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Success of secondary special education students outside of classroom in integrated occupational learning environments

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SUCCESS OF SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS OUTSIDE OF CLASSROOM IN INTEGRATED OCCUPATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

by

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A Thesis

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Thesis Chair: Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D

Dedication

I dedicate this manuscript to my Mom, for her constant love and support throughout this entire process, and in memory of my Dad, who is the reason I followed the path I am on today.

Abstract

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SUCCESS OF SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS OUTSIDE OF
CLASSROOM IN INTEGRATED OCCUPATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
2016-2017
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Master of Arts in School Psychology

The purpose of this study is to highlight the benefits of vocational work outside of

the classroom for special education students, primarily those who are in enrolled in

secondary school. It also questions how effective a vocational setting is compared to a

traditional classroom setting for special education students nearing the end of their initial

educational track. It was hypothesized that special education students, primarily enrolled

in secondary or high school, benefit from a learning environment outside of a normalized

classroom setting due to the first-hand experience gained in a real-world setting is more

conducive to long-term success after completing their education. Descriptive and

observational data was collected after distribution of anonymous survey. Implications

from the study show there may be a need for curricular re-assessment and classroom

modifications at the secondary level.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Need For Study

The effect of the classroom environment on special education students matters by how it relates to the student and how they can achieve their own academic success. In the state of New Jersey, the Structured Learning Experience (SLE) available for special education students as they enter their final years in a secondary school environment, provide a real-world occupational setting to develop hard and soft skills they would need in order to achieve and maintain a job (NJ D.O.E., 2014). These students are sent out anywhere from two to five days a week for several hours to work on a variety of tasks specific to each distinct site. The disabilities of the students working at these sites are very widespread, ranging from autistic to behavioral to severely cognitively disabled. The profound thing is how much more success they demonstrate at these SLE job sites than they do in a regular classroom setting. Emphasis is given on developing hard and soft skills in the final years before transitioning away from the school-based system into either an adult work program or college-transition program or achieving an occupational employment.

Special education students who participate in an SLE classroom setting will demonstrate much more success and present with less egregious behaviors than they would in back in a regular classroom setting. Anything from the physical aspects of the room, such as color, lighting, design, size, air quality and the number of or personality of teachers, aides and students in the classroom has a substantial impact on behaviors of

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certain students. (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010, Lippman, 2010). Considering these factors might have on even a general education student, it is highly anticipated and some cases assumed that there may be difficulties with certain special needs student populations (Guardino, 2010.) Over-stimulation and lack of structure due to so much student diversity in classrooms can cause outbursts, self-injurious behavior and physical aggression towards their peers and classroom staff.

The general purpose of this study is to acknowledge and determine how much success severely disabled special education students have working at specialized job sites compared to when they are in a normalized classroom environment in a school setting. It is hypothesized that students who exhibit a variety of aggressive behaviors when restricted to an in-school classroom environment will demonstrate a more positive and appropriate demeanor consistently when they are in a vocational work site or out in a community setting. A survey of staff associated directly and indirectly with the students observed will be used to compare demonstration and frequency of behaviors while in each of the different learning environments.

The importance of this study is that it opens up more variety of educational approaches for special needs students who may have been previously restricted due to their behaviors and lack of success in a classroom-based setting. Aside from ABA behavior plans, these students having a hard time controlling these behaviors are often limited in the support they can be given due to the difficulty at times to apply these strategies and instruction. It impedes not only basic academic instruction, but the development of valuable soft and hard skills. Also, when special needs students leave the

educational setting normally after their 21st birthday, their parents or caregivers are faced with a number of difficult decisions in which to proceed with future placement. The degree of severity with the individual's disability or impairment may limit the options available and success in SLE type programs may open up more avenues than once may have been previously thought available. Decrease in potential negative behaviors and development of lifelong skills will not only have a benefit in future program options but just overall quality of life for the individual.

Definitions

Structured Learning Experience: Experiential, supervised educational activities designed to provide students with exposure to the requirements and responsibilities of specific job titles or job groups, and to assist them in gaining employment skills and making career and educational decisions.

Community Based Instruction: Sustained and repeated instruction sustained and repeated instruction that takes place in the community that takes place in the community rather than in a school building rather than in a school building

Job Coaches: Paraprofessionals who take groups of students out to SLE Job Sites to observe, assist, intervene and write evaluations on the students

Soft Skills: Interpersonal skills that are less tangible, examples include communication skills, social awareness, work ethic, attitudes, self-management,

Hard Skills: Measurable and teachable skills needed to complete a job

Limitations

Limitations in this study center on the observation and recollection from the associated staff of the students. The sample size is also limited to one particular private school and there may be potential for bias due to the implementation of the SLE styled curriculum in this school and success of said program. Behaviors can range from a variety of students and those who exhibit prominent behaviors may have a variety of different disabilities that may have an underlying effect on these displays.

Assumptions

The educators and paraprofessionals providing their observations are all well-versed in the SLE program and can interpret and categorize student behaviors in order scale which are prominent in the classroom and at work sites. It is also assumed that the surveys used for student observations can be comprehended and applied consistently amongst the educator group.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Structured Learning Experience

According to the New Jersey Department of Education, the Structured Learning Experience is defined as the experiential, supervised educational activities designed to provide students with exposure to the requirements and responsibilities of specific job titles or job groups, and to assist them in gaining employment skills and making career and educational decisions (NJ D.O.E., 2014). The Structured Learning Experience, or SLE, curriculum varies throughout different programs, catering to the needs of that specific district or school in terms of utilization of the program. These programs vary from college preparatory, general education, career and technical education, career academies, and special education (Shendell, D. G., Hemminger, L. E., Campbell, J. K., & Schlegel, B. 2009).

The SLE program in regards to special education has been one of the more optimal learning opportunities and instruction across the country. School districts are required to provide their students with the option to participate in these programs and be afforded specialized services in accordance to their individualized education plans (IEPs) (NJ D.O.E. 2014). According to the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004, "Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals." This curriculum allows for special needs students in their

secondary school settings (age 16-21) to be exposed to vocational education not only in the classroom, but in the community as well. Due to the nature of their disabilities, special education students are at much higher risk of poor post-education outcomes (Wagner, 1991). Vocational studies or practicums have shown to have a positive impact on students with disabilities, although there was not a substantial amount of data to compare with at the time of the study. This being said, students with varied disabilities should be encouraged to pursue these types of programs, or at least be exposed to them. (Wagner, 1991).

For students to find success in these vocational programs, the instructors or team must have a level of training and competency in order to best instruct in this educational setting (Blazejowski, 2013). The study examined the ideas and perceptions of a number of vocational teachers about their feelings on how the needs of how a class should be modified and accommodated for their students and how it differentiates from a regular inclusion class. According to Blazejowski's study, there were four distinct themes from a varied vocational programs: the lack of specialized training as vocational instructors; the idea of promotion after goals or skills are deemed mastered; poor levels of basic reading and math skills hinder progress in vocational areas; and attitude, laziness, or declined interest is the biggest factor in determining student success. These factors can be translated to the SLE curriculum, as coordinators who oversee their school's implementation of the program, are required to have sufficient training. Training consists of potential coordinators being enrolled in 12 hours of intense seminar classes. Core of the course consisted of the enhancement of knowledge and awareness of legal and

scientific occupational safety and health principles to ensure safe, rewarding experiences for minors inside and outside classrooms. (Shendell, D. G., Hemminger, L. E., Campbell, J. K., & Schlegel, B. (2009).

Community Based Instruction

As the Structured Learning Experience can be looked at as the umbrella in employment-orientation, then community based instruction, or CBI, is one of the curriculums central foundations. The overall goal in community based instruction is to provide adequate vocational training for special education students through real-life employment experience in a mostly volunteer setting (White & Weiner, 2004.) Despite the benefits of having a job, individuals with disabilities lag far behind their peers without disabilities with regard to employment outcomes. Recent data confirm that individuals with disabilities are less likely to be employed than those without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; Kessler Foundation/National Organization on Disability, 2010). Additionally, individuals with disabilities are consistently employed fewer hours and receive lower wages than individuals without disabilities, a major detractor for even the most abled workers classified with special needs (Pickens, J. L., & Dymond, S. K., 2014.)

As students prepare to enter the later years of their secondary education and complete their schooling, community instruction has presented itself with the support of various teachers as a tool for preparation of life after school. Soft and hard skills are focused on, and this gives the students a platform to practice and harness these skills in a protected setting where potential employment is not jeopardized. In one study, surveyed

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teachers were said to understand the importance of offering opportunities for students to perform a variety of job tasks, providing students with a wide array of work experiences, and giving students the choice among a selections of available work sites (Kim & Dymond, 2010.) Performance based goals relative to achievement are created and long-term goals potentially can be self-evaluation on strengths and weakness from students themselves (Zhang, 2001). Student socializations with fellow employees, customers, appropriate behavior in public, overall independence and basic vocational skills/motor function are all taught and emphasized while out in the community. (Pickens, J. L., & Dymond, S. K., 2014).

Another study showed that 77% of the respondents felt that community-based instruction helped prepare students for successful outcomes overall, but that there was a split on what degree it helped, with 47% of the respondents believed that inclusion was 'very helpful' and 44% believed that it was 'somewhat helpful' in preparing students for transition (Agran, M., Snow, K., & Swaner, J., 1999.) Despite its ambitions, community based instruction does not come without its own obstacles. Coordinators and teachers have to overcome certain issues like finding a fit employment wise, liability concerns, parental concerns, transportation and enough staff support for very involved medically and/or behavior students. Classroom options are offered for students unable to actively participate in real-life community instruction, where they can practice employment and vocational skills in simulated workshops or timed activities in a more controlled setting. The ability to integrate these lessons in an environment best suited for the individual is ideal to not only optimal learning, but gaining valued experience whether it is real-world

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or in a structured setting. (Kohler, P. D., & Field, S. 2003).

Vocational Curriculum

Instituting vocational instruction into special education curriculum helps give opportunities for students to increase their occupational competencies through structured training relative to their own strengths and weaknesses (Dowdy & Evers, 1996.) A variety special education schools and districts have embarked on these career and technical education programs in order to promote potential for future employment amongst their student population (Calvert, 2012). In particular, the Long Beach Unified School District started the *Vocational Education Program* in 1985, and also coincided with the IDEA in 2004 which required transition plans for special needs students starting at the age of 14 (Ofoegbu, Reza, 2010). Occupational employment of students was evaluated to see if anything significant relationships between success of obtaining work and completion of the VEP. Over the course of the study, 81 students were observed and results indicated that 67% of participants in the 2004-2006 school years were able to acquire and retain employment, while 57% of graduates in 2006-2007 school year acquired a job and 53% retained their employment (Ofoegbu, Reza, 2010). It acknowledged that there was an impact for those who participated in the program in securing future employment. At the same time, further clarification is needed on what entailed the vocational training of the program and range in severity of disabilities of participants in the study. (Calvert, 2012). Knowledge of what disabilities students are presenting with specifically in these programs can make a difference in more accurately evaluating the impact in the short and long-term.

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Employment Outlook

Ideally, the ramifications of vocational integration into special education curriculums are not only to give these students the optimal opportunity to be self-sufficient in everyday life activities, but to procure employment with a chance for a regular income and the possibility of benefits. The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) showcased how important the post-school outcomes of special needs students are by forcing schools to create "measurable post-school goals in the areas of employment, education/training, and, if appropriate, independent living" and states to "report student post-school outcome performance." (Morningstar et al., 2010). A major identifier of success (or lack of) was execution of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, which provides significant data of special education students and their post-graduate success in the employment industry. The study found that individuals who interviewed right after completion of secondary programming were

"as likely to have a paid job at the time of the interview as were their same age peers in the general population, of whom 71 percent reported currently having a paid job" (NLTS2, 2010). Understanding that there was not much difference in those who needed to secure employment compared to how many did have a job shows major benefits to vocational education and training. Additional statistics from the study evaluated differences in disabilities in regards to employment, wage difference, and demographic considerations. "Young adults with learning disabilities (79 percent) were more likely to have a paid job than were those with deaf-blindness (30 percent), orthopedic impairments

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(38 percent), visual impairments (40 percent), traumatic brain injuries (44 percent),

autism (45 percent), mental retardation (46 percent), or multiple disabilities (46 percent,)"

(NLTS2, 2010). This breakdown indicates that while overall there are positives; lots of

individuals with varying disabilities are still finding jobs less than half the time.

(Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Knokey, A. M., 2009). Many privatized

special needs schools have students with a wide-array of disabilities at varying severities,

much like the ones listed above.

Classroom Environment

A major proprietor for these vocational programs is that a normalized classroom

setting is not always conducive toward the needs of special education students. A high

number of this population is made up of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The prevalence of ASD has substantially increased in the last 10-15 years due to more

concise and better diagnostic criteria to help identify traits of the disorder. The Center for

Disease control now states that 1 in 68 have symptoms pertaining to ASD (CDC, 2014).

A study looked at the design criteria for classrooms and how it impacted students with

ASD, and the interventions made were categorized into seven themes. Space, visual

sensory aspects, lighting (daylight and artificial), auditory sensory aspects, FF&E,

flexibility, and design process (Martin, 2016). The needs of students in a learning

environment should be considered, as the above factors can have an influence on their

educational experience, as well as providing comfort and feeling of security.

In self-contained classrooms or specifically privatized special needs learning

institutions, there is usually going to be a blending of different physical or learning

disabilities, as well as varying disorders pertaining to each individual or groups. Research conducted looked at three different disorders; ASD, ADHD, and Down's syndrome; and how the physical environment impacted learning either a positive, negative, or no effect at all. Concentration impact was looked at in terms of physical aspects, sightlines, furnishing, teaching method and individualistic factors. Not surprisingly, there was evidence that showed different positive impacts for some groups, while others groups were negatively impacted by certain features (Tufvesson, 2007). It also scaled personnel in the classroom for their own opinions on these specific factors and their impact on concentration and learning. The challenge for these classroom environments is to allow for optimal success despite varying disabilities in the classroom and how they learn in their own unique ways and settings. Environment constructs also can have a negative impact on the stress levels of students, although older children are not as dramatically impacted compared to younger ones (Kopec, 2012). Special education students can have difficulty with adjusting to classroom and processing the different aspects of their environment (Kopec, 2012). As students progress in their own educational careers, keeping the attention and same routine becomes more challenging (Inagaki & Wake, 2017). Finding ways to overcome complacency and regression in the classroom for special needs students begins with challenging the norm on normalized school environments and investigating new outlets for maximizing learning potential in later schooling years.

Classroom Behavior

For a number of special education students, behaviors associated with their disabilities can become a hindrance to not only their own learning experience, but to others around them. This can cause increased stress for both student and staff alike (Parsonson, 2012). According to Parsonson, most disruptive behavior can be linked to some kind of cognitive disability, and this requires that proper task engagement be monitored. Students all need to learn the skills to engage in their work, and this stems from regular participation and encouragement. Other research suggests that establishing routine, expectations, giving enough praise, and allowing frequent opportunities to participate with their classmates can help curtail such disruptive behavior (Kern & Clemens, 2007.) Classroom modification can prevent these unwanted behaviors from occurring, decrease presenting behaviors, and allow instruction to proceed without constant interruption (Emmer & Stough, 2001). In a case study conducted by Gaudino & Fullerton, prior to classroom adjustment, disruptive behaviors were occurring at a 90 percent rate. Once proper intervention was made to the classroom, these observed behaviors dropped to a 45 percent recurrence rate. Normalized classroom settings have more success when dealing with an integrated classroom, but this research suggests that there are numerous intricate details about the classroom that can set off behaviors not conducive to a successful learning environment and changes should be made to help account for this.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Subjects

Participants in this study were staff members at a private special education secondary school. Employees were asked to participate in a survey and were recruited by email. Participants all had an integral role in working directly with the student population and were considered experienced enough to answer questions described in the survey. They are a mix of all genders, races and ethnicities. The ages of those being surveyed ranges from 21-70 years. Their experience in special education range from one year to more than 40 years, and their educational backgrounds range from high school graduation to those with doctorate degrees. Their experience provided a better foundation for data and results hoped to be achieved. In all, 75 staff members were invited to participate, with all holding various positions within the school, to which 32 consented and took part in answering the survey.

Instrumentation

The survey administered was composed of 24 questions and created via Qualtrics' research program. The major goal of the survey was to collect a variety of feedback from employees of all potential positions (i.e. teacher, paraprofessional, related services, etc.) and learn attempt to quantify their experiences. Participants were asked to assess student characteristics in the classroom compared to vocational instruction in the community or job site. They were also asked to scale the prominence of certain behaviors/traits in terms of the time of day, class size, and frequency of their integration into the community.

Other questions looked to determine what details of the classroom had positive or negative effect on the student learning environment and how their skills improved or regressed over the course of time with exposure to vocational curriculum. Finally, participants were given three open-ended questions to provide their own personal feedback and opinions to the researchers to give a more personal application of their experience that may not have been able to quantify with the general survey questions.

Procedure

Participants for the survey were recruited via their employee email and given an explanation of what the questionnaire entailed and had to consent before given access to continue onward. The collection period lasted approximately three weeks before the survey was closed by principal investigators. Data collected looked at trends with observation of student success in various classroom settings from multiple points of view and different levels of experience. Overall, the responses were used to determine whether there was significance in utilizing different learning environments outside of normal classroom settings specifically pertaining to secondary special education students.

Chapter 4

Results

Of the 32 staff members who consented to participate, all had at least completed 90% of the survey. Participants in the study were 32% teachers, 23% as job coaches, 13% as teacher assistants, 9% as paraprofessionals and 23% as "other". In terms of experience, 19% of respondents had worked there two years or less, 38% three-to-five years, 26% six-to-ten years, and 16% with ten years or more. The initial hypothesis stated that special education students, particularly enrolled in a secondary or high school program, would benefit from a learning environment outside of a normalized classroom. They were asked to rate attention and focus between students in a standard classroom compared to those who are in vocational learning environments. Attention rates were presented in pairs ranging from 1-10 (i.e. 1-2, 3-4, etc.) and coincided with a specific time frame of the school day, which was defined as early morning (8:00-10:00), late morning (10:00-12:30) and afternoon (12:30-2:30). The results of this comparison between focus in the classroom compared to vocational settings are illustrated in *Table 1* and *Table 2*.

Table 1

Student Levels of Focus in Normalized Classroom Setting

Time of Day	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
Early Morning (8:00-10:00)	0.0 %	21.9%	40.6%	31.3%	6.3%
Late Morning (10:00-12:30)	9.4 %	21.9%	37.5%	31.3%	0.0%
Afternoon (12:30-2:30)	18.8%	59.4%	21.9%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 2

Student Levels of Focus in Vocational Setting

Time of Day	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
Early Morning (8:00-10:00)	0.0 %	6.5%	22.6%	48.4%	22.6%
Late Morning (10:00-12:30)	3.2 %	6.5%	48.4%	41.2%	0.0%
Afternoon (12:30-2:30)	12.9%	32.6%	35.9%	19.4%	0.0%

Participants were asked to choose as many aspects of the classroom as they felt presented challenges for the students to their success on a daily basis. Every selection was selected on at least 60 percent of each survey response. While these are all common classroom aspects which may present difficulties for special needs students, some responses, such as class size and class population, were recorded on 90 percent or more of the surveys. (See Figure 1).
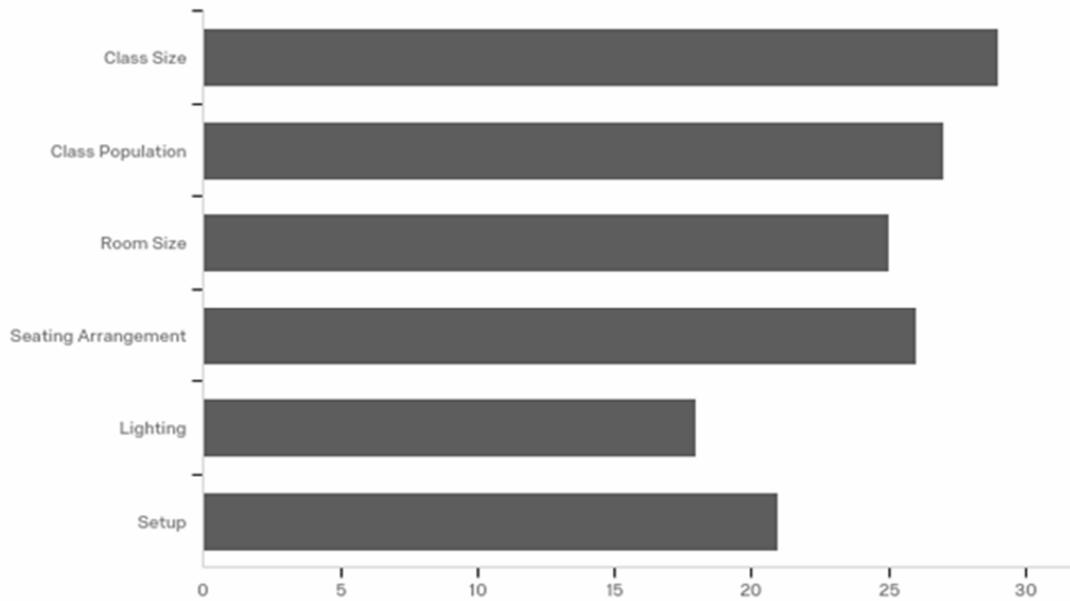

Figure 1. Classroom Aspects Presenting Most Challenges for Students

When asked to consider behaviors of students who are in the classroom each day, in the community two-to-three times a week, and out in the community each day, participants scaled the behaviors from zero (meaning no presentation) to 10 (extreme and frequent presentation). All respondents answered the question (n=32) and the mean score of the scales were as follows. Behaviors of students in the classroom had an average scale of 6.03, behaviors of students in the community part of the time had an average of 4.23, and behaviors of students in the community every day scaled at a 3.13 average score. As a result, participants believed that students behavior were more frequent when in a normalized classroom compared to when they were out of the building either in the community or at a vocational work site. Table 3 illustrates this comparison along with other statistical data.

Table 3

Student Behavior Scale for Classroom Environment

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D	Variance
Classroom	0.0	8.00	6.03	2.35	5.52
Community 2-3 Times	1.0	7.00	4.23	1.67	2.78
Community Everyday	2.0	9.00	3.13	1.76	3.09

Participants were asked to recollect student development of functional skills before and after they regularly received vocational instruction. Observation of students' behaviors, attention, social skills, spacial awareness, work stamina, production, hygiene, appropriateness, and maturity were to be considered. The study questioned how much progression in each of these categories was made by having respondents choose between "None to minimal", "Somewhat", or "Substantial." Overall, 11.5 percent of the answers felt that there was no improvement with listed skills, 56.2 percent felt progress was made somewhat, and 32.3 percent felt there was substantial improvement in some areas. Results also showed that spacial awareness had the least improvement progress wise at 18.8 percent and students' socialization skills benefitted the most with vocational instruction with 46.9 percent feeling substantial progress was made. Table 4 highlights a breakdown of the percentages among the categories and the amount of skill development relative to each one.

Table 4

Skill Progression of Students After Introduction to Vocational Instruction

Skills	None to Minimal		Somewhat		Substantial	
Behaviors	6.25%	2	75.00%	24	18.75%	6
Attention	3.13%	1	71.88%	23	25.00%	8
Socialization	3.13%	1	50.00%	16	46.88%	15
Spacial Awareness	18.75%	6	56.25%	18	25.00%	8
Work Stamina	3.13%	1	56.25%	18	40.63%	13
Production	3.13%	1	62.50%	20	34.38%	11
Hygiene	6.25%	2	75.00%	24	18.75%	6
Appropriateness	3.13%	1	59.38%	19	37.50%	12
Maturity	3.13%	1	53.13%	17	43.75%	14

In regards to opinion on the emphasis of academics for special needs students at the secondary level, 64.5 percent agreed with the statement of "low priority, that functionality and long-term outlook were much more important at this stage." 19.4 percent and 16.1 percent either felt indifferent or a blend of academics and vocational is optimal, respectfully. None of the respondents, however, felt academics were a high-priority in the classroom.

Relative to academics, participants were also asked what skill set developmentally gave students the most difficulty. Overwhelmingly, 80.7 percent felt that soft skills was the most challenging to develop, followed by 12.9 percent selecting life skills, and just 6.5 percent believing hard skills presented more difficult for students to learn.

When presented with the question, "Do students benefit from a standard classroom setting?" 78.1 percent felt that it varies, 21.9 percent responded it did not, and no participants agreed that it benefited at all. If "it varies or no" was selected, an open-ended response asking why was given. These are a few responses given by those who choose to follow up.

"There are too many variables that a special needs student requires and he cannot get them in a regular classroom."

"I think that regular classrooms do not benefit special education students because they do not get the attention they need to succeed. Alternately, students who do present challenges for the teacher and classroom receive most of the teacher's time, therefore limiting curriculum and content for the other students."

"Success sometimes depends on the teacher to adapt teaching into small segments, pulling out the strengths of each student with adaptive techniques centered on individuals"

Participants were also asked for their own words what the toughest/beneficial aspects of working in the classroom.

"Toughest: Keeping things creative and fresh throughout each marking period to minimize boredom and disruptive behaviors. Beneficial: It is a more contained and

protected environment for some behavioral students who have difficulty in the outside world. Also, it can serve as training ground for potential job site assignments, and allow for observation necessary to fine tune those assignments."

"The toughest aspect of working in a classroom is the simulated nature of programming. Students typically demonstrate greater skills when engaging in realistic community activities, structured learning experiences, etc. The most beneficial aspect of working in a regular classroom is the ability to control the environment to suit the needs of your students."

Respondents were also asked to address their opinions on the toughest/most beneficial aspects of working in the community.

"The toughest aspect is the lack in environmental change for stimulation for the student. It is also the controlled environment and lack of real life experiences. The beneficial side is the fact that those students that struggle with uncontrolled events are within the parameters of a safe environment, along with the increased staff support that a teacher has in the classroom. "

"The toughest aspect of the community setting is the inability to control the environment and the unpredictability of others in the community, mostly how others perceive, view and respond to disabled students. The most beneficial thing is the ability to apply real life teaching for the students as well as teaching community acceptance of exceptional individuals."

"Safety is the toughest aspect of working in the community. The most beneficial thing is building experiences and social skills that they can carry with them when they

graduate."

"In the community/vocational setting, it can be difficult to manage any challenging behaviors that present. As far as benefits, students enjoy being in the community. There are teachable moments around every corner. It is best for generalization of skills."

Chapter 5

Discussion

Summary

This study was created to delve further into the idea that special education students, particularly of high school age, tend to flourish more functionality outside of a normalized classroom. It explored how aspects of the classroom environment can impact learning, the progression of developmental skills, contrasting classroom and vocational effects on attention and behaviors, and providing an evaluation of one's educational philosophy. It also allowed participants to give open-ended answers and further discuss on their own feelings on student compatibility in the classroom, as well as the benefits and challenges for students in each of the different settings. Through descriptive and observable data, it can be reasoned that secondary special education students find more success in vocational or community-based learning environments than in general classroom settings.

As special education students progress through their educational tracks, motivation and incentive become more and more of a task for educators. Influences such as puberty, a more adept awareness of their shortcomings, and plateau of interest in academics can lead to general disinterest in school and therefore potential presentation of unwanted behaviors. Data from this study and previous research suggests that numerous characteristics of the classroom can present issues for students. While outliers do exists (i.e. severely disabled or extreme behavior risk), generally most students can be opportune with the chance to work in vocational settings or be exposed to community-

based instruction. Learning in these more authentic settings can present real-life based structure and a routine in tune with life after school will be like. Therefore, based on descriptive and observable data, it can be reasoned that general classrooms are more of a detriment for special education students at this age and exposure to more vocational learning environments provide a more realistic routine.

Implications

As results of the study indicate, it appears that not only adjustments to classroom structure should be considered, but as well as modifications to curriculum for special education students at the secondary level. With prevalence of so many disorders among the population as diagnostic capabilities improve with time, it is inevitable for a multitude of disabilities to place together in the same program, let alone the same classroom. Class population and size were two of the most selected challenging aspect of a room for students as observed by participants, so it is not out of question to fathom that curtailing this could help render any of these problems from consistently occurring. Data from the study showed that students work better in small groups of approximately three-to-four people, so an aesthetic restructuring of room setup and reevaluation of how class population is formulated could be further investigated down the road.

Vocational instruction is an integral part of the education process for older students as they near their transition away from special services. Curricular evaluation should be considered for special education students not only in the latter part of their secondary experience, but also for those who are just entering that portion of their schooling. Parents will generally advocate for an academic-based approach for their

children, but research postulates that finding employment of some nature is an achievable goal regardless of students' levels or scholastic achievement. Of course, there are many variables and outside factors that make a complete overhaul an unrealistic objective. Instead, a prioritization on functional academics at an earlier age could occur to help with introducing hard, soft, and life skills development (Bouck, 2010.) Functional academics are defined as academics made functional designed to teach skills which allow each student to succeed in real-life situations at home, school, work and in the community (SPASTN, 2011). A focus on implementing the instruction of functional skills provides opportunities for at-risk students, such as students with disabilities, to experience more successful post-school outcomes. (Bailey, Gunter, Thomas, Thompson, 2013).

Future Research

This study's goal was to look at special education student success outside of a normalized classroom setting by utilizing staff descriptive data through their own observation and experience. Future studies should accumulate more schools in the public sector for comparative analysis and to increase their sampling size. Future studies should narrow the focus of the study to more specific aspect of the data that can be better refined with more statistical research. Potential future research should identify more about the population being studied; as well consider focusing on specific students in a longitudinal study to track overall progress and functional development. Demographical information about students involved in observation should also be considered in future studies to investigate any outstanding trends.

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