabilities perceive to be the educational setting that engages them both academically and socially. Therefore, researching the perceptions of high school students with mild moderate disabilities regarding the setting that actively engages them is needed so programs can be created, reconstructed, and refined to both meet mandated federal requirements and students voices.

Purpose

This study will analyze the perceptions of students with mild to moderate disabilities regarding how actively engaged, both socially and academically, they view themselves in contrasting educational settings- a self-contained setting and a general education setting. The results of the study will inform my practice as well as the practice of general and special educators who are teaching secondary students with mild to moderate disabilities at the high school level. Gaining students’ perspectives on their education will aid in policy decisions, individual education programming (IEP), and service delivery options for high school students with mild to moderate disabilities (Poplin, 1994).

Researchers Background

I have taught for five years as an Education Specialist at the secondary level. My position has specifically been as an SDC teacher, which has resulted in primarily teaching in a self-contained setting. I have co-taught two history courses in the general education setting. Additionally, I have served as Department Chair for two years. In that capacity I have been responsible for implementing the district’s inclusion program, as well as working with the students to schedule their courses and ensure we are meeting their needs. I have witnessed a
range of successes and challenges on the part of both staff and students in the implementation of an inclusive special education program.

**Research Context and Rationale.** My interest in inclusion and co-teaching began my second year teaching when I was given the opportunity to include 6 students with mild-moderate disabilities (including Specific Learning Disability and Speech and Language Impairment) from my SDC (Special Day Class) into a general education 10th grade World History course. The rigor and the pace of the course was a substantial increase from a day class setting, yet the students responded positively to the experience. They demonstrated a notable increase in self-esteem and consistently used appropriate behavior. The same year I also taught a self-contained World History class. The students that were in the inclusive class demonstrated a higher understanding of the content and a stronger interest in the subject matter than the students in the self-contained setting. Admittedly, the students I chose to include were also the students I envisioned as being the most successful in a general education setting; however the peer role models, high standards, and depth of content may also have been influences on success and engagement. After the course was over, this group of students constantly referred to the class as the best class ever. When this group of students was about to graduate we discussed their experience in an inclusive classroom. All of the students shared that it had been a very important and worthwhile experience; furthermore they felt that all students should have the opportunity to participate in inclusive classes.

My district has increased their focus on placing students in the least restrictive environment with access to a highly qualified content specialist. Prior to the 2010-2011 year, this high school offered Resource Specialist Program English and Algebra courses, taught by special educators. Additionally, some diploma bound students were placed in SDCs for science and
social science. Starting with the 2010-2011 academic year, diploma tracked students have been placed within a general education classroom, sometimes with the support of a special education teacher or paraprofessional to support them.

These changes have brought about a wide range of responses from students. I have witnessed many students push themselves harder to succeed in a demanding and rigorous curriculum, exhibiting strong signs of engagement. Conversely, I have seen students overwhelmed and emotionally drained by the pressures they feel from their coursework. This has manifested in students cutting classes and avoiding school, clear indicators of a lack of engagement.

**Theoretical Model**

The legal framework which establishes the continuum of services, when viewed through the lens of Allport, Vygotsky and Krashen's theories, provides a model for analysis. States are required to provide a free and appropriate education (FAPE) to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). IDEA states that,

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 that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the general educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA 2004).

This mandate implies that the least restrictive environment will be dependent on each student's individual needs and level of support required to receive an appropriate education. LRE could fall anywhere on the continuum of services, including a general education classroom with
or without supplementary aids, a self-contained program, or a separate school (Copenhaver, 2006).

The establishment of a continuum of services, designed to offer students with disabilities placement options ranging from the least to the most restrictive environment, implies by its very existence that all students are not always best served in a general education, or inclusive environment. Placement in more restrictive settings is based on the premise that the one size fits all approach found in general education settings is not capable of meeting the needs of all learners, despite the use of accommodations and other supports in that environment.

Undifferentiated large group instruction is most commonly utilized in general education and few adaptations to meet the needs of students with disabilities occur that require planning and alternative materials. General education teachers are trained to focus predominantly on content and covering required curriculum maps, and have limited knowledge on behavior management and modification. Student monitoring in the general education setting frequently involve brief student check-ins, as opposed to detailed data collection and direct feedback available in a special education setting (Hocutt, 1996). Fuchs contends that the special educator possesses the skills and knowledge to craft individualized, targeted lessons, by utilizing a variety of curriculum, techniques, and pedagogy. The level of support and intensive systematic instruction provided in special education settings is necessary for some students with disabilities. Denying them access to these settings would deprive them of an appropriate education.

Analyzing the placement of students with mild to moderate disabilities through the lens of Krashen’s affective filter theory offers an interesting perspective (Krashen, 1981). According to Krashen, the variables of anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence directly relate to language acquisition. The lower the anxiety and higher the motivation and self-confidence, the more
successful the student is in acquiring the language. One can transfer Krashen’s theory to support a more intensive smaller educational setting wherein students feel safe and non-threatened by unrealistic expectations placed upon them by the dominant language culture in typical general education classrooms in America. The smaller student to teacher ratio and more individualized instruction would provide an environment that could decrease anxiety, as students are not feeling pressured to keep up academically, in this case, with their general education peers, thus building self-confidence and increasing motivation through success. This in many ways was the justification for special education placement (both resource and special day class placement) in the first place; a small intensive and supportive learning environment to reduce anxiety and increase academic proficiency in order for the student to then re-engage with the normative school population.

Vygotsky developed the sociocultural theory of Zone Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes that a student should not be assessed based on what they can currently do, but on what they are capable of doing with adult or peer guidance (Wang, Bruce, & Hughes, 2011). Vygotsky explains ZPD as

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (1978, p. 85)

This theory is based on the premise that when a student is in the ZPD, they are capable of learning new tasks and skills through the assistance of a peer or adult. Current teaching practices have adopted Vygotsky’s theory through the use of scaffolding and cooperative learning groups. Scaffolding can be defined as the support that the student receives from a peer or adult to facilitate achieving a task. By design scaffolding should be gradually removed until the student
can master the task independently. Cooperative learning groups provide academic opportunities through mixed-ability group work.

Vygotsky’s work incorporates both the academic and social learning needs of students. He reinforces the importance of learning objectives being both obtainable and challenging. It requires educators to view the student as being capable of achieving higher level academic skills that they do not currently possess and provides a social structure for learning with an inclusive peer group.

Though Krashen did not explicitly call for separate instruction for language learners nor did in any way advocate for separate placement for adolescent students with mild to moderate disabilities, his affective filter theory helps practitioners understand the importance of targeted, humane instruction for language learners who for one reason or another struggle with and for literacy in the dominant language. Could separate “pull out” instruction then be appropriate and justified to reduce anxiety, build competence, and confidence? The famous psychologist, Gordon Allport would argue against that view and argue for social inclusion versus social exclusion. Gordon Allport’s (Gaines & Reed, 1995) theories about social interaction revolve around the importance of social mores as indicators of social engagement and competence. When institutions create isolated environments individuals feel excluded from the intense sociology afforded in those environments. On the other hand, when institutions create opportunity structures wherein individuals can participate meaningfully in the nexus of the institution they feel a sense of belonging. Allport (1979) developed a scale of prejudice which details the progressive degrees of isolation and ultimately abuse incurred upon isolated groups. The scale begins with antilocution, in which the minority group is subjected to jokes and insults, and progresses to avoidance, in which the minority group is purposefully avoided by the majority. As
the intensity of the prejudice increases, Allport describes the level of discrimination, which
denies the group of services or opportunity. Further escalation results in physical attack on either
person or property and ultimately extermination. The premise of Allport’s work questions the
implications of socially isolating groups of people and highlights the increasingly destructive
consequences of this behavior (Allport, 1979).

Though this research looks at Special Day Class as one of the options for serving students
with mild to moderate disabilities, this service delivery model often segregates students with
learning disabilities from the mainstream class. A case can be made for providing additional
support for these students in a self-contained environment, but as Allport points out these
students pay a high price for this type of segregation— discrimination and prejudice, two most
pejorative consequences. A self-contained classroom for students with mild to moderate
disabilities becomes a shield, a protection from the academic rigors and high expectations of the
mainstream student and may indeed lead to a positive attribution by some students. As Vygotsky
outlines in his theories, it is critical to view student achievement in terms of learning potential
rather than current learning limits. Placing students in self-contained settings with a reduced
complexity of materials can result in lowered student expectations and achievement, as well as
the inability to create genuine mixed-ability cooperative learning experiences. As for the
inclusive general education class, a student might feel the pressure of a little fish in a big pond
effect (Marsh, Seaton, Trautwein, Ludtke, Hau, O’Mara, & Craven, 2008) and display feelings
of inadequacy thus maintaining a positive identification with the self-contained class. Although,
according to Allport the more opportunities to be and feel part of the cultural mores, and the
more an organization supports this type of identification, increases the likelihood that a person
will engage in a meaningful and participatory manner in the more supportive sociology.
Allport’s theoretical model gives one the lens to look at, in this case, students with mild
moderate disabilities perspectives and to look closely at what makes sense for them and what in
truth actually occurs.

Research Questions

- What are student perceptions of engagement in inclusive settings?
- What are student perceptions of engagement in self-contained settings?
- What are student perceptions of engagement in inclusive settings when compared to self-
  contained settings?
- What are common factors that influence students’ preferences regarding their setting?

Definition of Terms

**Inclusion**: Students with and without disabilities being educated in the same
classroom (Leatherman & Neimeyer, 2005).

**Co-teaching**: A form of inclusive education in which a general and special
educator teach within a single classroom (Mastropieri, M., Scruggs, T.E., & Graetz, J.
2005).

**Self-contained setting**: Restrictive placement for students with disabilities
designed to provide intensive academic and social support unavailable in a general
education setting (Lane, Webby, & Cooley, 2005).

**SDC**: Full-day classes for students with learning disabilities, speech and/or
language impairments, serious emotional disturbances, cognitive delays, and a range of
other impairments. Classes are taught by certified special education teachers. A student
may be placed in a regular classroom as appropriate according to the student's IEP.
**IDEIA:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act is the federal law that provides the legal authority for early intervention and special educational services for children birth to age 21. This federal law mandates students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum (Zigmund, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009).

**NCLB:** Reauthorized in 2001, this is the principal federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school for children “at risk” (Copenhaver, 2004).

**Least restrictive environment:** The placement that is as close as possible to the general education environment. This is the educational setting that permits a child to receive the most educational benefit while participating in a regular educational environment to the maximum extent appropriate. LRE is a requirement under the IDEA (Copenhaver, 2004).

**IEP:** Individualized Education Program, which describes the specially designed instruction and the supplementary and related services needed by the student to benefit from instruction in that special content as well as in the general education curriculum (Zigmund, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009).

**Mild to moderate disabilities:** These students may qualify for special education services due to learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, attention deficit disorder, cognitive disabilities, and autism.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents the legal mandates, current practices, and significant research relevant to inclusion and learner engagement. Originating with the IDEA decision to place students in the Least Restrictive Environment, it explores the practice, philosophy, and implementation of inclusion. The concept of learner engagement is also explored and conceptualized in relation to special education services and settings.

Search Procedures

A systematic search through a computerized database was conducted. The database used was ERIC. The following descriptors were used: (a) inclusion, (b) secondary, (c) learner engagement (d) co-teaching, (e) content specialist, (f) engagement instrument. These descriptors were used individually and/or in groups to fully search through each of the databases. Additionally, the references provided at the end of each of the articles were reviewed to search for other pertinent articles related to the descriptors.

Least Restrictive Environment

IDEIA, the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, mandates that students are taught in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent possible (IDEIA; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The LRE is determined based on the student’s needs, and can be a general education classroom, special education classroom, or separate program. The creation of a continuum of services by Congress established a legal framework which inherently implied that the general education setting was not always appropriate or supportive enough for all students needs.
IDEIA 2004 emphasizes that “students with disabilities to have access to general education curriculum within general education classrooms as the most appropriate method of providing special services within the least restrictive environment” (Karger, 2005, p. 5).

Self-Contained Educational Settings

Emphasizing the need for individualized education, the concept of provided instruction in self-contained educational settings arose out of the assumption that students with disabilities required special teaching techniques, equipment, or facilities that were not feasible in a general education setting (Algozzine, Morsink, Algozzine, 1988.) The creation of a continuum of services by Congress established a legal framework which implied that the general education setting was not appropriate or supportive enough for all students needs. This legal decree reinforced the continued use of self-contained settings for education students with disabilities. Undifferentiated large group instruction is most commonly utilized in general education and few adaptations to meet the needs of students with disabilities occur that require planning and alternative materials. General education teachers are trained to focus predominantly on content and covering required curriculum maps, and have limited knowledge on behavior management and modification. Student monitoring in the general education setting frequently involve brief student check-ins, as opposed to detailed data collection and direct feedback available in a special education setting (Hocutt, 1996).

Students who are identified as having emotional or behavioral disabilities are most likely to be educated in a separate classroom setting. The necessity for separating students with these particular disabilities is again based on the premise that their needs require specialized behavioral modifications unavailable in a general education setting (Furney, Hasazi, Clark-Keefe, & Hartnett, 2003). Bouck demonstrated that students with mild mental impairment
experienced more interactions with both peers and adults in special education settings compared to general education settings (2006). The physical placement of students with disabilities into the general education setting does not assure social inclusion with their peers. This criticism has prompted some educators to advocate for the self contained setting as an environment where students can be accepted and socially included, albeit sans non-disabled peers.

**Inclusion**

Educating students with and without disabilities in the same classroom, commonly referred to as inclusion, has increased in practice since the early 1990’s (Austin, 2001). Proponents of inclusion cite a variety of reasons for advocating this model, including increased student access to grade level curriculum, as well as the opportunity to learn alongside non-disabled peers. The development of appropriate social skills is facilitated by maximizing student interactions with general education peers. Students that are included benefit by increased self-esteem and confidence (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999).

A majority of parents surveyed feel that mainstreming helps their child learn. They believe that the social needs of their children, such as learning to get along with others, are just as important as the academic needs. These skills can be developed in inclusive programs which provide interactions with typically developing students (Johnson & Duffett, 2002).

Providing an inclusive education is a key component to a socially just educational system that allows students to be valued and treated with respect (Carrington & Robinson, 2004). Including students with disabilities provides experiences relevant to the real world, when employment opportunities, housing, and social interactions are not separate for those with various learning needs (Schwartz, 2007).
Various models of inclusion have evolved, including the consultant model, the coaching model, and the teaming or collaborative model. The consultant model refers to a special educator providing consultation services to a general educator. The special education teacher provides recommendations on curriculum and assessment adaptations and modifications. In the coaching model the two teachers share the responsibility of coaching each other in their respected areas of expertise. Finally, in the teaming or collaborative model, the two teachers share the responsibility for planning, executing, and evaluating lessons and student progress. The concept of co-teaching falls under the third model (Austin, 2001).

Student Engagement

Fredericks, McColskey, Meli, Montrosse, and Mooney (2011) reveal that defining the term engagement is difficult due to the wide and varied use of the term. Terms used in assessment instruments include student engagement, school engagement, academic engagement, engaged time, student engaged learning, academic responding, engagement in class, engagement in school work, indicating a lack of specific language and criterion related to engagement.

The broader themes defining engagement are commonly identified across current research. Engagement encompasses a variety of components, including academic engagement (i.e., time on task, academic learning time), cognitive engagement (i.e., self-regulated learner, student responsibility, using learning strategies to complete a task), behavioral engagement (i.e., participation-classroom and extra-curricular, attendance), and psychological engagement (i.e., identification with school, belonging, positive peer relationships (Christenson, 2003).

Academic Engagement.

Academic engagement can be categorized by the student’s progress in completing academic requirements. Homework completion, credits towards graduation, and time on task can
all be considered indicators of levels of academic engagement. Further indicators of academic engagement include student’s ability to plan, task management, and positive academic intentions (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006).

**Cognitive Engagement.**

Cognitive Engagement can be identified as a psychological state in which the learner puts forth significant effort, persistence, and time to achieve. Rotgans and Schmidt (2011) assert that a student’s level of autonomy during a task directly correlates to the level of cognitive engagement. A student that is listening to a lecture is presumed to be far less engaged that a student conducting research on a computer. Group work can be highly cognitively engaging if there are no domineering members to reduce the cognitive engagement of more passive peers. Cognitive engagement can also be qualified by the depth of processing that is occurring. Strategies that create deeper cognitive engagement include paraphrasing, using pictures or diagrams, checking for understanding, and the use of analogies. Conversely activities that contribute to a lower level of cognitive engagement include rote memorization, the use of mnemonics, highlighting and underlining (Harlow, DeBacker, & Crowson, 2011).

**Behavioral Engagement.**

Attendance, suspensions, voluntarily participating in class and extra-curricular participation are all indicators of levels of behavioral engagement (Appleton et al., 2006). Behavioral engagement can be observed by teachers and school personnel. Student’s observable actions, such as paying attention and displaying appropriate student behavior, are indicators of strong behavioral engagement. Students that are frequently absent or involved in the discipline process are exhibiting low levels of behavioral engagement (Dotteter & Lowe, 2010).
Psychological Engagement.

Psychological Engagement has been identified as school attachment (Johnson et al., 2001). It refers to a student's identification with school, sense of belonging, and positive peer relationships (Appleton et al., 2006). Students that exhibit a high level of psychological engagement have a social group they feel a sense of belonging with and consider themselves a part of their classroom and school community. Child-centered, nurturing classroom environments are a component of a high-quality education and are an indicator of psychological engagement (Dotteter & Lowe, 2010).

Role of Student Engagement

Student engagement has been identified as an indicator of future success and achievement. Students with disabilities are more likely to disengage from learning by dropping out of high school and less likely than their general education peers to enroll in adult programs or obtain a GED (Kortering & Braziel, 2002). As these students drop out of school, their opportunities to develop critical skills and knowledge for adulthood are reduced. Finn and Rock (1997) assert that engagement in the classroom and the school community are strong indicators of school achievement and that it is an indicator of achievement that educators may alter, unlike socio-economic status. While dropping out of high school is frequently associated with a specific event and decision, Kortering and Christenson (2009) instead define it as a "gradual disengagement that occurs over many years." Signs of disengagement spanning the categories of behavioral, academic, cognitive and psychological include poor attendance, academic difficulties, behavioral problems, low participation, isolation, failure, and insufficient credits.

Increasing student engagement is a goal for educators attempting to reduce the high school dropout rate. Christenson (2003) recommends that educators look for meaningful ways to
increase school completion by addressing the issue of engagement. Five strategies for engaging students include access to age-appropriate transition assessments, direct links between school-based learning and life, opportunities to control destiny, engagement in non-academic aspects of school, and engagement in classroom learning.

In Goldberg and Ingram’s (2011) study on student engagement in a lower-division biology course, they identify active learning techniques as an instructional strategy that improves student engagement. Group instructional activities designed to increase active engagement resulted in improved final test scores and more exposure to using higher level cognitive skills. Active learning is further linked to increased motivation to learn, which produces desirable outcomes.

For the purpose of this study engagement will be defined as a student’s involvement in their learning environment, encompassing their academic (time on task, academic learning time), cognitive (self-regulated learner, student responsibility, using learning strategies to complete a task), behavioral (classroom participation, extra-curricular involvement, attendance), and psychological participation (identification with school, belonging, positive peer relationships).

Assessing Student Engagement

Accurately measuring student engagement can be a challenging concept to researchers and educators. As stated above, a wide variety of definitions, terms, and indicators have been utilized when dealing with the concept of engagement. Academic and behavioral engagement can more easily be observed and quantified, however cognitive and psychological engagement are more difficult to gauge from external observation and data (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003). A variety of instruments are available to measure student engagement. Three major types of instruments to assess engagement include student self-reports, which typically
consist of students responding to items using specified responses, teacher reports, which are scores assigned to students based on teacher responses and observational measures, which involve direct observation of classroom behavior (Fredericks et al., 2011). There are multiple student responding instruments available at no charge. Most are designed for use in the classroom setting. The teacher reports can be used across subject matters and require the teacher to be very familiar with the students they are rating. Observational measures can be utilized to observe specific student engagement and overall classroom engagement.

Betts, Appleton, Reschly, Christenson, and Hebner (2010) reviewed Student Engagement Instrument, a survey including a series of 56 items designed to target the subgroups of engagement. The instrument was designed based on an extensive literature review and encompasses both cognitive and psychological engagement. Items are scored on a four-point Likert rating scale and can be administered orally or in written format.

Determining levels of engagement and student perceptions of their engagement can also be assessed by student interviews. Kortering and Braziel (2002) interviewed 185 students with identified learning disabilities regarding background, school history, perceptions of school, and future ambitions. Students indicated that they believed the best part of school was socializing with peers, followed by active, interesting and successful classes. Learning was identified as the final component of the best part of school. Participants also responded to the worst parts of school as boring and difficult classes, as well as mean and uncaring educators. They also ranked difficult and mean peers as a major category (Kortering, 2002).

In this study I will be conducting interviews which will address the four components of engagement. A series of open ended questions designed to elicit student responses regarding
their perceptions of engagement will be administered. The students will be interviewed on their perceptions in both general education and self-contained settings.

**Student Perceptions**

The use of student self-reports in assessing engagement is valuable in providing critical input for school reforms and policy (Fredericks et al., 2011). Students’ perceptions are relevant to our educational practices and policies and deserve to have a voice in instructional design (Konings, Brand-Gruwel, van Merrienboer, 2010). The inconsistencies that arise between students and teacher perceptions have undermined the effectiveness of interventions and programs.

If school is about what students know, value, and care about, we need to know who students really are. We need to listen to them, pay attention to what they show us about themselves and their views... Students’ voices help us understand what they need and value as learners. (Dahl, 1995, p. 124)

When students are given the opportunity to plan their own educational activities their investment, commitment, and eventual outcome is improved (Flutter, 2006). The concept of accessing student voice and perspectives to improve upon educational systems, processes, and curriculum has grown tremendously in the past ten years (Fletcher, 1995). Educators cannot afford to ignore students, because students will tell educators what is actually working in their classrooms (Wilson & Corbett 2001). Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve implementation (Levin, 1999).
Chapter 3: Methods

This qualitative teacher action research thesis project explored how students with disabilities perceived their levels of engagement in self-contained and inclusive settings. I conducted the study with students that I was teaching. Conducting research with these students provided the advantage of bringing a sense of trust and confidentiality to the interviews. The students were likely to be more comfortable imparting their feelings and perceptions with a familiar person. The presence of an unknown researcher would have likely trigger uncertainty and reluctance from the participants. Clearly this arrangement had the disadvantage of researcher subjectivity, however as the study is designed to ultimately inform my own practices it requires this level of involvement.

Setting

This teacher action research was conducted at a comprehensive high school campus located in an agricultural community of 50,000 residents. The school has a population of approximately 1,500 students. Seventy-one percent of students are identified as Hispanic or Latino and forty-nine percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch. English language learners account for approximately 30 percent of the student population. This school is the older of two high schools located in the community.

Participants

Four high school students in grades nine through twelve participated in this study. Participants were students receiving special education services, according to their Individual Education Program (IEP), in both general and self-contained settings. All students were within the mild to moderate category, with disabilities including Specific Learning Disability, Speech
and Language Impairment and Other Health Impairment. Participants were selected by identifying students that were placed in both a Special Day Class and general education class with a co-teacher or general education without direct support. Fifteen students that met these criteria were provided the opportunity to participate in the study. A colleague discussed participation in the study with potential participants in the school library. I was not present during this dialogue.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted to obtain student perspectives related to academic, cognitive, behavioral and psychological engagement. These open-ended interviews were based on a protocol to elicit students' perceptions on their engagement in self-contained and general education settings. The interviews were audio recorded and included questions designed to elicit student responses related to the elements of engagement. Interviews were about twenty minutes in length. They were conducted in my classroom during my prep time and after school.

In order to operationalize this concept of student engagement, I looked for evidence of such things as: spending time to complete academic tasks, demonstrating responsibility and the application of strategies, participation and attendance, a sense of belonging, positive peer and teacher relationships, and interest in the course content. The questions in the interview protocol explored the constructs of engagement and presented the participants with the opportunity to voice their perspectives on engagement in their classes (see Appendix A).

Questions were designed to address the critical components of engagement as defined by major research publications. In order to elicit data on the subset of academic engagement, questions such as, "Tell me about what you did in your SDC/ general education class today/yesterday? Is that typical for you in this class or is it unusual?" were asked. To gather data
on cognitive engagement, questions such as, “Tell me about the work you do outside of classes or in Study Skills. How much time do you spend on this work?” The prompt, “Tell me what you like about your SDC/ general education class. Tell me what is more difficult about your SDC/ general education class,” was designed to obtain data related to psychological engagement.

**Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed I transcribed them and began the data analysis. Utilizing Siedman’s (2006) approach to qualitative research analysis, I created an outline to guide my analysis (see Appendix B). The interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. First I read through them all to re familiarize myself with the interviews. Next I highlighted passages that related to the predetermined themes of responsibility, attendance, behavior, classroom participation levels, and relationships and involvement school activities. I also highlighted any other passages that I thought might be significant to the research questions. I then read the interviews again and added comments to these highlighted paragraphs to clarify the meaning and create preliminary finding. Other patterns and themes began to emerge which did not relate to the predetermined themes, yet seemed significant in relation to the research questions. The concepts such as comfort, individualized instruction, and content specific information became evident at this point.

Once the themes had been identified I reflected on the significance of the students’ responses and compared each response to the four subsets of engagement and their definitions. This provided the initial reflection on the relevance of student responses on the study’s research questions. Responses were then grouped by comment tag to facilitate a greater sense of the frequency, relevance, and similarities and differences between passages. Once they were grouped in this manner the findings increased in clarity. The findings were then discussed with colleagues.
at my site, as well as both of my professors at California State Monterey Bay to elicit input and reflections. These conversations guided the process of analyzing the data and provided feedback and recommendations in interpreting the results.
Chapter 4: Findings

The goal of this research was to analyze the perceptions of students with mild to moderate disabilities regarding how actively engaged, both socially and academically, they view themselves in contrasting educational settings — a self-contained setting and a general education setting. The research questions were designed to elicit students’ perceptions of each setting, as well as to compare their perceptions of the two settings. This information is useful for individual teaching practices and for determining appropriate services and special education policy.

Five common themes were identified across the student interviews:

- Students perceived a higher level of comfort in the Special Day Class (SDC) setting.
- Students perceived lower expectations in the SDC setting.
- Students retained more specific content from the general education settings and minimal or no specific content from the SDC settings.
- Students perceived a lack of individualized instruction in the general education setting.
- Students perceived more friendships that extended outside of the school day in the SDC setting.

Level of comfort

Students perceived a higher level of comfort in the Special Day Class (SDC) setting. Students were asked how they felt about themselves in each setting. A majority of students responded that they felt comfortable and a sense of understanding from their teachers in an SDC setting. Students indicated that when they were outside of their comfort range they were not expected to attempt or complete those tasks. One student commented, “I can get things done and not worry about doing something that I am not comfortable doing.” Student responses indicated
that their comfort was related to lowered expectations (finding #2). “I like being in here because sometimes I will get shy of asking someone for help, but it doesn't really matter because no one answers anything right, so I feel like I am more comfortable here than anywhere else,” explained a student. Other students shared similar views of high comfort levels that resulted from lowered expectations.

The teacher shared out some but only if you were comfortable and um he read mine because I told him he could…and he understands us more and if we don’t feel comfortable with something he is okay with it.

None of the students interviewed volunteered words such as comfort, comfortable, or understanding when describing a general education setting. When prompted about their comfort level, most indicated that they were comfortable but did not elaborate on their experience. One student remarked, “It brings my confidence down having to write. I have to do the notes and that’s what brings my confidence down.”

**Implications for engagement.**

Psychological engagement is defined as a sense of belonging and positive peer relationships. This finding indicates that students perceive stronger psychological engagement in a self-contained setting than in a general education environment. Students clearly indicated stronger perceptions of understanding and comfort in SDC than in the general education environment. Comments such as “I am more comfortable here than anywhere else,” reflect that the SDC setting is providing an environment that is meeting their psychological needs for a nurturing environment where they experience a sense of belonging. The multiple times that student volunteered words such as comfort or comfortable when discussing their perceptions of the SDC setting, compared with the complete absence of students volunteering these types of
words when discussing general education is a significant indicator that they are not perceiving
the same level of psychological engagement, be it a sense of belonging or comfort, in the general
education setting.

**Academic Expectations**

Students perceived lower expectations in the SDC setting. Students expressed that they
received homework nightly in their general education class and received minimal homework in
their SDC class. Speaking to their homework load in a general education class, a student
remarked, “I take homework because we get homework a lot so it’s mainly just homework or
notes if I didn’t finish writing them.”

When asked about the amount of homework they complete from their SDC class, most
students responded similarly, “We don’t really get homework. I didn’t get no homework today.”
Another student elaborated on the lack of homework from the SDC class, as well as the lack of
required materials, “To be perfectly honest if I just have those classes than I can go without my
backpack unless I have PE. That is the only reason I bring my backpack.” When asked what was
more difficult about SDC classes one student simply remarked, “I don’t pay that much attention.”

Students discussing SDC settings also commented on limitations in peer academic
abilities and frustration at the lack of responsible student behavior.

For example the other day my group was just not focusing. I was the only one trying to
do work and they were trying to cheat off my paper.... The students they are usually mainly
annoying, well most of them don’t. I prefer to be in a more mature group that helps keep each
other on track instead of having them be distracted on other subjects.

The lower expectations perceived by students in their SDC settings included a lack of
homework and required materials compared to nightly homework in general education settings.
Pacing and attending to the class were perceived to be difficult, as well as frustration with peer behavior.

**Implications for Engagement**

There are multiple implications for engagement related to this finding. Students' perceptions indicate lower levels of academic and cognitive engagement due to reduced time on academic tasks and lessened student responsibilities. The sentiment, “We don’t really get homework,” in response to the SDC setting was consistent across interviews and indicates a lower level of expectations for students to complete academic tasks outside of the school day. It also implies that the teachers are not reinforcing academic learning through the use of homework. Additionally, lower levels of behavioral engagement are evident in student responses related to peer behavior and academic honesty. The student that commented, “the students they are usually mainly annoying,” referring to a group of peers demonstrating off task behavior and cheating, is perceiving a learning environment with low behavioral engagement. This is evident by his report of classroom behavior and observable student actions. There are reduced academic, cognitive, and behavioral engagement levels perceived by students resulting from a lack of homework and inappropriate student behavior.

**Retention of Content.**

Students retained more specific content from the general education settings and minimal or no specific content from the SDC settings. During the course of the interviews students were asked what new information or ideas they recalled from their last SDC and general education class. Overwhelmingly students were unable to articulate a topic, skill, or idea that was covered in their last SDC class. Answers included no response at all, as well as “I don't really remember anything.” One student, when prompted with the question, “Do you feel you are always learning
new ideas and information in your SDC class?” responded “Yeah, so-so. To be perfectly honest probably not.” The most detailed response regarding recent information learned in a SDC setting was, “We were just getting into WWII so it was kind of an introduction so we didn’t exactly learn a thing yet. During the Russian Revolution I learned quite a bit like who was the main enemy in Russia.”

Students' responses to recent information learned in a general education setting were substantially more exact and definitive. “Last class we did cross multiplying and that is on our homework and I understand it,” was the response of one student. Another student, who had responded, “I can't remember what we did,” in response to her SDC class had the following response when recalling her last general education Biology class.

We were doing this DNA lab when he handed us cards… he gave us all a different one and told each of us to find in his words our partners and so we did that and we had to draw one of the DNA strands.

One student in describing his last general education history class, included these specific details,

The Mayan Apocalypse. On the 23rd of December this year we are all going to be thrown into space according to the Mayans because the sun is going to go to the center of our galaxy the milky way galaxy so it’s going to send the earth into a ...it’s going to go from a slanted axis this way to that way.

One student did not remember details regarding the last general education course he attended. His response indicates that his lack of information may have been a result of non-attendance. “She was reviewing some work with students. It was a new subject I wasn’t familiar
with I am pretty sure she explained it more on Tuesday, but I wasn’t here so I completely do not understand the subject.”

The contrast between information retained from the SDC and general education setting is significant. Students provided much more precise and detailed explanations of new ideas and information learned in a general education setting than in a SDC setting. These explanations included content-specific vocabulary and more descriptive answers.

**Implications for Engagement**

This finding indicates stronger academic and cognitive engagement in general education classes and much lower levels in the SDC setting. Responses such as “we didn’t exactly learn a thing yet,” in regards to the SDC setting are clear indications of reduced academic and cognitive engagement. This is reinforced by the degree of content specific vocabulary the same students were able to recall from the general education setting. Comments such as, “We had to draw one of the DNA strands,” and “cross multiplying” demonstrate that students are capable of retaining content information and lesson topics. Their inability to do so when discussing their SDC setting is a warning that the academic and cognitive engagement is compromised in that setting.

**Individualized instruction and accommodations**

Students perceived a lack of individualized instruction and accommodations in the general education setting. When asked what was happening in her SDC class when her time was being well used, which was explained to the student as a time that she felt she was learning and understanding material, a student responded, “In English cause we learn different things, but at the same time they are all based on one thing, but it’s just like in little sections, but he cuts it down.” This reference to accommodations in this student’s SDC English class was the only time a student mentioned receiving any accommodations in either setting. Students did share
perceptions that indicated a lack of accommodations and modifications in their general education setting.

If it was just power points, I would feel that I could do all the gen education system. You know how it is based on tests. I feel like I could pass pretty much all the tests they could give me on that subject if I could just listen to people talk about the power points. That’s what brings my confidence down—having to write. I have to do the notes and that’s what brings my confidence down.

Discussing the support a special education co-teacher provides in his Algebra class, a student acknowledged a lack of specific support and interventions.

When we are doing work and I am trying to figure out what we are doing. She usually taps us on the shoulder and says keep working she doesn’t really ask if we know what we are doing or not.

Another student spoke generally positively of her experience in a general education Algebra class, but added, “Sometimes it does really get hard. But then I just take notes and try to do the best I can.” Echoing these sentiments, this student shared her experience keeping up in her general education class.

It is a lot of work, most of the times it is a lot of notes. I don't like it. Some days we'll get a little bit of notes and other days we'll get tons of notes to write down.

These comments reveal students perceive that they are attempting to keep up with the pace and the demands of the general education setting but are acknowledging it is a struggle to do so. The students do not share any information indicating they are receiving differentiated instruction, accommodations, or modifications to the general education curriculum.
Implications for Engagement

This finding indicates academic and cognitive engagement can be affected in a general education setting when academic tasks are not designed to meet student’s individual needs. Student responses such as “It does really get hard,” and “Most of the times it is a lot of notes. I don't like it,” reflect that the academic tasks provided the students have not been designed with their individual needs in mind, which can result in decreased academic engagement. Students’ perceptions of their time on task and sense of responsibility reveal challenging workloads and pacing. This can imply heightened engagement, but in analyzing comments such as, “That’s what brings my confidence down—having to write. I have to do the notes and that’s what brings my confidence down,” it appears that it was creating a sense of frustration and low self-worth. This result can be counterproductive to academic and cognitive engagement.

Friendships

Students perceived more friendships that extended outside of the school day in the SDC setting. Students were asked about the friendships they had developed in their SDC and general education classes. Their answers indicated that students had developed more friendships in their SDC settings, particularly friendships that included spending time together outside of the school day. Two students responded “no,” when asked if they had friends in their general education class. Both of these students had very different responses when asked about their SDC class. One student answered, “A couple,” and proceeded to name four students. The other student named five students that he considered friends from his SDC class. A student that did indicate having friends in her general education class added, “They are more in class friends.”

Perceptions related to friendships and peer relationships reflected students developing stronger relationships with peers in a SDC setting. Students did not acknowledge significant
friendships in general education and no students named a friend from general education which they spent time with outside of school hours.

**Implications for Engagement**

This finding indicates students’ stronger perceived psychological engagement in the SDC settings. Students were able to name more friends from the SDC setting and few, if any, from the general education setting. The sense of belonging that is developed through peer friendships is clearly stronger for these students in the SDC setting, which directly correlates to psychological engagement. Students perceived more positive peer relationships developing in the SDC settings that contributed to a sense of belonging and extended outside of school hours.

Based on the findings and their implications on engagement, it is evident that students are perceiving higher psychological engagement in the Special Day Class setting, and lower levels of academic and cognitive engagement in the general education setting. Students perceived higher levels of comfort (psychological engagement), yet lower levels of expectations (cognitive/academic engagement) in the Special Day Class Setting. This setting also fostered more significant friendships (psychological engagement) according to students. They perceived the general education setting to have a lack of individualized instruction (academic/cognitive engagement), yet were able to retain more specific content from the general education setting than the SDC setting.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In order to analyze the perceptions of students with mild-to-moderate disabilities regarding how actively engaged, both socially and academically, they view themselves in contrasting educational settings, interviews were conducted with students served in both Special Day Class and general education. Participants were four high school students with mild to moderate disabilities including Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, and Speech and Language Impairment. The findings of this study indicated that students perceived a higher level of comfort and lower expectations in a Special Day Class (SDC) setting. Students retained more specific content from general education settings and minimal or no specific content from SDC settings as well as a lack of individualized instruction in the general education setting. Finally, students perceived more friendships that extended outside of the school day in SDC setting.

Limitations and Implications for Research

Due to the small sample size and scope of this study, there are inherent limitations to the study. Only four students were involved in the study and the students that were involved were those who elected to participate and demonstrated a sense of responsibility by obtaining parental permission and returning required documents. Furthermore the students that participated are the minority at this site; most students with mild to moderate disabilities served in Special Day Class do not participate in general education academics. These students would have been chosen to participate in the general education setting due to factors including higher academic ability, appropriate behavior, and/or strong motivation. Therefore this group of students is not representative of all students with mild to moderate disabilities, as they possess qualities that deemed them more appropriate for the general education setting.
**High comfort and low expectations**

Krashen (1981) states in his "affective filter" theory that the variables of anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence directly relate to language acquisition. The lower the anxiety and higher the motivation and self-confidence, the more successful the student is in acquiring the language. He further explains that decreased anxiety and increased learning opportunities will occur when students are provided small group learning environments. Student responses partially concurred with this as they indicated lower anxiety and a higher comfort level when placed in Special Day Class. The students' experiences did not indicate increased learning or academic engagement in these settings. Conversely, they reported lower expectations and demands in Special Day Class.

Accompanying their increased comfort level, which indicates psychological engagement, is a decrease in academic and cognitive engagement. As Vygotsky (1978) articulated in his Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, students need to be provided the opportunity to reach their learning potential through adult/peer mentoring and scaffolding. When students are judged solely on their present level of performance and provided instruction that does not provide a challenge or opportunity for growth, their academic and cognitive engagement is compromised. As educators seek to fully engage students with mild to moderate disabilities, the Special Day Class setting may not fulfill all types of engagement. Students in this study perceived that they were being provided a safe-haven devoid of the academic challenges and rigor that are necessary for student growth and progress.

Allport’s (1978) in his theory on prejudice warns that when a group is isolated and excluded from the cultural and community norms, the dangers of prejudice escalates and threatens to exacerbate differences. During this research none of the students discussed feelings
of isolation, embarrassment, or sensitivity related to attending their SDC class. As an SDC teacher, my presence as the interviewer may have limited their willingness to vocalize any of these concerns or experiences. Informally, I have had students share stories of humiliation as they were forced to walk to the portable in the back of a parking area because it was the SDC setting. It was common knowledge at their school that this was where the students in special education were taught and therefore it was embarrassing to be seen back there. Furthermore I have witnessed students staying in my classroom well past the bell ringing for lunch. They maintain a patient stance at the door and when enough time has passed that the crowds will have dispersed, they will emerge and hope that they have not been seen. These types of student experiences, while they did not emerge in the research, have emerged with regularity in my classrooms over the past five years. They do impart a warning that we have a system that isolates and segregates students who would prefer to be considered the same as everyone else.

**Strong content and weak individualization**

Students' greater level of specific content recall from the general education environment compared to their self-contained setting reinforces the notion that inclusion provides greater access to grade level standards and content. It is important and alarming to note the absences of clear content topics and subject matter that students recalled from their self-contained settings. As students were able to remember what they were currently learning about in their general education class, they demonstrated that they are capable of retaining this type of information. This corroborates the finding that students are not being provided with an academic challenge and learning experience in the SDC setting.
On the other side, there are weaknesses in the support special education students may be receiving in the general education setting as well. Krashen's (1981) affective filter theory stresses that students need to be provided with situations that reduce anxiety and build learner confidence to optimize progress. Student responses regarding the general education experience do not relay a sense of lowered anxiety and heightened confidence. It is clear from student responses that they are not receiving the individualized services, which are a key component of special education, in the larger general education setting. When a student describes the special education co-teacher as someone who "says keep working. She doesn’t really ask if we know what we are doing or not," a lack of service implementation and specialized support is apparent. This lack of individualization can threaten to undermine student engagement on all levels as students frustration level exceeds their desire to succeed. Furthermore, the lack of tailored support can reduce their psychological engagement as their comfort level is diminished. When a student has low academic, cognitive, and psychological engagement they are going to be more likely to demonstrate behavioral disengagement. This greatly reduced the chance that the student will obtain the skills necessary for success and increases the chance that the student will not graduate from high school.

**Implications for Practice**

As placement is a significant determination for the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team, it is critical that the issue of learner engagement is addressed for students that are placed in SDC settings. While the self-contained setting is providing access to a comfortable and psychologically engaging environment, it is failing to provide students the academic rigor and higher level cognitive engagement that is needed. The psychological engagement they are feeling in this environment may be at a cost, as when they are not in the self-contained setting they may
feel less comfortable and safe. As districts create and maintain SDC settings they need to reflect on the possibility that placing students with mild to moderate disabilities together in small group environments does not assure that their educational needs are met. Grade level content and higher level cognitive practices found in the general education classroom are likely not successfully being modified and taught in these settings, as witnessed by students having limited recollection of recent lessons. Conversely, the placement of students in general education can be merely a physical inclusion, not an academic and social inclusion, if they are failing to receive individualized learning opportunities and social integration. A greater emphasis needs to be placed on creating learning opportunities that provide for maximum learner engagement. More attention needs to be given to creating an engaging environment in a general education classroom with teachers providing students with mild to moderate disabilities the opportunity to work with peer tutors, in collaborative groups, and with scaffolded assignments.

Conclusion

As students with mild to moderate disabilities are at an increased risk of not completing high school, it is imperative to analyze and evaluate the programs and policies that are dictating their instruction. Using the construct of engagement as an indicator of success, students' voices can provide us with invaluable insight into the realm of learner engagement. Their reflections challenge educators to redefine special education services to engage, challenge, and respect the needs of high school students with mild to moderate disabilities. This necessitates programmatic and instructional changes to ensure that these students are justly provided a free and appropriate education.
References


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Academic engagement (time on task, academic learning time)

Specific Questions: (Followed by: Give me an example.)

- Tell me about what you did in your SDC/gen ed class today/yesterday? Is that typical for you in this class or is it unusual?
- Do you get the help that you need in your SDC/gen ed class? Who helps you? Describe how they have helped you.
- Do you feel that you are always learning new information and ideas in your SDC/gen ed class? Tell me about the last new idea/information you learned in that class.
- Is your time well used in your SDC/gen ed class? Describe what you are doing in your SDC/gen ed class when you feel your time is/ is not being well used.

Cognitive engagement (self-regulated learner, student responsibility, using learning strategies to complete a task)

Specific Questions:

- How do you feel about yourself in x class?
- What do you bring with you to x class?
- Tell me what you do if you are unsure of the next thing to do in x class.
- Have you ever approached any of your teachers about class work or homework? And if so what happened?
- Tell me about the work you do outside of classes or in Study Skills. How much time do you spend on this work?
Behavioral engagement (classroom participation, extra-curricular involvement, attendance)

Specific Questions:

- Do you participate in your SDC/gen ed class? Tell me the ways you participate in your SDC/gen ed class.
- Do you arrive to school on time? Tell me how your attendance is in your SDC/gen ed class.
- Are you at school every day? Tell me what you do when you are not in school.
- How many referral have you received in your SDC/gen ed class? Tell me about the last time that you received a referral.
- Have you received any Saturday schools or on campus suspensions for attendance? How many have you received?

Psychological engagement (identification with school, belonging, positive peer relationships)

Specific Questions:

- Tell me what you like about your SDC/gen ed class. Tell me what is more difficult about your SDC/gen ed class.
- Are there students in your SDC/gen ed class that you would consider your friends? Which students? Do you spend time outside of school with these friends? Tell me about what you do.
- What activities have you attended afterschool or on weekends? Did you attend with friends? Which friends?
Appendix B: Siedman Notes

Making/Analyzing Thematic Connections

1. Transcribe the interview into written words
2. Mark with [brackets] the interesting passages...this judgment may be "the most important ingredient the researcher brings to the study"
   - Respond to: conflict (within and between people), hopes, processes, frustrations, resolutions, isolation, community...issues of class, ethnicity, gender, hierarchy, power
3. Code the bracketed passages but keep labels tentative
4. Label each passage with a notation system that will keep its original place in the transcript
5. File excerpts into computer files named the assigned category
6. Reread all files
7. Do NOT read with a set of predetermined themes.
8. Repetition of themes across passages calls attention.
9. Some excerpts will connect to the literature
10. Do NOT ignore contradictory passages.

Interpreting the Material

1. The categorized themes cannot speak for themselves. (see #2)
2. The researcher must ask themselves what they have learned from doing the interviews, studying the transcripts, marking and labeling, etc...What connective threads are there among the experiences of the participants they interviewed? How do they understand and explain these connections? What do they understand now that they did not understand before they began the interviews?
3. When you have a passage that is important but the category is unclear write a memorandum (how they were picked, what they meant to you) and the category may become clear.
4. Write a memorandum about each category you have developed and you will discover what is important in them individually and relatively.
5. Last stage of interpretation: Asks the researcher what meaning they have made of their work. (How they came to the research, what their research experience was like, and what it means to them. How do they understand it, make sense of it and see connections in it?)
6. This may result in proposing connections among events, structures, roles, and social forces

Appendix C: Data
Excerpts of student comments related to comfort in an SHe setting. (Finding #1)

I like being in here because sometimes I will get shy of asking someone for help but it doesn't really matter because no one answers anything right so I feel like I am more comfortable here than anywhere else.

The teacher shared out some but only if you were comfortable and um he read mine because I told him he could… he understands us more and if we don’t feel comfortable with something he is ok with it.

I feel comfortable but I think if it was at more of a personal speed but still at that level it would be easier.

I can get things done and not worry about doing something that I am not comfortable doing.

Excerpts of student comments related to expectations in a SDe setting. (Finding #2)

To be perfectly honest if! just have those classes than I can go without my backpack unless I have PE. That is the only reason I bring my backpack.

No not really, we don’t get homework

We don’t really get homework. I didn’t get no homework today

I don't pay that much attention.

Because it moves at such a slow pace that it just kind of goes on and on and on and you just kind of get lost and you don’t really feel what’s going on and you just kind of block it out as some point, especially with the block schedule.

Excerpts of student comments related to expectations in a general education setting. (Finding #2)

I take homework because we get homework a lot so it’s mainly just homework or notes if I didn’t finish writing them

In some of my classes I get work to do it's pretty easy every other day for about 30 minutes.

Whatever homework I am assigned whatever I can do I do the easy work first and then the hard work. (How much time does it take?) Quite a while mainly in study skills the whole time, 5 hours a week.
### Excerpts of student comments related to specific content in SDC setting. (Finding #3)

**Yeah, so-so. To be perfectly honest probably not. Because it moves at such a slow pace that it just kind of goes on and on and on and you just kind of get lost and you don’t really feel what’s going on and you just kind of block it out as some point, especially with the block schedule.**

### Excerpts of student comments related to specific content in general education setting. (Finding #3)

**The Mayan Appocolypse. On the 23rd of December this year we are all going to be thrown into space according to the Mayans because the sun is going to go to the center of our galaxy the milky way galaxy so it’s going to send the earth into a ...it’s going to go from a slanted axis this way to that way.**

### Excerpts of student comments related to lack of individualized instruction in general education setting. (Finding #4)

**If it was just powerpoints I would feel that I could do all the gen education system, you know how it is based on tests I feel like I could pass pretty much all the tests they could give me on that subject if I could just listen to people talk about the powerpoints. That’s what brings my confidence down having to write I have to do the notes and that’s what brings my confidence down.**
It is a lot of work, most of the times it is a lot of notes. I don't like it.

When we are doing work and I am trying to figure out what we are doing she usually taps us on the shoulder and says keep working she doesn’t really ask if we know what we are doing or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excerpts of student comments related to friendships in SDC setting. (Finding #5)</th>
<th>Excerpts of student comments related to friendships in general education setting. (Finding #5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marisol, Ilene, Alex, JoJo</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Mannys, Mario, Savanna, Erica. They are mature but sometimes they will get a little off track that is ok though.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, everybody in my classes because I have known them since freshman year</td>
<td>Maurissa, Jackie, Jon, Saphire…they are more in class friends.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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