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

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Let's Talk About It:

Special Education Communication Barriers with General Education Teachers

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### **Abstract**

The focus of this Capstone Project is the communication barriers between Special Education and General Education educators. The importance of this issue is the lack of time given in order for all subject departments to have efficient time to collaborate during the school year. The negative effects on teachers are then reflected on students academic achievements. Unfortunately, this has issue has been around for decades yet no effective methods have been put in place. Methods that have been considered are more teacher training, peer-mediated instruction, and time allotment between Special Education and General Education teachers. Data was collected from interviews conducted with one administrator, two special education teachers and four general education teachers. Major themes began to emerge from analysis of data collected that lead to three action options. These actions will improve some of the antecedent procedures that could be more effective if they were properly implemented.

*Keywords:* Special Education, General Education, Co-Teaching, Collaboration, Individualized Education Program, High School

### Let's Talk About It:

#### Special Education Communication Barriers with General Education Teachers

##### **Setting the Stage**

I was first exposed to the many issues inside of special education during my service learning experience at CSUMB. I was in “Mr. L’s” first grade general education classroom. This class had about 25 students, including a few students who could have benefited from being in special education, either full time or part time. There was one boy in Mr. L’s class named Jacob who needed more help than Mr. L or I could offer him at the time. Jacob was born over 2 months premature, leaving him developmentally delayed both physically, socially, and academically. Jacob was also an English Language Learner (ELL), which only contributed to his struggles. For a couple hours each day Jacob would go to a teacher who specialized in helping ELL students, but for the rest of the day Jacob was with Mr. L. Mr. L had been a teacher for ten years, but had no formal training in teaching students with disabilities.

When it came to getting through to Jacob, he was at a loss. Jacob could not do the same activities as the rest of the class, and was a constant distraction to the other students. Mr. L and I just did our best to keep Jacob occupied doing whatever he wanted to do, as long as he wasn’t taking away from the learning of the other students. It was frustrating to know that he needed more help than we were able to give him, but unfortunately as a student I did not have the training in teaching students with disabilities, and Mr. L didn’t either, at least not at the level Jacob was at. Teaching credential programs only have one or two special education classes at best. At CSUMB there is only one special education class, and it only covers the basics. Even though more and more special education students are being put into general education

classrooms, teachers are not being trained to support them and create a classroom that is inclusive. Luckily, Jacob managed to get into a school that had a program more suitable to his needs because his parents pushed hard to get him more help. However, he was only one of many students with disabilities that I met during my service learning who I felt the school and I were unable to reach.

While immersing myself into this research paper, I learned many things about special education that I was taught while on my journey to be a teacher. Knowing how to communicate with other teachers who can offer me support and being able to effectively co-teach are skills that will help guide me in creating an inclusive classroom when I am a teacher. However, these are unfortunately not skills that are taught to teachers in training. I wish I had been able to teach the students I met, like Jacob, but I am hopeful that the experiences I have had while writing this paper will guide me in educating my future students.

### **Literature Synthesis and Integration**

In regards to the inclusion of special education (SPED) students in general education (Gen-ED) classroom, teachers often have mixed feelings. Some teachers view it as a positive step in offering all children equal education, and others believe that special education teachers should be the ones left to teach students who have disabilities. Those who view inclusivity negatively often think that it's the special education teachers who chose the career path to work specifically with children who have disabilities, so they should be the only ones teaching those students. General education teachers have little to no training in serving special education students, so having an inclusive classroom can be a scary and unfamiliar learning experience. Without having the training that special educators have, can you blame the general educators for

not wanting to take the new role of teaching both Gen-ED and SPED students? America's Education system is littered with problems, but it seems as though special education and the students in it face the most difficulties. As classrooms change become more inclusive, teachers will need to change as well.

### **What is the Issue?**

Since 1975, when congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which is now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children with disabilities have had access to a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for each child. Before IDEA, students with disabilities were excluded from a public education, resulting in them being put in institutions or sometimes private schools. According to the U.S. Department of Special Education Programs, students with disabilities “In 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students, including children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded.” Because of IDEA classrooms today are more diverse than ever. It is becoming more mainstream for students with disabilities to be in a general education classroom if it is the least restrictive environment for that particular student.

Figure 1 shows the different kind of settings children with disabilities can be placed in, with level 1 being the most inclusive and level 7 being the least inclusive. Most students with disabilities are in levels 1-5 in public schools. As classrooms become more inclusive, teachers are needing to take on the

responsibility of being able to understand and support students of all disabilities and backgrounds. Even to teachers who welcome SPED students with open arms, teaching them can be a very difficult task. It can take a lot of training and skill to know how to adequately teach students with disabilities and adapt their classroom to being inclusive-friendly. Because of these difficulties, some general educators believe that SPED students should be taught only by special educators. "Special educators were a breed apart . . . and it was inappropriate to expect teachers lacking in such preparations and inclination to participate in educating students in wheelchairs or students who have difficulty learning academics (Stainback & Stainback, 1995, p. 19)." Despite some teachers being against it, SPED students have continued to be integrated into Gen-ED classrooms because of IDEA and the drive to place SPED students into the least restrictive environment.

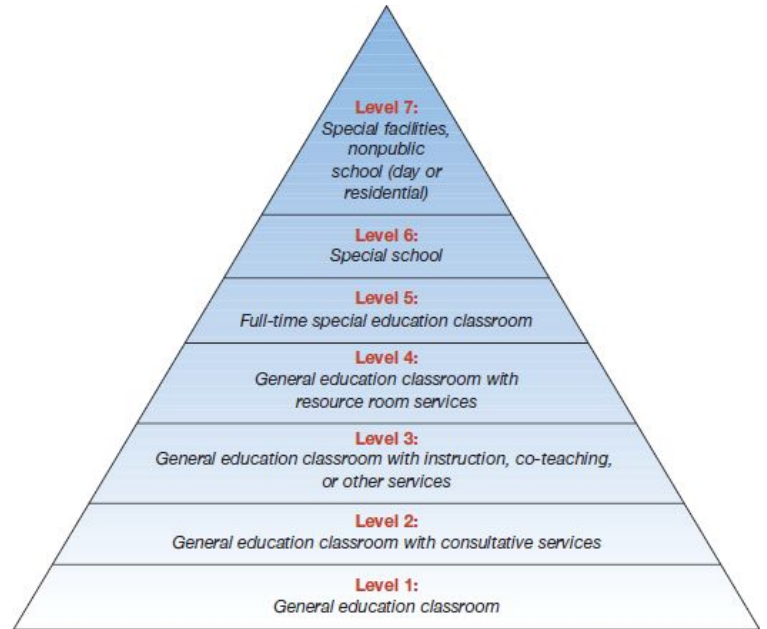


Figure 1. (Pastropierri & Scruggs, 2018)

### Why Is It An Issue?

During the school day teachers are expected to create lesson plans, prepare those lessons, keep the classroom organized, communicate with parents, and of course, teach. Finding the time

to communicate and collaborate with other teachers can be extremely difficult. Special education (SPED) teachers in particular can find themselves particularly under resourced, isolated, and stressed. A lack of teacher collaboration can not only stress and hurt teachers, but also their students who lose out on the benefits of this collaboration. As students being diagnosed with autism increases, it is becoming even more important that teachers have the skills to educate these students and adapt to their special needs. Because it is becoming more desirable for students with autism and other disabilities to be in an inclusive classroom, general ed. teachers will need to have these skills as well. In a study looking into the experiences of over 7,000 children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the Interactive Autism Network found that a majority of students with ASD were in public schools in a general education classroom for either part of or for the whole school day. According to the Center for Disease and Control (2014) , the number of children identified with ASD is increasing, and is now estimated to be 1 out of every 68. As students being diagnosed with autism increases, it is becoming even more important that teachers have the skills to educate these students and adapt to their special needs. Because it is becoming more desirable for students with autism and other disabilities to be in an inclusive classroom, general ed. teachers will need to have these skills as well. However, it can be unrealistic for a general education teacher to be expected to be an expert on meeting the needs of children who have a variety of disabilities. According to a 2007 study, the average general education teacher takes about 1.5 SPED classes, and the average special ed. teacher takes one. (Cameron & Cook, 2007) When teachers are unprepared to teach the different levels of students in their classrooms, it can be a frustrating experience for everyone involved, and students who need the most help will fall even further behind.



**What Should Be Done?**

Teachers collaborating with other teachers offer a great opportunity to teach and learn from each other, however, sometimes this does not happen. There are a variety of different ways that general education and special education teachers can work together to meet the needs of a diverse classroom. With team-teaching, the two teachers work as equals in lesson planning and teaching their students. This method of co-teaching can be particularly helpful for classrooms that have students that need one-on-one help, as one teacher can deliver instructions to the rest of the class while the other teacher assists the struggling learners. This is similar to a method where one teacher teaches, and another assists and/or observes. The observing teacher can take note of what does and does not work for certain students, and then the teachers can work together to make their lessons more suitable for the types of learners they have. During station teaching, students are divided into groups and rotate stations. Teachers play to their strengths and teach the station that they are the most knowledgeable about. During parallel teaching a class is divided into two or more groups and depending on the students learning styles. Each group is taught the same lesson, just in a different way. In alternative teaching one teachers gives a lesson to a larger group, while the second teacher takes a smaller group of students who are struggling or need more attention. All of these co-teaching methods are great ways for general ed and special ed teachers to learn from each other. Every teacher brings their own unique abilities and strengths to the classroom, so by collaborating teachers can share valuable information. Reported benefits of co-teaching include improved instruction, increased enthusiasm for teaching, more communication, and more opportunities to generalize learned skills to the general education class environment (Pastropierri & Scruggs, 2018) “When communication is effective, several common

elements are in place: active listening, depersonalizing situations, identifying common goals and solutions, and monitoring progress to achieve those goals.” Considering the limited amount of time that teachers have during their work day for their many responsibilities, schools must support their teachers and give them the sufficient time and training to collaborate with each other. Training in communicating effectively can be useful to help general ed and special ed teachers collaborate more effectively.

School districts will need to take the initiative to provide more training opportunities for both special and general education teachers. This could be training in co-teaching, teaching special education students, or training in other teaching strategies that would be helpful in learning an inclusive classroom. An example of this is instructional scaffolding, which is based off of Psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s theory of scaffolding. Instructional scaffolding is when a teacher supports a students learning by tailoring the process to the unique needs of the student in order for that student to meet their learning goals. The teacher must make sure that the tasks given to the student is manageable and not too difficult or easy. If the task is too easy or redundant this might prevent the student from processing the information and making any connections to existing knowledge (Janneke van de Pol, 2015). The same issue may occur if the task is too difficult. If the task is at the right learning level for the student, the student will be able to process the information and make connections to existing knowledge and long term memory. The scaffolding method can be very beneficial to students who are in special education, but the teacher may need additional training provided by the school to learn about the method and implement it into their classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Making our classrooms more inclusive is a step forward in our education system. Students who are disabled can benefit greatly from being in a successful inclusive classroom. However, this change can be a very difficult and stressful one for teachers who lack the training to deal with the different kinds of obstacles students with disabilities can bring to a classroom. In order to reach their unique needs, schools will have to allocate more time and resources to helping teachers collaborate and work with each other.

## **Method<sup>1</sup>**

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. This 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, so 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.

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

## SECTION IV: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

### Context

This research took place at Bayside Sharks High School<sup>2</sup>. This school is in the Monterey Peninsula Unified school district located in California. It is located near Cannery Row. Monterey is a small livable city 115 miles south of San Francisco with 27,810 residents and 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 2016-2017 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 70 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 3 High School Special Education teachers, 2 General Education teachers and 1 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. Doe.** A white male in his thirties who has a social studies and special education

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

credential. Currently he has been teaching special education for seven years in a high school setting. Mr. Doe received an honorarium for working with our group the entire semester. Mr. Doe 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 reads students “passports” because he feels he gives all his students extra accommodations if they are general or in special education.

**Mrs. Pow.** A white female teacher who teaches sports medicine, health careers, and anatomy. . Mrs. Pow was willing to be interviewed even though she did not teach have any special education students. Mrs. Pow 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. Admin.** A administrator for about three years Mr. Admin welcomed our team into his school. Mr. Admin wanted both the General and Special Education Departments to integrate and work together. Mr. Admin felt his hands were tied due to the union not allowing him to mandate integration and collaboration times between the two departments.

**Mrs. Brown.** A white female who has been teaching Special Education for ten years. Mrs. Brown was selected because of her experience working with Special and General Education teachers and students. Mrs. Brown also had previous experience working as an instructional aide before she received her Special Education credential. She also will sit in on classes when behavioral issues arise with their students who have disabilities.

**Mr. Roman.** Mr. Roman is a social studies who has been there for ten years. He works alongside many students with students with IEPs. He had a class where about half the class was students with disabilities. He has been assigned to co-teaching for the past two years. He has seen what good can come from it and issues that can arise when they is not appropriate communication strategies.

**Researchers**

**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 subjects 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 an 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 an ex-special ed. students qualifies me to carry out this project. I have also done service learning in a special ed. classes that giving me experience in this line of work and topic. By doing serve learning it gave me 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 ed 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 ed. students in a general education setting. I have seen how challenging these students can sometime be and how important it is for the general ed. and special ed. 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 Sped teachers can affect the the SPED students in the class?

(Do you have examples benefited your or te student)

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?

### **Procedure**

We invited 60 teachers via email but only our participants replied. 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.

### **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 burden 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.

The *cost* of this option would be renting a honorarium fees range from \$250 for a 2-hour workshop up to \$700 for a full day session; Materials fees are \$10-20/person. It should be taken into consideration that this would **payment** would only occur once of year. All departments would benefit from a better understanding of co-teaching ( Jolla, 2018) .

The *time* needed at beginning of the school year in August and at the return of the new year in January.

The *reach* would impact stakeholder just 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.**

Based off of the interviews conducted at Bayside Sharks High School, it was found that teachers were unhappy with the communication efforts in place. Communication consisted of mainly emails which often went unread or unreplied. Teachers did not have time to meet on their own, and the school did not set aside time for them. The teachers admitted that they rarely met in

person because they simply did not have the time and support of the school. In order to collaborate effectively and efficiently, teachers, administrators, and the school must be prepared to commit their time, resources, support, and efforts. Collaborating must be made a priority by everyone involved in order to be successful. "Planning sessions were viewed as priorities by both teachers; they refused to let other competing responsibilities interfere with their planning sessions" (Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land, 1996, p. 260). The Walter-Thomas study found many positive outcomes from successful collaboration efforts between teachers, including a more efficient classroom, and increased academic and social performance in their students. Ideally teacher would be able to collaborate weekly, but we suggest giving special educators and general educators the time to collaborate once a month during wednesday collaboration times that are already scheduled by the school. Normally, teachers within the same departments meet on wednesdays to collaborate, but our action would offer the special educators and general educators who have mutual special education students the time to collaborate.

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 principle 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.**

The teachers interviewed at Bayside Sharks High School claimed to be frustrated with the amount of effort that the students put into advocating for themselves and being independent. The students who were interviewed admitted that they did not self-advocate a lot of the time and that they did not know how to. Many students had the shared experience of not speaking up for themselves when they were not receiving their accommodations. Students also shared that they did not understand what an IEP was or what was in their own IEP. In a study looking into special education students who completed college, it was found that the most successful of these students had strong self-advocacy skills. The study found, “A common thread amongst the successful SWDs in this study was an ability to understand their disability and advocate for the accommodations they needed to successfully engage in their education (Barber, 2012).” To help the special education students at Bayside High be more successful while in high school and also in college we came up with the idea to give students a passport, or IEP at a glance, to help them self-advocate. Teachers at Bayside High already had a passport but it was not being put to use. A teacher interviewed admitted to not ever looking at them. We decided a passport would be most beneficial for the student to have as it could serve as a reminder of what is in their IEP and it would also be much less complicated than the entire IEP for the student to understand.

The *cost* to create or print the passport would be free to special education teachers. The only cost that might be include is if teachers are interested in laminating the form. Printing of the form can be done on school ground for no extra cost to the teachers.

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 and at the return of the new year in January. The lesson given to students could take about one to two days during their special education class session. Usually teachers return to school before the students and they can have each passport printed out before the return of the students. The paraprofessionals can help print and laminate the students 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 with this option because would benefit all Special Education students and General Education teachers. 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 students accomodation.

### **Recommendation**

After analyzing three potential options, it is highly recommended to have student passports or IEP at a glance implemented in high schools. Passports to be the first to take place, this will influence students to advocate for themselves which will have a domino effect in hopes

to open general education to the idea of more collaborative efforts such as, co-teaching and integration of different departments.

### **Concession**

We are not recommending co-teaching at the lead action. Although, co-teaching provides teachers with the insight to collaborating on lessons plans. Special Education teachers may step in to give advice on how a lesson may be manipulated in order to assist student with disabilities. It provides a reach to all stakeholders involved with this topic. Integration of different departments weekly meetings will also enhance the communication and decrease barriers. This also effect with time management because staff meeting are already arranged throughout the school year.

### **Limitation(s)**

While co-teaching and integration of different departments strongly creates a bridge for communication between the two department, passports lack this. Passports may only create a form for students to advocate for themselves but way also decrease the time special education and general education teachers communication with one another. The students would be the ones who would to most of the communication. Students may also not use the passport effective or appropriate. The limitation that students may also lose this form repeatedly if not taken care of. Or students just never use it making it impractical.

### **Potential negative outcomes**

Potential negative outcomes of the passport when used effectively is the chance of increasing bias and stereotype. Bullying can be an outcome when passport somehow gets in the hand of the wrong student. Students may fear using it because of this outcome.

### **Conclusions**

Creating a structured academic for students support system is a priority in schools to ensure students are being advocated for. To be able to do that for students with learning difference and/or disabilities will require extra steps or resources. The IEP at a glance was chosen due to time and cost limits at the time which were main reasons for continuing with the option. Yet the passport system will enforce the right to accommodation for student such as for time in regular classrooms and the support of a tutorial support class. These accommodations on paper while ensure that all stakeholders are reached and pleased with the support the students are receiving. With the increased involvement within these recommendations students will be advocated for during class time and outside of class despite its limitations and negative outcomes.

### **Action Documentation and Critical Reflection**

The initial focus issue was to increase the communication and collaboration efforts between special education and general education teachers. Through our interviews with teachers from both departments and the school Principal, we found that the communication going on was minimal and usually consisted of emails, rather than face-to-face meetings. Many teachers blamed their co-workers for either not being responsive or being unhelpful, but the teachers put

most blame on the administration and school districts. The teachers did not feel as though they had the right training and support. Mrs. Pow, who was a relatively new teacher expressed fear over having special education students in her classes because she had no training in special education. A majority of the teachers interviewed shared this fear, even the ones who had been teaching for many years. The teachers interviewed also claimed to be frustrated with the students who did not speak up for themselves and take their education into their own hands. This led to us conducting a survey with the special education students using Kahoot, an online tool used by teachers to conduct quizzes and surveys in a fun game format. Students answered our questions independently on their electronic device. We asked them questions about their experiences in special education, their IEP, their accommodations, and how they self advocate. We found that the students had a lot of confusion around what special education is and what it entails. After realizing that the students did not have a clear understanding of what was being asked, we cut our surveys with them short. We decided that in order to get accurate feedback from them, we would have to help them understand more about special education, their IEP, and their student rights. We created a 15-20 minute powerpoint that converted special

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student # \_\_\_\_\_  
 Case Manager: \_\_\_\_\_

**About Me:**

**Class Accommodations:**

**Testing Accommodations:**



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(Figure 2)

education topics they needed to know in order to answer our questions. This powerpoint was presented by their teacher, Mr. Doe. After the presentation we conducted the survey again to the same students and using the same questions. The feedback we got from the students was that there was a lot of confusion regarding what was in their own IEP's and what kind of rights they had as students. This confusion led to them to feel uncomfortable and unsure of how to advocate for themselves. To conclude our survey with the students, we asked them if they had any interest in having a personal passport that they would have, instead of just the teachers having. The students responded positively to this idea.

Due to the time and money restrictions we faced, we were unable to make actions one and two a reality. We felt that pursuing action 3 would be the best course of action to help those involved in special education, particularly the students, whos education should always be the number one priority. After deciding to pursue action 3, we created a passport for the special education department to give their students. This passport (Figure 2) was even more simplified than the version that teachers were given, to ensure that the students would understand it and use it to advocate for themselves. The passport included a section for the student to share information about themselves that they deemed necessary for their teachers to know. It also had sections for students to list their classroom and testing accommodations so that they would not forget their accommodations, and that could also present it to their teacher in case they have forgotten what the student's accommodations are by right of the IDEA law.

Unexpectedly, our research lead us to find a method to help students advocate for themselves, which strayed from our initial goal of wanting to better communication between the

special education and general education teachers. Through our interactions with the students and teachers, we realized that the students were the bridge to help special education and general education teachers close the gap in the communication barriers. By giving the students more information on the topic of IEPs and accommodations it relieved the teachers of many responsibilities which could also give them more time to work collaborate with each other in regards to their special education students. It was a big shock to hear that high school students still did not understand their IEP after being the special education system for so many years. At age 18 student can sign a form that will exempt them from attending meeting which is harmful for their futures if they go on to high education and leave without grasping the knowledge of their IEPs. Students who are adept at advocating for themselves are more likely to complete college and be more competitive when finding a job outside of college (Barber, 2012). Because of this unexpected discovery we would have changed the first time we conducted the student survey. This would have also led to asking the teachers different question that were more student understand based question.

Because the passports were given at the very end of the semester, we have not received feedback yet on the outcome of the passports. When presented with the passports, the students and teacher were enthusiastic about the idea. Mr. Doe helped us with process of designing the passport, and he and the students liked how simple and easy the passport was.

We would have liked to have know how students felt about their accommodations from the beginning. It would have also been helpful to have know the extent of their knowledge of this topic.. But now the important steps are to continue to teach to students about IEP and the correct way for them to advocate for themselves in a positive and effect manner.

### **Critical Reflection**

Though our experiences writing this paper, researching the topic, and interviewing the students and teachers, we realized how important it is to keep the students in mind at all times when it comes to education. When we originally approached this topic, we thought it was all about the teachers and what they can do better. When interviewing the students we realized that this is their education on the line, and there's no reason why they shouldn't step up and be a part of the problem-solving process. We never planned on interviewing or surveying the students at the beginning of our research, but now it seems like a no brainer. When working towards change in special education and also education as a whole, it should be taken into consideration what the students thoughts are and what they can possibly do to ignite change.

### **Synthesis and Integration**

MLO 1 was met during my service learning classes at CSUMB, such as LS 277s, and LS 398s. I learned from the professors and from my service learning teachers the responsibilities of being a teacher and class management skills. MLO 2 was met in LS 277, LS 394, and SPED 560, which were all classes which focused on diversity and celebrated it. In LS 277 I learned about the different educational systems around the world and how different their values and ideas are to our own. In LS 394 I learned about multicultural children's literature and how important it is to have a variety of different cultures in a classroom, and how minorities are impacted when they are being represented in the course materials. In SPED 560 I learned about creating a welcoming inclusive classroom that was accepting of students of different backgrounds and abilities. I also learned a lot about students with disabilities through this research paper. I was able to do more

in-depth research of topics that were covered in SPED 560. MLO 4 was covered a lot in LS 398, where we learned about how social changes have affected our education, and the types of discriminations students have faced and still do face. Through my service learning experiences I was about to work with students of many different backgrounds. Through this research paper I was able to work with teachers and students to create social change for special education students who often do not receive an adequate education. MLO 5 was met through the wide variety of courses I have had to take as a part of the Liberal Studies major, and through my Human Development minor. These classes varied from geology, to elementary mathematics, to art history. These classes gave me knowledge in many different subject areas, and supported me in taking and passing the CBEST on my first try.

My next steps in my education is to begin my student teaching as part of the ITEP program at CSUMB which is an accelerated program in getting my teaching credentials. I feel as though the classes I have taken will support me in my next set of classes, and through my student teaching. I believe that the best learning experiences come from being in the classroom, and because of this my service learning and student teaching experiences will be invaluable when I finally begin my role as a teacher. Even when I become a teacher, I expect that I will continue to learn a lot and take as many training courses that are offered to me. I hope that soon I will be able to pursue my masters degree work towards becoming and even more knowledgeable and qualified teacher for my future students.



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