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Instructional Teaching Strategies for Special Education Students
with Moderate to Severe
Disability

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Senior Capstone
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Abstract

There is a plethora of beneficial teaching strategies for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Like each disability, each student is very unique with regards to their educational needs within the classroom. The purpose of this senior capstone is to explore the most effective teaching strategies that could be implemented for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Through the use of literature review, interviews with a professor of special education, three high school teachers, and a school psychologist, the result findings revealed that inclusion is one of the best teaching strategies that could be used to benefit students with moderate to severe disabilities coupled with the use of veteran mentors as resources.

Introduction

In regards to students with moderate to severe disabilities, there are certain teaching strategies that benefit the students more than others. Instructional teaching strategies are the cornerstone to running a special education classroom efficiently and effectively. According to the North Monterey County high school psychologist who is a part of the special education assessment team, the eligibility for students with moderate to severe disabilities is determined by data collected throughout their school years. The determination is made from the multidisciplinary team which may include any or all of the following individuals: special education teacher, school psychologist, speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, deaf and hard of hearing specialist, vision specialist, and adaptive physical education specialist, depending on the suspected disability or disabilities of the student (K. Bishop, personal communication, March 17, 2023). The data collected by these specialists over a period of time as well as multidisciplinary team meetings are what opens the door for students with moderate to severe special needs and get those students the help they deserve. Based on the assessments results, the multidisciplinary team will look at the student's cognitive, academic, personal and physical health, adaptive, social, emotional, behavioral, and motor skill development, and then make a determination about eligibility as a team (K. Bishop, personal communication, March 17, 2023).

There are no specific learning deficiencies that define a student with moderate to severe disabilities. As every student is different and unique, so are the disabilities in regards to the severity that would impact the students learning ability. According to the school psychologist, when considering a moderate to severe special day class for students, the goal is to find the least restrictive environment in which a student can achieve adequate educational benefits. Students

with moderate to severe disabilities should be in an environment where they can make progress toward challenging goals based on their individual skill level (K. Bishop, personal communication, March 17, 2023). The least restrictive environment means that kids who get special education should be in the classroom with other kids as much as possible. The least restrictive environment is not a place, it is a principle that guides that child's education throughout their schooling years (Morin, 2023).

There are beneficial teaching strategies that produce positive outcomes in regards to the students, there are also teaching strategies that have a negative impact on the students ability to learn. Beneficial teaching strategies not only help the students find success within the classroom but also out in the community as active members of society. Community based instruction is one of those beneficial teaching strategies that helps the students understand how to be an active member within the community. Isolation is one of the negative teaching strategies that does not help the student learn to work with fellow classmates as well as peer assisted learners. According to a study done by Tremblay (2013) in the *Journal of Research in Special Education Needs*, "The impact of the two instructional models on student achievement demonstrated that compared with students in special education, the students in the inclusive setting noticeably progressed on the external evaluations in reading/writing between the beginning and the end of grade 1 and grade 2" (pp. 251-258). Inclusion demonstrates one of the many instructional teaching strategies that benefit students with disabilities in special education.

Under the Individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA), students with suspected disabilities must be evaluated at no cost to the families. To qualify for IDEA services, a child must have a disability and need special education to make progress in school (Morin, 2023). There are 13 eligibility categories under IDEA that include specific learning disability, speech

and language impairment, other health impairment, emotional disturbance, autism, intellectual disability, visual impairment, deafness, hard of hearing, orthopedic impairment, multiple disabilities, deaf-blind, traumatic brain injury, (K. Bishop, personal communication March 17, 2023). These disabilities do not define a student with moderate to severe disabilities as the severities also play a factor in the student's ability to learn and comprehend information. IDEA covers students with disabilities from birth to high school graduation or to the age of 21, whichever may come first (Morin, 2023). IDEA places two big responsibilities on states and their public schools including free appropriate public education (FAPE) to kids with disabilities and these kids must learn side by side with peers called the least restrictive environment (LRE), (Morin, 2023). Under Federal law, FAPE requires schools to provide education to meet the unique needs of a child that may have a disability in a free and public school setting. IDEA, FAPE, and LRE are laws put in place to put our students with moderate to severe disabilities in a position to succeed inside and outside of the classroom.

Literature Review

There are numerous teaching strategies that benefit the way students in special education classrooms learn and comprehend the material at hand. It is not just enough to deliver the appropriate content to the student but the student also needs to be in the appropriate environment to maximize their learning experience. The Individuals with disabilities education act is the federal law that supports both special education students and their parents and protects their right to a free, and most importantly, appropriate, public education. It is not enough to use beneficial teaching strategies such as inclusion or small group instruction, progress monitoring is a key element that will allow you to look back on the students' learning and make sure that they are

moving in the right direction. Under IDEA you will also find LRE or least restrictive environment. This is one of the factors that plays a role in finding a classroom that best suits the students' needs and goals. Morrin (2023) states that the Least restrictive environment isn't a place, it's a principle that guides a child's education program.

Teaching special education can be tricky because each student is very unique and group lessons need to be modified to reach full classroom participation from all students and staff. One of the most important aspects of teaching special education is making all content accessible while being respectful and mindful of the students' needs, stated M. Gallegos, a moderate to severe special education teacher of nine years. He also goes on to talk about how he believes curriculum such as community-based learning, work/life skills, and recreational activities are some of the more effective teaching strategies he prefers but ultimately it is the collaborations that includes student, parents, and teacher. (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20 2023).

In order for teachers to put out the best learning experiences for the students they need to have resources where they can obtain information regarding the needs of their students. One of the best resources is an experienced teacher that has been teaching students with moderate to severe learning disabilities for a number of years. A good mentor can guide a teacher in the right direction toward beneficial teaching strategies. There are also a number of websites and agencies that can offer insight regarding evidence -based practice that deal in successful strategies. California autism professional training and information network or CAPTAIN is a multiagency network developed to support the understanding and use of evidence-based practices for individuals on the spectrum across California. Resources such as these are where special education teachers can brainstorm and obtain ideas to apply in the classroom.

Beneficial teaching strategies

Self-monitoring is a teaching strategy that gives the student a sense of responsibility in regards to their behavior inside and outside of the classroom. Research shows positive results that students with moderate to severe disabilities can self-monitor and also give them a sense of fulfillment as they record their own data, under supervision of a paraprofessional or instructional aid. A student-directed learning strategy enhances student motivation by transferring ownership of data collection from teacher to student and, by doing so, permits the student to assess and evaluate his or her own performance (Agran, et al, 2005 p.11). Giving the students more responsibility puts them in the driver's seat and helps include them in their learning process. According to a study done by Gilberts et al Ag (2001), with *The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, "Students in this study reported that they felt that they were a part of their general education classroom and indicated that they were aware of an increase in their classroom participation" (pp.25-36). Self-monitoring can translate to the students ability to follow directions as they have the ability to identify and record if they are on task or not. This will give students with moderate to severe disabilities a better understanding of what is right and what is wrong.

Co-teaching is also another beneficial strategy that can be used to help students find success. Co-teaching was developed to help support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Co-teaching has four main components: (1) having two certified educators, usually one general education teacher and one special education teacher, (2) instruction delivered by both teachers, (3) a heterogeneous group of students, (4) and a single classroom where students with disabilities are taught with their peers without disabilities (Hang

& Rabren, 2008). Other than students, teachers have also expressed their positive perceptions of co-teaching as they believe that their students receive more attention regarding instruction and lessons. In a study done by Hang and Rabren, (2009) with *remedial and special education*, “all participants groups, for example, showed agreement with statements that students with disabilities increased their self-confidence, learned more, had sufficient support, and exhibited better behaviors in co-taught classrooms (pp. 259-268). In a survey done in Mr. Seymour’s moderate to severe special day class, every student said they prefer to participate in the general education classrooms than have lectures within their own special day classroom (Seymour March 2023). Students will continually find more success if they are put in an environment of their preferences.

Inclusion is another beneficial teaching strategy that allows students to maximize their potential within the classroom. In a study done by Downing (2007) with the *Research & Practice for persons with severe disabilities*, “...respondents felt strongly that students with moderate-severe disabilities needed to be with their classmates without disabilities” (p.22). “ In an inclusion program they’re [students without disabilities] getting the same education, but along with that education... they’re getting interactions with people who have differences, and you can’t get that in a regular program” (Downing, 2007, p.22). Students with moderate to severe disabilities not only learn the general education curriculum but they also learn to see how students in the general education setting are patient, quiet, and raise their hand when in need of assistance. A skilled and knowledgeable staff will help prepare students for success within a general education classroom. Some schools use peer assisted learning along with paraprofessionals to assist students with moderate to severe disabilities. Peer assisted learning

allows general education students to help students with moderate to severe disabilities on daily tasks such as class work or assignments.

Community based instruction is another beneficial teaching strategy that students with moderate to severe disabilities can find success in. According to M. Gallegos, a high school moderate to severe teacher at North Monterey County says, community based instruction and life skills are important for the student to prepare for a life after high school (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20, 2023). Community based instruction can be anything from teaching the students how to use money at a restaurant or teaching the students how to use public transportation in the event they need to get to their future job. Moderate to severe teachers are responsible for embedding core content with life skills such as students that have the ability to read, can read a cookbook and learn to prepare a meal. Students that are learning mathematics can learn to count with money and deal with change in an adaptive mathematics lesson. “Many students identified as having moderate and severe disabilities benefit from a curriculum that includes instruction on the functional skills that they will need to successfully transition to adulthood” (Collins et al, 2010 p.52). Core content is extremely important but students need to be prepared for life after schooling age.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act & Least Restrictive Environment

The Individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA) is the nation’s special education law that allows schools to evaluate students that are thought to have disabilities at no cost to the families. Through IDEA, schools must provide free appropriate public education (FAPE) to kids with disabilities and these kids must learn in the least restrictive environment (LRE) as much as possible (Morin, 2023). The goal of IDEA is to help students with disabilities make progress in

school by putting them in the best position to succeed. Through IDEA, students with disabilities must be offered special education related services such as speech or occupational therapy.

LRE is a principle that guides students in special education and puts them in classes with the general education population as much as possible (Morin, 2023). Students with special education services can be put in general education classrooms under the supervision of a paraprofessional or instruction aid. Depending on the students ability and the safety of everyone will depict how often that student is put in other classes with their peers. The students individualized education program will describe if and why a student is being placed outside of a general education classroom (Morin. 2023).

Teacher and Student Perspectives

In an interview done with three high school moderate to severe special education teachers, they found that inclusive education and community based instruction are some of the most beneficial teaching strategies one can use for their students. M. Gallegos, a special education teacher of nine years, mentioned how self-care and work-related skills are the cornerstones to his classroom (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20, 2023). Gallegos also goes on to say that collaboration with the parents is also key in finding what aspects are beneficial for the student in the parent's eyes as well (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20, 2023).

Leo Seymour, a special education teacher of two years, commented on how his students respond to an inclusive environment the best, especially when it comes to peer delivered instruction (L. Seymour, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Students tend to be more involved when they feel like they are a part of something. In a survey done in Mr. Seymour's

moderate to severe special day class, every student (11 students in total) stated that they would rather go to their elective classes than be in their original classroom. Mrs. Medina, a moderate to severe special education teacher of three years, mentioned how her students need a co-teaching environment in order for them to get the attention they need (K. Medina, personal communication, March 29, 2023).

Resources for teaching strategies

There are many resources teachers can use to find beneficial teaching strategies to implement for their students with disabilities. One of the best resources is having a good mentor that has been there before, a mentor with real life experience can offer insight to what has worked for them and what has not. A key point to remember is all students learn in a different way and what works best for one student may not work for another student.

According to doctor Josh Harrower, the special education program coordinator at California State University, Monterey Bay, states that there are specific agencies that define successful teaching strategies within an assembled panel of experts in the field of special education that discuss and dissect articles (J. Harrower, personal communication, March 22, 2023). Dr Harrower goes on to list a few helpful resources that can assist with beneficial teaching strategies such as the *What Works Clearinghouse*, which is managed by the Institute of Education Sciences and is conducted under contract with several leading firms with expertise in education, research methodology, and the dissemination of education research (Schneider, 2023). Dr. Harrower also mentions the California Autism Professional Training and Information Network, CAPTAIN is a multiagency network developed to support the understanding and use of evidence based practices for individuals on the autism spectrum across California (England,

2023). Matt Gallegos also mentions that with moderate to severe education, there is no one size fits all approach and that you always have to be willing to adapt and overcome new situations periodically (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20, 2023). There may be beneficial teaching strategies that work for some students that may not work for another and the use of paraprofessionals within a moderate to severe special day class is a great way to maximize potential.

Methods and Procedures

At the beginning of the semester, I knew I wanted my senior capstone research project to be focused around special education. It was not until I met with Dr. Thao that I refined and focused my topic on instructional teaching strategies for special education students with moderate to severe disabilities. As I wrote my prospectus, it defined and outlined how I was going to go about with my hours of topic related research. To seek the answers to my research questions, I found and utilized peer-reviewed scholarly articles, journal articles, scholarly literature, data gained through surveys, and interviews with experienced professionals. The library research was rather smooth as there are many articles regarding moderate to severe instructional teaching strategies. The perspectives of the three special education teachers I interviewed helped me gain insight toward what teaching strategies they preferred and what was actually effective within the classroom. Dr. Harrower gave me a plethora of information regarding resources that teachers could use to help find beneficial teaching strategies and implement within their classrooms.

I thought the best way to discover instructional teaching strategies for students with moderate to severe disabilities was to ask currently employed moderate to severe teachers about

which strategies work best for them. Going one step further I thought that it would be beneficial to ask the students of these moderate to severe special education teachers what their favorite way to receive instruction was and the results were as I expected. For the students that were able to communicate under their own power, the majority of the students from each class said that they preferred to learn in an inclusive environment or under the instruction from a peer assisted learner. Some students even mentioned how they felt like they were really a part of the general education classroom setting. The teacher answers were similar to the students in regards to an inclusive environment. Interviewing the moderate to severe special education teachers almost seemed repetitive as they all pushed for their students to be in the least restrictive environment as much as possible. Being a paraprofessional for the last seven years or so I can attest to the success I see when we take the students to their general education electives rather than staying in their special day classroom.

One of the most informative professionals I had the chance to interview was the high school psychologist specialist who gave me a lot of vital information regarding my primary and secondary research questions. She discussed how students with moderate to severe disabilities are diagnosed as well as the thirteen eligibility categories that define a student with moderate to severe disabilities. The biggest thing I took from her was that it really does take a village to give a student with disabilities the education that they deserve. It was a combination of special education teachers, school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, deaf and hard of hearing teachers, vision specialists, adaptive PE specialists, and most importantly the students' parents or guardians.

Dr. Harrower and myself met via zoom and discussed the tools and resources teachers can use to find beneficial teaching strategies. Dr. Harrower gave me a plethora of resources about

professionals that live to find quality education for our students with special needs. He also mentioned how these professionals constantly review articles and reveal their finds on what works and what does not. After he gave me a list of resources, Dr. Harrower also talked about progress monitoring tools and data collection in regards to making sure the students are constantly taking steps toward their end goals.

I was very grateful for being a paraprofessional for so many years as I have learned a lot about the world of special education as well as what teaching strategies worked for me and which one did not. This background gave me a great starting point for where I wanted to go with my research. It also introduced me to all the professionals and students that I interviewed and surveyed throughout my senior capstone research project.

Results and Discussion

Through my research, my results indicated that there are many environments where students with moderate to severe disabilities can find success. Anywhere from peer assisted learning to the least restrictive environment, students learn at different paces as well as different places. Matt Gallegos put it best when he stated that in regards to moderate to severe disabilities, there is no one size fits all method when it comes to the students' learning (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20, 2023). Leo Seymour also added that there are a lot of resources available but the majority of useful material is found through trial and error, especially in your second year of teaching special education (L. Seymour, personal communication, March 29, 2023).

A topic then continually emerged throughout my research was the ability to put students with moderate to severe disabilities in an inclusive environment. Current teachers and past

studies all indicated how that is one of the best environments you can put your student in so that they are in a position to succeed inside and outside of the classroom setting. Students with moderate to severe disabilities not only learn the curriculum being taught in that inclusive environment, with assistance from paraprofessionals, but they also learn proper etiquette on how to behave and operate in a somewhat crowded environment. Of the 18 students surveyed, within three different moderate to severe special education classrooms, over eighty percent of the students said they prefer to learn outside of the classroom rather than inside (Student Survey, Appendix 2).

From my perspective as a paraprofessional for the last seven years, students with moderate to severe disabilities are more willing to put forth an effort and follow direction when placed in an inclusive environment. This is the part of the day that the students seem to look forward to the most. Self-monitoring in another teaching strategy that students enjoy partaking in as they get to give themselves a grade on how their performance was. If they give themselves a bad grade, it is the teacher or paraprofessional's job to make sure they understand why and what they can do to be better for next time. A student-directed learning strategy enhances student motivation by transferring ownership of data collection from teacher to student and, by doing so, permits the student to assess and evaluate his or her own performance (Agran et al, 2005, p.11).

Co-teaching is another beneficial teaching strategy that benefits the whole class as well as the students with moderate to severe disabilities. The more teachers and paraprofessionals within any given classroom give the students more opportunities to get the help they desire and deserve. According to a study done by Hang (2008) with *sage journals*, a student examination revealed that students who were taught by effective co-teaching teams indicated their overall satisfaction with their co-taught instruction practice and although not all students understood why two

teachers were in one classroom, they did report that they received more academic assistance and had fewer behavior related problems within the co-taught environment (Hang, 2008).

Co-teaching lightens the load of the teachers as well as giving each and every student the opportunity and attention they deserve.

Community based instruction (CBI) is a form of teaching outside of the classroom, it puts the students out in the community in real world situations with paraprofessionals and allows them to work on their social skills and problem solving abilities. The job of a moderate to severe special education teacher is to combine core content with functional skills in the student's curriculum. According to a study done by Collins et al (2010), with *Sage Journals*, one of the two approaches begins with functional skill instruction and embeds core content, whereas the other begins with core content instruction and adds functional information; both approaches employ direct systematic instructional procedures that are based on a large research base of effective and efficient practices for teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities (Collinset al, 2010). According to M. Gallegos, community based instruction, life skills, and work skills are all a part of the process of getting these students ready for adulthood (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20, 2023).

Recommendations

Based on my research on teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities, I can recommend the strategies that are listed in the above section. Teaching strategies such as inclusion, co-teaching, self-monitoring, and peer assisted learning are all strategies that benefit the student's learning experience in a positive learning environment. There is no supplement for

experience and there is no one size fits all approach, students with moderate to severe disabilities need to be in their least restrictive environment to get the most out of their education.

I recommend reviewing some evidence based practices and expert reviewed articles in the subject of special education. Dr. Harrower recommends resources such as: what works clearinghouse, national autism center, CEC council for exceptional children, and the California autism professional training and information network (J. Harrower, personal communication, March 22, 2023). M. Gallegos also mentioned how he is in communication with Barbara Boyd, a state level transition advocate (M. Gallegos, personal communication, March 20, 2023). There is a plethora of resources out there for teaching strategies for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Conclusion

For my research, there are teaching strategies that repeatedly come up when talking about moderate to severe students with disabilities. Inclusion paired with the least restrictive environment are some of the top teaching strategies that continuously appear when researching beneficial teaching strategies for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Not only do teachers prefer the inclusive environment but the students enjoy it as well. If the students are in a positive inclusive classroom, then it will be that much easier for them to find success. According to Downing (2010), “Students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities may perform longer and with greater attention to the task if their interests are embedded into activities,” (p. 21). Students that are put into an environment of their liking will produce positive educational outcomes.

Every student is unique and there is not one disability that defines a student's ability to learn. Students with moderate to severe disabilities should be in an environment where they can make progress toward challenging goals based on their individual skill level (K. Bishop, personal communication, March 17, 2023). Beneficial teaching strategies not only help the students out within the classroom but the integration of community based instruction also help prepare them for life after schooling age.

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Appendix 1. (A)

Interview Questions for Dr. Harrower,
Professor and Interim Chair
Department of Education and Leadership

1. How do you define an effective teaching strategy compared to a non-effective teaching strategy?
2. What progress monitoring tools should teachers use to monitor growth in their students to ensure the teaching strategies are effective?
3. Are there resources for teachers for teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities?

Appendix 1. (B)

Interview questions for three Special Education Teachers with Students With Moderate to Severe Disabilities.

1. How many years have you been teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities?
2. What instructional teaching strategies do you use that you find most effective?
e.g. small group instruction, community based instruction, independent or assisted work
3. What teaching strategies do your students respond best to?
4. Where do you obtain resources for teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities?

Appendix 1. (C)

Informational questions for school psychologists as part of the special education assessment team.

1. How are students with moderate to severe disabilities diagnosed at schools?
2. What learning deficiencies define a student with moderate to severe disabilities?
3. What are the 13 eligibility categories that define a student with moderate to severe disabilities?

Appendix 2

Anonymous Moderate to Severe Student Survey Questions

1. Would you prefer to spend more time in your (inclusive) elective classroom?
Yes No (83% yes)
2. Do you feel like you learn more in your (inclusive) elective classroom?
Yes No (88% yes)
3. Do you enjoy your CBI based field trips?
yes No (100% yes)
4. Do you enjoy when the PALS (peer assisted learning services) help with your class work?
Yes No (100% yes)
5. Do you think the extra teachers (paraprofessionals, co-teachers, and service providers) help you learn during each lesson?
Yes No (100% yes)