Creating Acceptance and Awareness of Mild Student Disabilities through Teacher Preparation

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Creating Awareness and Acceptance of Mild Student Disabilities through Teacher Preparation

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LS 400/01

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Abstract

General education classrooms are changing to become more inclusive for students with mild disabilities. However, teachers are not always provided with the necessary communication tools to help these atypical students integrate effectively within the classroom. The objective of this capstone project is to help teachers appropriately discuss disabilities in the classroom as well as in the community. We addressed this matter through the creation and implementation of an educational brochure for teachers coupled with the instruction of hands-on learning centers about disabilities to collegiate future teachers. Through these efforts we provided educators/staff throughout Monterey Peninsula Unified School District and local institutions that work with students, information about how to answer student questions about disabilities, helpful teaching tips, and descriptions of the hands-on learning centers. All educators and adults working with children should be provided with this helpful information in order to foster accepting and informative classroom environments for all students.

Keywords: mild disabilities, inclusion, teacher preparation
Meeting of Liberal Studies MLOs

The Liberal Studies B.A. major at California State University, Monterey Bay has a set of five major learning outcomes (MLOs). In order for these outcomes to be met, Liberal Studies course work collectively addresses all of them. Throughout my four years here, I can truthfully state I have mastered all five MLOs through my educational and service learning experiences.

The first MLO is enumerated “Developing Educator.” Within this MLO, students will be exposed to and discuss the responsibilities, roles, attitudes, and skills that should be demonstrated by a public school teacher in the state of California. Additionally, early pedagogical foundations will become established as well as the opportunity for students to apply educational frameworks in elementary school classrooms. I completed this MLO via a number of courses including LS 298 and LS 300. In LS 298 (Intro. to Public Education), we learned of the foundations of education including school funding, school makeup, and the government’s role in education. This class also had a service learning component where I worked in kindergarten and third grade classrooms; I was able to reflect on these field experiences during class meetings as well. During LS 300 (Major Proseminar), we were introduced to material regarding Common Core State Standards, educational equity, and types of learning assessments. We used critical thinking to delve into these broad topics during group discussions, debates, and analyses. All of these classroom activities fostered my comprehension of what a teacher’s role entails and developed my general pedagogical viewpoints.

The second MLO is called “Diversity and Multicultural Scholar.” It lists that students will wrestle with diversity and multiculturalism while applying these theoretical perspectives to their educational repertoire. Moreover, students will examine his/her identity, socialization, and societal institution influences on their life experiences. I was able to address this MLO in the
courses LS 394 and LS 398. In LS 394 (Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults),
we explored multicultural literature and themes while simultaneously engaging in critical
thinking discourse about how these themes are incorporated within children and young adult
texts. We also discussed how educators can select meaningful multicultural literature and ways
to implement it within the classroom. Moreover, through written assignments we were required
to reflect on our own multicultural influences growing up and how those have influenced our
current views on multicultural issues. In LS 398 (Sociocultural Foundations of Multicultural
Education), the content revolved around sociocultural foundations of education including critical
historical milestones, how to characterize schools, and ways in which underlying values
influence educational practices. Both of these courses allowed me to reflect on the classroom
content in local elementary school classrooms. Additionally, these experiences equipped me with
the skills to analyze how themes of diversity and multiculturalism exist within education as well
as how critical they are for effective instruction.

The third MLO is “Innovative Technology Practitioner,” which requires students to use
various technological tools in order to collaborate, design, investigate, and cultivate new ideas in
an educational setting. Additionally, students will have the chance to enrich their educational
practices by incorporating technology into teacher instruction. A course I took for my Human
Development Minor, under the umbrella of the the Liberal Studies Department, was HDEV 342
(Human Development Technology and Media). This course curriculum largely took place in an
online format, which related to the course’s already present theme of technology. We used
Google Docs to create discussion lead handouts, PowerPoints for official presentations,
WordPress to create an online blog about course readings, and used scholarly search engines to
gather empirical research pieces. Mastery of these technological resources was necessary to
complete these class assignments correctly and added to my educational wealth of technological teaching tools. In turn, we as students constructed and led classroom discussions using said technology to do so. In this way we modeled the integration of technology into the class’s pedagogy allowing us to envision how technology can be used for education development and enhancement.

The fourth MLO is “Social Justice Collaborator” which enumerates that students combine class subject material, application of such content, and field experiences to strengthen one’s teaching pedagogy when it comes to equality and social justice issues. Students will also work with stakeholders in order to advocate for societal issues within the educational realm as well as the community. This MLO was met in many courses I have taken including ones I have previously mentioned: LS 298, LS 300, LS 394, and LS 398. In all of these courses, I was provided with opportunities to deliberate on equality within education, ways to advocate and introduce societal issues to students within classrooms, and how to assess values that may shape schools and teacher practices. However, I feel I was able to ultimately incorporate all of these skills in taking LS 400: Capstone. Capstone has allowed me to choose a foundational education issue I am passionate about and devise an action plan to help remediate and advocate for said issue. In researching and implementing my action plan, in a hands-on way, I have had the opportunity to work with a multitude of stakeholders in the education field while conversing on how to enhance effective teacher pedagogy when it comes to equality and social justice.

The fifth MLO “Subject Matter Generalist,” states students will showcase mastery of general education subject material in order to equip oneself to effectively teach in a public school classroom in the state of California. The courses Math 308/309 (Elementary Mathematics) and LS 233 (Arts in the School and Community), as well as many other general education classes,
met this MLO requirement. All of these courses provided me with access and education to information regarding biological science, earth science, California history, world geography, art in the schools, physical education instruction, math for elementary education, physics, and human communication through writing and reading of texts. With this wide range of subject material at my fingertips, I have received a broad educational foundation that I will utilize in my future classroom. The combination of all of these courses also prepared me to take and pass the multiple subjects tests for California’s Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET) and California’s Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) in order to start my teacher credential program in Spring 2016. With my passing scores of the CSET and CBEST, it is evident that my CSUMB coursework has well versed me in the subjects taught in California public school classrooms.

Throughout my courses, capstone, fieldwork, and skill application experiences at CSUMB I have met all of the five MLOs for the Liberal Studies B.A. major successfully. My work here has ultimately strengthened my communication skills, written work, critical thinking abilities, pedagogical techniques, and much more. Upon completion of these outcomes, I feel I am extremely prepared to follow through with my teacher credential program in the coming year and eventually teach in an elementary school in the state of California.
Prospectus/Introduction

My capstone project addresses how teachers can best discuss the topic of mild student disabilities within their classrooms. Furthermore, it suggests ways in which teachers can integrate hands-on learning centers into their curriculum that promote understanding of various disabilities prevalent throughout modern society.

Education regarding student disabilities is becoming a much more pertinent issue in the coming years. This is due to the circumstance of increased mainstreaming of students who have mild disabilities. Typical children have growing questions upon interactions with atypical children as there have been increasing numbers of interactions taking place. However, a teacher-initiated appropriate discussion of this topic is not always occurring in public schools. This could be due to any number of reasons including a lack of resources for teachers about how to begin such a conversation, not deeming the discussion a priority, and/or teachers who are unaware of their students’ questions. Nevertheless, this issue is clearly present in schools meaning that teachers and administrators should be well versed in order to promote acceptance and awareness of atypical students in the public school system.

This educational theme relates to me personally because my nine-year old brother was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome the summer before he entered kindergarten. He is high functioning on the autism spectrum and has been mainstreamed in a public school classroom since his diagnosis. As a future educator, I cannot help but notice the absence of deliberation about atypical children in the classroom, and made disability awareness my priority when I began my capstone project. My future career as a teacher, coupled with my love for my brother and his well-being, make this a topic that is very close to my heart. Children in his class know that he is different, but not why. While he is nine years old now, I know that as he ages children in his
classes will become less and less tolerant of these differences that make him the amazing little boy that he is. I believe that early discussion of disabilities will work to create an accepting environment for all students who are atypical. This phenomenon is not improving by staying silent. Teachers should be supplied with the proper materials for creating welcoming social environments for all students.

In addressing this issue there were a myriad of project formats for me to consider. One option could have been kick starting learning centers in a local elementary school for one day in an effort to create awareness of mild disabilities. Or, I could have advised teachers in an oral format about how to address the topic of disabilities with his/her students. Nonetheless, I decided to approach the issue by creating a brochure with crucial information for adults about how to discuss mild disabilities with students while also generating hands-on learning centers in a college teacher education classroom. This last option ensures that the education outreach I provide will last longer than a one-day event and spread farther than one elementary school and one group of teachers. I chose this format because it is geared towards teacher preparation, which I feel as a future teacher will reach many more students than any other method.

This topic is addressed two-fold, first of all with a brochure containing information about student disabilities in the United States, frequently asked questions by students, and how teachers can appropriately answer such questions. This brochure is then presented at a Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) board meeting with the goal of having the brochure distributed to teachers and administrators throughout the district as well as available electronically for parents to view. The action component of the project takes place in a teacher education classroom at CSUMB. In this classroom, six hands-on learning centers are set up and completed by the college students. Each center has an activity about a different disability that
allows the participator to envision what life is like for a child with that disability. The effectiveness of the learning centers is measured by means of a survey distributed to the class, one before and one after the activity. Descriptions of the learning center activities will be included in the brochure for teachers to implement in their own classrooms.

Information regarding appropriate teacher responses to student questions is explored by looking into previous success stories, teacher accounts, and reliable special and general education resources. Empirical research and historical information is collected by means of reputable articles from journals, magazines, books, etc. These sources generate background information in order to investigate what research has already been conducted on this topic. A survey was distributed to the college teacher education class. This survey asked a select group of future teachers what they already know about disability education, what they would like to learn, if they feel prepared to talk to students about disabilities, and if they find hands-on activities to be a valuable learning methodology. The survey distributed after the activities asks what they have learned, how effective it was, what they would have changed about the activities, and how they will incorporate these learning center activities into their future classrooms. All of these sources culminate in producing evidence of the topic’s background, the project’s experimental process, and how the action plan of this capstone has benefitted the education field of our local community.
Literature Review/Synthesis

The Issue

An inclusion classroom is one where typical students are educated alongside atypical students, also referred to as mainstreaming. Inclusion classrooms are becoming more and more common in the public school system in the United States. Currently, about 37% of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) spend the majority of their day in the general education classroom while 3 out of 5 students with learning disabilities are mainstreamed in the general education classroom (Cooke, Miller, Test, & White, 2003). Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education (2014) has gathered data from the school years between 1990 and 2013 indicating that students 6 - 21 years of age covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) spent more time in general education classrooms. More specifically, students who spent 80% or more of their time in these classrooms increased from 33 to 61%, while those spending 40-79% and less than 40% decreased by 36 to 20% and 25 to 14% respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). All in all, it is evident that inclusion is becoming much more widespread as atypical and typical students are interacting more frequently in general education classrooms.
However, just because this phenomenon is occurring does not mean that typical students know how to respond in appropriate ways to their atypical peers. Researchers have identified that atypical students in general education classrooms often are rejected by their peers and are unable to form friendly relationships with classmates (Cooke et al., 2003). Children who feel excluded socially “experience adverse physical, mental and social consequences such as depression, anxiety and low self-esteem” (Lindsay & Edwards, 2013, p. 624). Therefore, social relationships need to be nurtured to help atypical students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance to improve one’s overall development and life experiences. Research has shown that disability awareness in the classroom has the opportunity to strengthen acceptance, positive attitudes, and accurate knowledge of mild disabilities (Lindsay & Edwards, 2013). In a 2001 study, former atypical students (now adults) shared their previous feelings of isolation in the classroom setting due to
the stigma of receiving special education supports. Consequently, these case studies had difficulty cultivating friendships and felt the need to hide their disabilities in order to integrate successfully into the community (Ferri, 2001). It is evident that the combination of atypical and typical students in one classroom requires adaptations in order to benefit the classroom experience of all students.

Some educators point out the benefits of inclusion not only for the atypical child, but for typical children as well. A student who has the opportunity to interact or assist a student possessing a disability with kindness and respect allows him/her to demonstrate maturity and acceptance of those different from themselves (Kashef, 2009). However, other sources disagree in that inclusion does not fully benefit all students. In a study about inclusion classrooms, it was found that, overall, teachers do not adjust their instructional practices for typical and atypical students, but keep their strategies the same regardless if a student exhibits a learning disability (McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager, & Lee, 1993). These differing viewpoints on the effectiveness of inclusion classrooms are still up for debate. Nevertheless the occurrence of inclusion classroom settings is steadily increasing and strategies for easing this transition need to be addressed.

**Historical Background and Standards**

Education civil rights, with regards to student education, have been through several milestones in the past forty years. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), initially called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, was reworked in 1990 and again in 2004 in the hopes of strengthening public education’s ability to provide atypical children with the same educational opportunities as typical children. This act specifically
pertains to children ages 3 - 21 that have one of the thirteen “educational handicapping conditions” and are in public or private schools in the United States (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). IDEA states that “children with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education and that each child's education will be planned and monitored with an individualized education program or an individualized family service plan” (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010, p. 387), this is referred to as Free Appropriate Public Education, commonly referred to as FAPE (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Through this legislation, atypical students and their guardians are promised to receive continuous evaluations, access to meetings/paperwork, and be involved in the planning of student transitions (e.g. helping to pick their student’s teacher). As well as these personal supports, there is also monetary support provided to states and local districts allocated to any supplementary special education costs (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Another legislative piece that addresses student disabilities is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which bans discrimination of disabilities within federal funded activities and programs. This law does not provide monetary disbursements, but does withdraw money from programs that do not adhere to this law. A student who has a mental or physical disability, that significantly impacts his/her life activities, qualifies for services under Section 504. All students who receive support due to IDEA will automatically be eligible for Section 504, but not visa versa.

The Americans with Disabilities (ADA), established in 1990, is another significant piece of legislation regarding disabilities that safeguards against discrimination, it protects people participating in life activities that are made difficult due to their disability. Learning is considered to be a life activity, so those included in the IDEA umbrella are again covered under the ADA (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Through all of these legal processes over the years, it is
evident that disabilities within the education realm have evolved to protect atypical students from discrimination as well as ensure they are receiving an adequate educational experience. While these legislation pieces do have an impact overall, classroom standards also have a daily affect on a student’s educational interactions.

Educational standards have reflected the importance of social interactions when it comes to increasing the effectiveness of school achievement. In 2001, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Commission (INTASC) as well as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) both articulate the necessity of social development in the classroom. They ascertain that teacher attentiveness and collaboration with special education instructors are required to promote the ideals of valuing diversity and encouraging amicable relationships among all students (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). With the transition of educational standards from No Child Left Behind to the Common Core State Standards, this teacher collaboration component is incredibly critical. Special and general education teachers can discuss how this standards shift impacts their teaching goals and lesson plans with their atypical students. On a global scale, the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child states that each child “should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community,” reflecting the necessity of harmonious peer relationships (Lindsay & Edwards, 2013, p. 624).

Disability Discourse and Inclusion Methods

While specifics regarding teacher reactions and diction vary only slightly, many reputable sources concur that the one aspect of disability discourse that is crucial is to be open about disabilities, while educators encourage insightful student questions/responses. Treating the topic
of disabilities as taboo perpetuates the stigma that a person with a disability is “damaged,” “not like the other kids,” or an “outcast.” To combat these negative stereotypes, open communication about student differences allows all students to comprehend how others may deviate from individuals they have previously encountered (Kashef, 2009).

In order to respond to student inquiries, educators are recommended to positively highlight atypical students’ successes as well as challenges. First of all, a teacher can start by being blunt about what a child struggles with, for example he/she has a hard time communicating with people around them. However, it is advisable to follow up by pointing out the aptness he/she does possess. Furthermore, examples can be given regarding how he/she receives support for said individual/disability; for example, a hearing aid helps a student to hear better. Teachers can also mention how every person is born differently, each person has different interests and we do not all look the same. A person with a disability may have specific obstacles to face, but other than that they are just like everyone else (Kashef, 2009). If students have questions that an educator does not have direct answers to, it is helpful to state that he/she will look into the answer and get back to the student or if they have the opportunity, the teacher and student should research the question together (Rogers, 2015).

The National Youth Leadership Network in conjunction with Kids as Self Advocates (2006) outlines what types of language are deemed as “respectful disability language.” Terms that educators use may seem benign, but there are various phrases that when used have the ability to hurt the feelings of atypical students. As part of cultivating an accepting, welcoming classroom environment refraining from outdated language is one of the ways to ensure respect and awareness of atypical students’ feelings. Teachers can utilize this language as well as
encourage students to refrain from outdated language. An example would be to use the term “accessible” instead of “disabled/handicapped” when referring to public accommodations. These coalitions outline examples of common terminology used when discussing disabilities, as well as inappropriate and appropriate word choices, a table based on this resource is displayed below (NYLN and KASA, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISABILITY</th>
<th>OUTDATED LANGUAGE</th>
<th>RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blind or Visually Impaired</td>
<td>Dumb, Invalid</td>
<td>Blind, Visually Impaired,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf or Hearing Impairment</td>
<td>Invalid, Deaf-and-Dumb, Deaf-Mute</td>
<td>Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech/Communication Disorder</td>
<td>Dumb, “Kid who talks bad”</td>
<td>Speech or communication disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Disability</td>
<td>Retarded, Slow, Brain-Damaged, “Special ed”</td>
<td>Learning disability, Cognitive Disability,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Disability</td>
<td>Hyper-Sensitive, Psycho, Crazy, Insane, Wacko, Nuts</td>
<td>Psychiatric Disability, Mental Health Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility/Physical Disability</td>
<td>Handicapped, Physically Challenged, “Special,” Cripple, Gimp, Wheelchair Bound</td>
<td>Wheelchair user, Physically Disabled, Person with a mobility disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Disability</td>
<td>Emotionally Disturbed</td>
<td>Emotionally Disabled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Conditions</td>
<td>Victim, Someone “stricken with” a disability</td>
<td>Survivor, Someone “living with” a specific disability (e.g. someone living with cancer)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, it is important to remember that appropriate language is always developing; therefore, this respectful language may change in the future due to goings on in the educational field.

The terminology labeled as respectful, frequently uses the phrase “person with…” This demonstrates the conversation strategy of recognizing similarities among atypical and typical students as a way to stimulate empathy and acceptance. A typical student who is aware of how they can relate to his/her atypical peers is more likely to exhibit empathy and understanding of differences among others. Moreover, an educator can help students to feel more comfortable around atypical peers by sharing personal anecdotes about a situation where he/she got to know someone different than himself/herself. Another way is by discussing how students feel when left out or ignored by peers and how atypical children tend to experience this phenomenon. Additionally, teachers can have students identify things they excel at and other things they may struggle with, pointing out that every person in the world every has abilities and disabilities (Rogers, 2015).

An educator using appropriate language regarding disabilities is an essential model for how students should be addressing the topic of disabilities among the entire population. Therefore, it is crucial to utilize this verbiage and point out appropriate terminology to students during discourse. Keeping all of the teacher suggestions in mind, below are some examples of student questions and possible appropriate teacher responses.

*Student Question:* Why is he/she like that?

*Teacher Answer:* Every person is born differently. Have you ever noticed that everybody looks different from one another? That is because inside and outside we are all different. Each person
struggles with different things in their life too, and he/she has a hard time (insert obstacles depending on the disability).

**Student Question:** Is he/she retarded or what?

**Teacher Answer:** Well let’s not used the word retarded, it is not very nice. But he/she has a hard time doing (insert obstacles depending on the disability). Other than that he/she is the same as everyone else.

**Student Question:** How do I act around a person with a disability?

**Teacher Answer:** You treat them the same as you would any person. You should always call them by their name. If you see them struggling with something you can ask them if they want help. If you feel comfortable, you can ask them a question if you are curious about something as long as you ask nicely and respectfully. If they do not want to answer or talk about it, respect their decision and ask an adult instead.

A classroom technique to create awareness and empathy for students with disabilities is to do hands-on activities within the classroom that allow typical students to “walk in the shoes” of an atypical student’s way of life. This can be completed in a learning centers format in which students rotate among centers that each targets a different mild disability. There are numerous online resources that outline classroom learning centers that can be implemented with groups of students. For example, authors Ben Adcock and Michael L. Remus at Possibilities Inc., a non-profit aimed at strengthening communities, has the Disability Awareness Activity Packet (2006) available that includes a wide variety of hands-on disability awareness classroom activities for a
multitude of age groups. An activity might be to have students wear a blindfold and attempt to complete a puzzle, allowing the student to imagine what it could feel like to have a visual impairment (Adcock & Remus, 2006). These types of activities are engaging and create the opportunity for typical students to feel empathy for atypical students.

Teacher’s Role

Much empirical research in the education community, including a 2001 study by Emmer & Stough, identifies the significance of a teacher’s role in the resulting success of his/her classroom. The INTASC, in 2001, also mentions the teacher’s responsibility to understand how each of his/her students learns and ways in which to “support the intellectual, social, and personal development of each learner” (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008, p. 159).

A teacher of an inclusion classroom must consider how his/her classroom management may differ from that of a general education classroom, which requires consultation with other general education teachers as well as special education teachers (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Rademacher, Schumaker, and Deshler (1996) suggest that teachers do better when instructing to an inclusion classroom. She ascertains that teachers teaching to students with mild disabilities work to increase the rigor and variety of their coursework with the goal of engaging students. In the end, these efforts diminish off-task behavior and classroom disruptions (as cited in Emmer & Stough, 2001). On the other hand, Emmer and Stough (2001) mention a survey administered by Schumm and Vaughn in 1992 regarding teachers’ feelings of readiness to be successful in their professions. Ninety-eight percent of teachers reported feeling “excellent” or “good” about their level of preparedness when it comes to instructing general education students. In contrast, only 39% of teachers felt the same way when it came to their atypical students. Moreover, some
teachers have been shown to exhibit frustration when managing disruptive behavior because research on this topic has not been widely published (Emmer & Stough, 2001).

While these challenges do exist and more research on classroom management techniques should be conducted, there are still resources for teachers to turn to when it comes to creating an enjoyable, accepting, and amiable classroom environment. Meadan & Monda-Amaya (2008) highlight the teacher’s role in collaborating with educators and administrators in creating a school community of social competence through a model of a school social support system; this model is pictured on the following page. The first level works to create a classroom community where students not only have a voice they feel comfortable using, but also have a support system from which they feel prepared to enter the real world. Teachers can do this in a myriad of ways, not limited to, but including: creating opportunities for peer collaboration/group work, making sure all students feel at home by contributing to the classrooms goings on, and ensuring students feel safe sharing their opinions free from judgment. The second level of this model suggests implementing curriculum and activities that teach social and communication skills. The third level is to address any outside factors that may be limiting students abilities to exhibit social competence as well as constructing a plan as to remediate said issue. If a teacher is able to build on these levels of social competence, classrooms have the opportunity to be safe places in which students can ask questions they have on disabilities and get honest, appropriate answers. A teacher’s role at fostering social skills works hand in hand with nurturing healthy relationships between typical and atypical students.
A multitude of studies exhibit the influence of a student’s mindset on his/her resulting academic achievements and motivation. Additionally, a teacher’s mindset about his/her students also impacts one's pedagogical approach. Furthermore, seasoned educators tend to have more fixed mindsets about student achievement than novice teachers, which may be due to differences in teacher training. When it comes to students with mild disabilities, among the teacher population the disabilities label “generates reduced or negative expectations, as well as negative stereotypes and attitudes” (as cited in Gutshall, 2013, p. 1075). As a result, these mindsets have been shown to impact teacher attitudes and actions towards students before they have ever met them (Gutshall, 2013). Teachers can make an effort to be aware of these preconceived notions that they may possess to prevent themselves from stifling appropriate social interactions in an inclusive classroom environment.
Methods and Procedures

When starting my capstone project, I knew without a doubt, that I wanted to provide teacher preparation for how to foster inclusion in a general education classroom. Originally I wanted to work only with students who were on the autism spectrum. However, I quickly learned that it was difficult to access classrooms with mainstreamed autistic children due to how specific my topic’s theme was as well as confidentiality issues. Therefore, I decided to broaden the types of students I wanted to support by targeting all mainstreamed students who possess mild disabilities. In order to do this, I wanted to approach it by educating teachers on how to address mild disabilities in the classroom in a hands-on manner in addition to support for how teachers can cultivate supportive classroom environments for typical and atypical students.

After solidifying this as my capstone’s topic, I soon found out from Professor LeTourneau that Kara Sprandell and Katelin Phillips wanted to target the same demographic with using a similar type of fieldwork. This resulted in the three of us completing the action plan portion of our capstone projects by working collaboratively to create and present educational materials regarding mild disabilities.

We chose to implement learning center activities that aim to show students, in a hands-on way, what it would be like to possess a disability. Ultimately these activities were conducted in a college education class at CSUMB that teaches future teachers about the foundation of public education in California. For the learning center classroom activities, there is a wide range of mild disabilities that we could have chosen to address. Nevertheless, the ones selected included fine motor disability, visual impairment, autism, communication disorder, deaf/hard-of-hearing, and dyslexia.
To create the activities for this course we consulted the “Disability Awareness Activity Packet” (2006), written by Adcock and Remus. This resource provides a multitude of hands-on activities for many mild disabilities to be completed by elementary school students. We read all of the activities and selected six activities that correspond to the disabilities mentioned previously. These ideas became slightly tweaked to simplify directions for the students who would eventually do the activities. In the end, the following learning centers were decided upon and below are their synopses:

- **Fine Motor Disability:** Students wear socks on their hands while trying to string beads onto thread and tie shoelaces on a shoe. People with fine motor disabilities have challenges completing fine motor skill tasks as this activity demonstrates to students.

- **Visual Impairment:** Students wear blindfolds and try to put puzzles together. The students’ experience how it feels to be blind to what they are doing.

- **Autism:** This activity has to do with the component of autism in which atypical students don’t understand what is expected of them. Two students team up as Student A and Student B. First, Student A picks up a card stating a task for Student B to complete in the class. Student B has to try to figure out what Student A wants him/her to do by walking around the room and trying things out. The goal is to demonstrate how difficult it can be for autistic students to complete tasks when they don’t have the skills to decipher what is being expected of them.

- **Communication Disorder:** Student A writes a sentence on a slip of paper. Then student A has to communicate to student B what the sentence is without writing, speaking, using ASL, or using any letters of the alphabet. The students can understand how this affects their ability to communicate effectively.
Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing: The goal of this center is to portray the difficulty in lip reading for deaf/hard-of-hearing students. First, student A has a list of words and sentences to mouth to student B. Student B then writes down what he/she thinks the words and sentences are. Then student A gives a clue about the sentences’ theme and mouths the sentences again for student B to write down. This process is completed visa versa.

Dyslexia: The students are provided a worksheet that aims to show the difficulty for a dyslexic student in reading simple words correctly. There are words on the paper that say various colors, but are colored differently than what the words say. The partners each take turns saying the color and not the word. They say it slowly first to their partners and then speed up to increase difficulty.

All of the learning center directions and examples of the materials provided to the college students are included in the Appendices section.

Once the activities were finalized, we began to assemble the learning center materials. For the fine motor disability center I purchased beads, paper plates to put them on, and socks. Kara made paper shoes with holes for the laces to be strung through; these materials she was able to acquire from her workplace. For the visual impairment center, I cut bandanas from used clothing I had at home and Kara was able to borrow children’s puzzles from her workplace. The autism center required sentence strip paper for us to write on and Kara was able to receive this paper from her workplace. For the communication disorder, deaf/hard-of-hearing, and dyslexia centers we only needed to print out papers in black and white as well as color, which Katelin did at her workplace. She also printed out the photograph consent forms and before/after surveys to be filled out by each participating student.
On the day of the learning centers presentation, the three of us arrived at the college classroom and set up the centers on six desks. The class was already arranged in six groups upon our arrival. First, we explained the gist of our project while thanking them for their participation and help. The students filled out their photograph consent forms along with their before surveys. After they finished these, we outlined the goals and procedures of each learning center, pointing to the learning center materials as we talked. Then we rolled each of the six desks to the six different groups and gave them about 10 minutes to complete that set activity; we timed them using one of our phones. Once the timer went off, we rotated the activities to different groups. Throughout the activity time Kara, Katelin, and I walked around the room to answer any student questions while also giving positive reinforcement for their efforts. Additionally, we collected the consent forms and before surveys while they were busy with the activities. After each group had completed each of the six tasks, we collected the materials and thanked them again for their participation. Lastly, we distributed the after surveys and had the participants fill them out once we had left the classroom in order to have them feel comfortable in answering the questions truthfully. The class’s professor returned the completed surveys to us later that day.

Once the learning center portion of the project was completed, we transitioned to creating the educational brochure. Our group decided to complete the learning center component first so we would be able to use the knowledge learned from the learning centers to strengthen our brochure information. To begin the brochure process, we conversed with another capstone group who was attending an MPUSD board meeting to find out the board meeting dates and settled on Tuesday evening at 7:00pm on November 10th. Kara, Katelin, and I constructed the brochure first on a Google Doc in which we laid out the main topics we wanted to address within the brochure. These headings included:
- What are mild disabilities?
- Why is this a pertinent topic in today’s educational field?
- How can teachers encourage students to be accepting of atypical peers, while also coaching students to respond to others in appropriate ways?
- How can teachers approach the subject of mild disabilities while creating a safe, welcoming classroom environment?
- FAQs by students and appropriate teacher responses;
- Up-to-date terminology chart
- Hands-on learning centers for teacher implementation.

Next we proceeded to collect information from our literature reviews that would fit the topics listed. Once this information was compiled we also chose photographs from the learning centers we thought be beneficial to include. After the brochure content was completed, we went to a FedEx store to customize the layout and had thirty copies made for our board meeting presentation as well as any other distribution endeavors that may have presented themselves.

Following this, the board meeting included about fourteen board members and a room of roughly forty Monterey County residents. We presented the goal of the project and brochure, the brochure content, and our distribution ideas. After our presentation, we provided the board with six physical copies of the brochure as well as my contact information. The next week we sent a follow up email to the board thanking them for their time and touching base with them about the brochure. The administrative assistant to the superintendent replied promptly stating that the superintendent wants the electronic version in order to distribute to all of the school sites and administrators within the district. Our group sent them the PDF of the brochure, which they then distributed through email.
After we completed this endeavor we decided to extend our distribution efforts to local institutions that also have adults working with typical and atypical children. We created a letter template (included in the Appendices section) that we emailed to a wide-range of local after school programs, organizations that work with children, and charter/private schools. The final list of institutions that accepted our educational brochure for implementation is as follows:

- Boys and Girls Club of Monterey County
- Special Kids Crusade
- Center for Reading Diagnosis and Instruction
- YMCA of Monterey County
- Ryan Ranch
- Monterey Bay Charter School
- After School Academy
- Star Riders Foundation
- Secret Garden Preschool
- Del Rey Elementary
- King City Arts Magnet
- Sol Treasures Performing Arts Program

Through the action plan of our project, we interacted with and affected a number of stakeholders. The learning centers impacted the twenty-four future teacher college students in that it provided them with the tools to conduct learning centers in their future classrooms while also familiarizing them with how to be aware of what struggles atypical students face amidst an educational setting. In doing so, we not only impacted these future teachers but the students they will work with throughout their future career experiences. With the creation and distribution of
the educational brochures, we were able to further the education of adults working with typical and atypical children and subsequently these children affiliated with the institutions listed above. These adults included principals, after school caretakers, teachers, parents, elementary school staffs, and CSUMB service learners working with children.
Results and Discussion

The expected outcomes of the capstone project were to implement effective hands-on learning centers in a future teacher college classroom coupled with the creation and implementation of educational brochures throughout MPUSD. We accomplished both of the project aspects ultimately with much success. For the educational brochure, I believe our biggest success was our distribution efforts (institutions accepting implementation previously mentioned). We were not only able to have MPUSD accept it, but many other local institutions that work with children on a regular basis. This greatly increases the number of teachers and children that we have had the chance to educate and impact. As far as the learning centers, according to the student surveys overall we implemented informative, helpful activities. The results are described below:

**Before Survey Results:**

![Bar Graph](image)

The before survey student responses are organized in the bar graph above. When it came to previous education the college students had received about mild disabilities, there was a range
of responses. Overall, 10 out of 24 (41.7%) had received some education, 9 out of 24 (37.5%) had received no previous education, and only 5 out of 24 (20.8%) had received a good amount of previous education. When it came to the future teachers’ comfortability levels in answering student questions about mild disabilities, 14 out of 24 (58.3%) stated they had no comfortability, 3 out of 24 (12.5%) had some, and 7 out of 24 (29.2%) had a good amount. Lastly, 23 out of 24 (95.8%) thought that hands-on learning is a very helpful learning method, while only 1 out of 24 (4.2%) felt that it is somewhat helpful. All in all, this data shows that most students did not have a lot of previous education about mild disabilities, many do not feel comfortable answering student questions, and almost all find hands-on learning especially beneficial.

_After Survey Results:_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1-10 Ranking of Learning Center Effectiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the learning center activities, we asked the students to rank the effectiveness of the learning centers on a 1-10 scale with 10 being the most beneficial. As shown above over half of the students ranked the centers at a 9 or 10. These students felt that it opened their eyes as to what it would be like as a student to possess different mild disabilities. Those that ranked it an 8
or 7 seemed to report that they felt some centers were more beneficial than others at conveying what the disability entailed.

These future teachers stated that after the activities, 65% of them did feel prepared to answer student questions about mild disabilities and 35% reported feeling more prepared after than before the activities. This means that 100% of the future teachers now feel that they have some idea of how to respond appropriately to students on this topic. The critiques mentioned about the learning centers included adding centers about ADHD and anxiety as well as making some the activities even harder for the students to complete successfully. However, the majority of the class mentioned they would use the learning centers to foster acceptance, have their students understand atypical challenges, and integrate them in order to cultivate a more engaging classroom. I felt a sense of accomplishment by knowing that we were able to broaden teacher preparation of mild disabilities by reaching many teachers and staff via the brochure. Moreover, because the future teachers considered the learning centers effective we were confident in including the learning center information within the brochure as well.
Throughout the project one deterrent we faced was the printing costs. In order for the brochure to be 11x17, in color, and on professional paper each brochure cost about $3. Because we had not anticipated needing so many brochures for distribution, we tried our best to provide institutions with the PDF version to keep the cost down. Additionally, in making the brochure it was difficult to make the content concise while still be informative and useful. In the end, there was more information we wanted to include inside the brochure but there was not enough room on the pages. Lastly, selecting which mild disabilities to address in the learning centers was tricky because there were many disabilities we could have chosen.

There are not many things about the project’s process that I would change due to the success of our end results. One thing that was mentioned in the learning center after surveys was to include learning centers teaching about ADHD and/or anxiety/depression. I think these centers would be very beneficial as these conditions are widespread throughout today’s society. The other thing I would have altered is in the information we provided to the future teachers. I think it would have been helpful for us to give them some of the brochure information about how to talk to students, appropriate language to use, how to create accepting classroom environments, etc. Because we completed the centers before the brochure, we did not think to provide the future teachers with the research we had collected; I think it would have enriched their educational experience. In conclusion, I think my group did great work providing effective information and learning tools about mild disabilities resulting in overall success.
Conclusion

This capstone project is sustainable in a myriad of ways. The initial reason for targeting teachers for this educational outreach was solely to ensure sustainability of our efforts. For the educational brochure because we were able to reach such a broad teacher base throughout MPUSD and community institutions, the impact was quite great. These teachers will not only use this knowledge of mild disabilities and communication techniques with one group of their students, but students throughout the rest of their careers. The brochure provided to these adults will also be available to share with parents, other staff, and future coworkers, as they will have infinite access to the PDF they received. Moreover, the students who are taught how to discuss mild disabilities appropriately and have received proper education on the topic will carry this skill with them for the rest of their lives to which they can model appropriate behaviors with other individuals they encounter. The learning centers impacted twenty-four future teachers who will have the opportunity to implement the taught teaching techniques in every classroom they will instruct in. Again these will have the same overarching impact as described with already established educators. All in all, both action components implemented will reach a large group of educators and students in the community for years and years to come.

Working in a group of three students proved very helpful in creating and completing the two action portions of this project. We all had unique ideas to contribute to the brochure layout, information to include, and target locations for distribution. As far as the learning centers, my group members and I all made an effort to collaborate on the center’s activities and provide materials for their implementation. Through our work as a team, we were more able to cultivate innovative ideas and execute them to a wide array of stakeholders in a myriad of established institutions. All of these efforts to prepare teachers, and adults in student settings, about how to
create awareness and acceptance of mild student disabilities bring our local educators one step closer to creating warm, welcoming environments for atypical and typical students alike.
References

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Appendices

The following documents were resources used throughout this capstone project. The first documents included are the instructions and printouts used for some of the learning centers. After this is the brochure distribution email provided to local childcare institutions. Third is the material list for all of the learning centers implemented as well as the ones discussed in the educational brochure. The master copy of the photograph consent form that was signed by all twenty-four student future teachers follows this. Fifth, are the questions for the before and after survey along with the anonymous student survey answers. Sixth, are the pictures we took during the learning center activities. Lastly, the professional copy of the educational brochure is tucked into the sleeve of the binder for easy access.
To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Ivy Ruggiero and I am Liberal Studies student at California State University, Monterey Bay completing my senior Capstone project. My project is entitled “Creating Awareness and Acceptance of Mild Disabilities through Teacher Preparation” and works to foster welcoming environments for students who are typical and atypical. In order to do this I have worked with fellow students, Kara Sprandel and Katelin Phillips, to create an educational brochure that discusses what mild disabilities are, how adults can create accepting environments, answers to frequently asked questions by students, and respectful language one should use when speaking of disabilities.

I am contacting you as part of my distribution efforts for this brochure. Attached is an electronic version of the educational brochure that we would like to provide to you free of charge. We would appreciate hearing from you to see if it is a document that you would be willing to provide to your staff that works with students on a regular basis. If you would prefer a paper copy of the document, please let us know and we will look into providing that for you as well. Our overarching goal is to provide adults, who work with children, the tools to create awareness and acceptance of mild disabilities throughout educational environments for young children and would appreciate your assistance in doing so.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please let us know if you have any questions!

Sincerely,

Ivy Ruggiero
(510) 205-3065
Learning Center Material List

- Fine Motor Disability
  - 6 Pairs of Socks
  - String
  - Beads
  - Paper Plates
  - Construction Paper
  - Tape
  - 3-Hole Punch
  - Scissors
- Visual Impairment
  - 6 Blindfolds
  - 6+ Children’s Wooden Block Puzzles
- Autism
  - Sentence Strip Paper
- Communication Disorder
  - Sentence Strip Paper
- Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing
  - Printout of Directions
- Dyslexia
  - Color Copies of Worksheet
Before Activity Survey

1. What previous education would you say you have obtained regarding students with mild disabilities?
2. If you feel like you could learn more about mild student disabilities, what would you like to learn about?
3. If a student came to you asking questions about an atypical classmate would you feel prepared to respond appropriately?
4. Does learning in a hands-on way help you comprehend material more easily or about the same as other methods?

After Activity Survey

1. How would you rank the learning center’s effectiveness at helping you to understand the six different disabilities on a 1-10 scale (10 being the best)? Justify your answer.
2. If you could change anything about the hands-on activity what would it be? Are there any other disabilities that you think should be included within the centers?
3. If a student came to you asking questions about an atypical classmate would you feel prepared to respond appropriately?
4. How do you imagine integrating the knowledge you learned today into your future classroom?
Learning Center Photographs

Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing lip reading activity

Layout of six learning centers during initial instruction

Fine motor disability center

Autism center
Dyslexia color name worksheet center

Blindness puzzle activity

Communication disorder activity