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AN EQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR ALL: STRATEGIES FOR
SECONDARY GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS TO MEET THE LEARNING
NEEDS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS LEARNING IN THEIR
CLASSROOMS

By

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A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Teaching.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

I walk into my classroom on my first day of teaching ninth grade Social Studies at a new school. Waiting for me on my desk, among various of other stacks of paper, are the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans for the students with special needs whom I will have in my classes. As I look over the IEPs and 504 plans, I begin to drown in the alphabet soup of special needs diagnoses: EBD, DCD, ASD, ODD, ADHD... the list goes on and on, and that is only for first period. I flip through page after page of test results, annual goals, and modification/accommodation requirements, feeling more and more overwhelmed as I go. I had a hard enough time scraping together my first week of lesson planning in between the myriad other things I had to get done before school started, and now I feel as though I have to start from scratch with what I have planned in order to comply with the mandates of the IEPs and 504 plans. Anxiety-provoking doubt begins to creep into my mind as my confidence plummets and I ask myself one burning question over and over: "How am I going to teach these kids?"

This scenario, although fictitious and exaggerated, is one to which I believe many secondary general education teachers can relate. As a newly-licensed secondary Social Studies teacher, it is certainly resonates strongly with me, so much in fact that I decided to make addressing this sort of situation the focus of my capstone project. The research question I sought to answer is as follows: Which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and

differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment? In this chapter, I explain how I arrived at this research question as the inspiration for my capstone project. I provide a narrative summary of my professional and personal experiences that piqued my interest in the topic and drove my thorough examination of this pertinent issue in the world of education. Second, I explain the significance of my research question to the myriad stakeholders that have a vested interest in determining the most effective strategies for instructing and assessing students with special needs. This includes general education teachers, special education teachers, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, administrators, and of course students with special needs and their families. Finally, I outline the context and rationale for carrying out this capstone project, answering the most important question for any researcher as related to the research they conduct: “Why does this matter?”

The Capstone Project

Inspiration for the project. At its root, the inspiration for this project stems from my intense passion for and interest in providing equitable educational experiences for *all* students, which I believe to be the primary responsibility of any education system. This passion and interest extends to all lines of division to which our society, and, consequently, our education system, subjects people, both formally and informally (race, socioeconomic status, sex, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, etc.). My particular interest in equity in education for students with special needs stems from my unique personal and professional experiences, beginning with my junior year of high school, during which I elected to volunteer as a tutor for my peers. I was assigned to a ninth

grade study hall for special education students and tasked with tutoring students with special needs stemming from cognitive, learning, developmental, behavioral, and physical disabilities. As I worked more and more with each student, I began to realize that the tutoring strategies I used varied in their effectiveness from student based on their unique abilities and needs. Over the course of the first semester, I learned which strategies worked best with which students and eventually was able to customize my tutoring to best suit the particular student with which I was working. By the second semester, the students I was tutoring were making tangible academic progress. While I recognized this as a significant accomplishment for these students, I could not help but to think about the fact that it took an entire semester of one-on-one work in a small group setting for me to develop tutoring strategies that were truly responsive to the learning needs of each of them. How, then, could general education teachers hope to accomplish the same thing while remaining attentive to the hundred or more additional students for which they are responsible?

A second, exceedingly formative experience that led me to this research question was working as a Special Education Assistant (SEA) at a middle school in Minneapolis. My job was to provide academic and behavioral support to students with special needs (grades 5-8) while they were learning in the general education setting. As a SEA, I had knowledge of the IEPs and 504 Plans for the students that received special education services. I also became quite familiar with the individual learning needs and preferences for these students. The general education teachers that worked with these students also had access to their IEPs and 504 Plans, and also became familiar with their learning

needs and preferences while teaching them in class. Furthermore, the special education team made concerted efforts to communicate openly with the general education teachers about students' learning goals and frequently provided suggestions for accommodations and modifications the general education teachers could implement in order to meet the needs of these students. However, the level of effort that general education teachers put towards compliance with the requirements of these students' IEPs and 504 plans varied significantly. Some teachers went above and beyond what was mandated to make every effort to help their students with special needs learn successfully in their classrooms. Some teachers did the minimum required of them for compliance, while others largely failed to comply with the requirements of these students' IEPs and 504 Plans and made little to no effort to provide accommodations and modifications in accordance with the learning needs and preferences of the students. What is more, when SEAs or other special education staff were present in the general education classroom, some general education teachers would delegate both teaching and behavior management responsibilities almost exclusively to the special education staff regardless of the services the students were or were not entitled to from the special education staff. The attitude of these teachers seemed to be that the students with special needs were not "their" students and that the responsibility for their learning belonged to the special education staff alone.

A third significant experience that inspired me to pursue this research question was my student teaching assignment. I completed my student teaching during the second semester at the very same school where I was working as an SEA. I spent 12 weeks teaching four sections of an eighth grade Global Studies class. In each of my class

sections, I had several students with special needs, some of whom I had worked with during first semester as an SEA. As it relates to this project, my student teaching assignment gave me invaluable insight into the amount of responsibilities that a general education teacher must deal with on a daily basis. My experience working as a SEA was tremendously helpful for planning and implementing modifications and accommodations for my students with special needs, and this certainly made that aspect of teaching in the general education classroom much easier than it would have been had I not previously worked closely with students with special needs. This helped me realize that many general education teachers do not have this same sort of experience and therefore may find it more difficult to meet the learning needs of their students with special needs while also tending to their myriad additional responsibilities. These combined experiences left me with a nagging question which I attempted to answer over the course of this project: How can we make the task of effectively meeting the learning needs of students with special needs learning in the secondary general education classroom easier for all parties involved?

Significance of the project. The research question that this project addresses involves numerous stakeholders for whom this issue is extremely relevant. First, special education is governed primarily by federal legislation which outlines the duties and responsibilities of educational institutions and educational professionals for providing an equitable educational experience for students with special needs (Woodworth, 2016). Therefore, the potential impact of this project reaches, however indirectly, the highest levels of the United States government, including elected representatives, federal

education agencies, and the distribution of federal funds for the provision of special education services. Accordingly, this project also holds ramifications for state-level government entities, including legislative bodies and education agencies, which are often charged with delegating federal special education funding as well as enacting and enforcing state special education law in addition to ensuring compliance with federal special education law (Thurlow et. al., 2005). Of course, the significance then also reaches those elements of local government that are ultimately responsible for the implementation of and compliance with special education policy within individual school districts, such as school board members and superintendents (Woodworth, 2016).

While the relevance of this project pertains to the stakeholders listed above rather marginally, the real impact relates much more closely to the educational professionals that are capable of putting such a project into action within their individual schools. I am referring first to school administrators (principals, deans, etc.), who are typically in charge of organizing and leading professional development sessions as well as collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data to determine the extent to which their school is satisfactorily performing its duties and responsibilities as well as progressing towards established goals. Second, this project holds extreme relevance for both secondary general education teachers and special education teachers as well as other educational professionals that often work closely with special education students (social workers, therapists, counselors, SEAs, etc.). These are the individuals who must work together to ensure that the students with special needs who attend their school are receiving the equitable educational experience to which they are entitled. Although this

project is designed primarily to help secondary general education teachers meet the learning needs of their students with special needs while learning in the general education classroom, many of these other educational professionals are also often involved in providing additional services for these students and therefore have a vested interest in the impact of such a project as related to the overarching goal of meeting the needs of these students in every aspect of their educational experience.

Of course, the most important stakeholders impacted by this project are the students themselves and their families and guardians. Students with special needs are entitled to an educational experience equitable to that of any other student. Collectively, we have defined, in the most general sense, the purpose of education to be to prepare young people to live within and contribute to our broader society. Therefore, we must provide an educational experience that gives all students the best opportunity possible to do so, including students with special needs. The families and guardians of these students must be able to trust that their children are receiving such an opportunity while at school, and the students themselves must be able to recognize this as well to the greatest possible extent. Ultimately, the purpose of this project is to help make this a reality.

Context and rationale for the project. At its core, my project centers on whether or not we as professional educators are providing each and every student with an equitable educational experience, which is our primary responsibility. Students who are entitled to special education services as established in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans, including accommodations and modifications to instruction and assessment in the general education classroom, are denied an equitable educational

experience when general education teachers fail to comply with the requirements of IEPs and 504 plans. What is more, general education teachers who fail to familiarize themselves with the learning needs of students with special needs and differentiate their instruction accordingly are also failing to provide these students with the equitable educational experience they deserve. This issue has become particularly pertinent in the wake of a strong push in many school districts nationwide for the integration of special education students into the general education classroom as much as possible.

Given this, my project aims to help general education teachers provide their students with special needs with this equitable educational experience to which they are entitled. As someone who has both worked as a special education assistant and taught in the general education classroom, I have personal and professional experience that gives me insight into the perspectives of both general education teachers and special education students and staff on this issue. I have found that my experience as a SEA has helped me tremendously as a general education teacher and vice versa. My experience working closely with special education students as a SEA allowed me to familiarize myself with the learning needs and abilities of these students, which has proven extremely helpful for differentiating and modifying my instruction in the general education classroom to meet the learning needs and preferences of special education students. On the other hand, my experience as a general education teacher has given me perspective on the demands of that position, which has in turn pushed me to consider how to make the implementation of strategies for modification, accommodation, and differentiation in the areas of instruction and assessment easier for general education teachers. Ultimately, the goal of

this project is to help general education teachers, myself included, become more effective educators by helping to ensure that they are meeting the learning needs of special education students in their classrooms as well as complying with state and federal special education policies.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter One, I introduced my research question as such: Which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment? I outlined the personal and professional experiences that inspired me to pursue this project, namely my work as a special education tutor, SEA, and student teacher. I examined the stakeholders that this project has the potential to impact, from federal, state, and local government entities to administrators, teachers, support staff, and most importantly, the students themselves and their families and guardians. I explained the context and rationale for the project, identifying the responsibility of general education teachers to meet the learning needs of all of their students, including those with special needs, and establishing that the purpose of this project is to help them to do so more effectively. In Chapter Two, I review existing literature on strategies for meeting the learning needs of special education students. In Chapter Three, I provide a thorough description of the project. In Chapter Four, I reflect upon and conclude the project.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The foundation of this project rests upon this research question: Which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment? In Chapter Two, existing academic literature pertaining to this research question is examined. First, the purpose of special education is established: to provide students with special needs with an educational experience equitable to that of students without special needs. The principle of equity is differentiated from that of equality, and the importance of this distinction as it relates to special education was explained. The history of special education as well as flagship federal special education legislation is reviewed. The most significant aspects of this legislation as related to this project are analyzed, namely “free and appropriate public education”, “least restrictive environment”, Individualized Education Plans, and 504 plans.

Second, existing academic literature on strategies for secondary general education teachers to meet the learning needs of special education students learning in the general education setting is examined. The practices of modification, accommodation, and differentiation are defined, and their differences as well as their interconnectivity are explained. Strategies for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for instructing students with special needs in the general education classroom and their effectiveness are analyzed. Third, a similar process

is conducted for assessing student learning in the general education classroom. The focus on classroom assessments administered by individual teachers rather than large scale assessments is established. Strategies for modifying, accommodating, and differentiating classroom assessments to meet the learning needs of special education students and their effectiveness are reviewed. To conclude, the rationale for conducting the research for this project is explained.

Purpose of Special Education

Equality vs. equity. The foundation of any project investigating the effectiveness of special education practices is a clear understanding of the purpose of special education itself. At its core, I understand the purpose of special education to be to help provide each and every student with an equitable educational experience, which is the primary responsibility of educators. Key to this definition of the purpose of special education is the term *equitable educational experience*. As opposed to an equal educational experience, which I understand as each individual student receiving the exact same educational opportunity, an equitable educational experience means that each individual student receives an educational opportunity that gives them the best chance to achieve their academic and personal goals (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Therefore, the amount of support and resources that each individual student is entitled to differs based upon the student's unique combination of abilities and life experiences.

A helpful example for understanding the crucial distinction between equal and equitable educational opportunities comes from the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case. In the *Brown v. Board* case,

the Supreme Court ruled that schools that segregated students based upon their racial background did not provide all students with an equal educational opportunity because students of color did not receive the same educational opportunities that white students received (Tatum, 1997). The Court held that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional and ordered schools to desegregate with the thought that racially integrated schools would afford every student an equal educational opportunity regardless of their racial background. In this sense, the *Brown v. Board* decision sought to address the problem of disparity in educational opportunity along racial lines through an equality lens (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Despite the *Brown v. Board* ruling and subsequent implementation of policies and procedures to eliminate the racial segregation of schools *de jure* (“by law”), 65 years later, one of the most pertinent issues in the sphere of education in the United States remains the disparity in academic achievement between white students and students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The root of the issue lies in the distinction between equality and equity. The policies and procedures that federal, state, and local governments implemented to racially integrate schools following the *Brown v. Board* decision failed to take into account the myriad factors beyond the fact that students of color attended different schools than white students that contributed to (and continue to contribute to) the disparity in academic achievement between white students and students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Among these additional factors are the legacy of historical and contemporary structurally racist policies and practices that occupy nearly all aspects of life in U.S. society, from housing to employment to finance to politics to law enforcement to the legal process and

everywhere in between, including the education system (Nocella II et. al.). By approaching the problem of racial segregation through the lens of equality, the *Brown v. Board* decision and subsequent integration policies and procedures failed to acknowledge these additional factors at play which inherently disadvantage people of color in the various spheres of life in U.S. society, many of which prevented and continue to prevent students of color from receiving an equal educational opportunity to that of white students. Furthermore, the educational system itself has its foundations in the experiences and values of white, middle-class U.S. citizens (Nocella II et. al.). The idea that simply placing students of color in white schools and therefore giving students of color an “equal” educational opportunity to that of their white peers would somehow solve the problem of disparity in academic achievement proved to be shortsighted to say the very least (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Approaching the problem of racial disparity in academic achievement through an equity lens rather than an equality leads to a perspective that takes into account the various additional factors at play that contribute to the problem and seeks to address them holistically. This means that students of color are entitled to additional support and resources to help “even the playing the field”, so to speak, with that of white students to account for the “head start” white students are privileged to in nearly all spheres of life in U.S. society, including the educational sphere, by virtue of their whiteness (Tatum, 1997). An equity approach to addressing the problem of racial disparity in academic achievement has become the dominant paradigm in the arena of education today (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Equitable educational experiences and special education policy. Although the issue of equitable educational opportunity applies to countless social categorizations (race, sex and gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, immigration status, and several others), the focus of this project was on one category of students in particular: students with special needs who qualify for special education services. Before I continue, a brief but important note on diction: throughout this project, I elected, whenever possible, to use phrasing such as “students with special needs”, “students who receive special education services”, “differently-abled students”, and “special education/special needs students” to describe the category of students upon which I focus my research. I made every effort to avoid referring to this group of students as “disabled” in recognition of the feeling that the use of this terminology implies a deficit perspective which members of this community may find offensive. Furthermore, the category of students with special needs is tremendously broad and intersectional, covering an array of subcategories of more specific special needs. When referring to a specific group of students under the broad umbrella of students with special needs, I made this designation clear. For example, if I was discussing an instructional strategy that is designed specifically for students with developmental cognitive disabilities (DCD), I referred to these students as “students with DCD” or “DCD students”. Unless I made this designation, however, the reader may safely assume that I was referring to the more general category of students with special needs.

In the most basic of terms, special education is the practice of educating students in a way that addresses their individual differences and needs (Scruggs & Mastropieri,

2013). Addressing students' individual differences and needs in the classroom is a primary responsibility of teachers and is commonly referred to as "differentiation" in the context of general education. However, those students whose individual differences and needs cannot be adequately accounted for by the general practice of differentiation are entitled to receive special education services. Students eligible for special education services include those with learning disabilities, communication disorders, emotional and behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and developmental disabilities, among various other types of disabilities and special needs (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2013). The principle behind special education is founded in the responsibility of educators to provide each and every student with an equitable educational experience. In order for students with special needs to receive an educational experience that is equitable to that of their peers without special needs, schools must provide special education services for special needs students (Woodworth, 2016).

The practice of providing special education services to students with special needs is a relatively recent development in the historical trajectory of the U.S. education system. Throughout much of the history of education in the U.S., schools elected to simply exclude students with special needs. Special needs students were refused access to schools or were admitted but received little to no effective instruction (Russell & Bray, 2013). During the 1950s and 1960s, a wave of advocacy for individuals with special needs inspired by the larger Civil Rights Movement led to several landmark court decisions and subsequent federal legislation that established the responsibility of state and local education agencies to educate students with special needs (Scruggs &

Mastropieri, 2013). This culminated in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA). EAHCA established the right of children with special needs to receive a “free, appropriate public education” (FAPE) and provided funds for state and local education agencies to comply with its mandates, including the provision of special education services (Scruggs and Mastropieri, 2013). 15 years later, Congress reauthorized and expanded EAHCA as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which remains the most flagship federal special education legislation to this day.

IDEA contains six primary elements. First, it reaffirms and clarifies the right of children to receive a free and appropriate public education. Second, it mandates an appropriate evaluation process to determine whether students qualify for special education services and for which services they qualify. Third, for those students who are determined to be eligible for special education services, it calls for the creation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that describes how the individual student’s special needs affects their involvement in the general education curriculum and specifies the special education services to be provided to the student. Fourth IDEA establishes the principle of “least restrictive environment” (LRE) for educating students with special needs, meaning that students with special needs must be educated in that environment in which a typical student is educated (the general education classroom) as often as possible. Fifth, it emphasizes the necessity of family-teacher communication and collaboration to ensure that students with special needs are receiving the equitable educational opportunity to which they are entitled. Finally, IDEA establishes several procedural safeguards to protect the rights of children with special needs and their families as well as

a process for families and teachers to challenge any decisions they feel are inappropriate for students.

IEPs, 504 Plans and LRE. For the purposes of this project, the most pertinent aspects of current special education legislation are the LRE and IEP mandates of IDEA as well as a closely related element that emerged from a distinct piece of legislation, the 504 Plan (Woodworth, 2016). As explained above, the principle of LRE requires that students with special needs be educated with students without special needs to the maximum appropriate extent (MacFarlane, 2011). The purpose of LRE is to ensure that students with special needs receive the free, appropriate public education to which they are entitled and to avoid segregating students with special needs from their general education peers as much as possible (Woodworth, 2016). Teaching students with special needs in the general education environment to the greatest extent possible is beneficial for these students for two primary reasons. First, it allows students with special needs to learn within the general education curriculum that covers the academic standards that students are expected to master in order to advance through the various grade levels. Second, it gives students with special needs the opportunity to interact with their general education peers in a common social space (the general education classroom), thereby minimizing possible feelings of isolation and marginalization for special needs students and more closely mimicking the social environment they will encounter outside of school as adults (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2013).

According to LRE, if students with special needs require supplementary aids or services, such as paraprofessional support, to achieve their educational goals while

learning in the general education environment, they must be provided as needed. Of course, what constitutes the least restrictive environment for students receiving special educational services varies from student to student based on their unique abilities and needs (Woodworth, 2016). This is where the IEP comes into play. Each student's IEP designates the extent to which the student will learn in the general education setting, which supplementary aids and services the student will be provided while learning in the general education setting, and the extent to which the student will learn in an alternative education setting, such as a resource room. I explore IEPs and their essentiality to providing an equitable educational experience to students with special needs in greater detail below.

The IEP can be best described as the “blueprint” to providing an equitable educational experience to students with special needs (Woodworth, 2016). A parent can request an evaluation to determine if their student is eligible for special education services. A principal, teacher, or counselor can also request the evaluation, but the evaluation cannot be administered without the consent of a parent. Typically, a student undergoes this evaluation if they are consistently struggling to keep up with grade-level academics, are struggling in one or more specific academic area, or has received a mental health or medical diagnosis from a provider outside of the school (Woodworth, 2016), and if pre-evaluation interventions have failed to help the student improve their performance. The evaluation consists of multiple testing tools that assess cognitive, developmental, behavioral, and physical domains. The evaluation team scores and reviews these tests to determine whether the student requires special education services.

If so, the student receives an IEP. The IEP is created by a team that consists of the student's parent or guardian, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, and other educational or medical professionals if necessary, such as a therapist or counselor. The team works together to tailor the IEP to the student's specific needs, including instruction, related services (such as speech or occupational therapy), assistive technology (such as an iPad), and any additional services for which the student might qualify, including those services which will allow the student to be included in the general academic curriculum, extracurricular, and other nonacademic time (Woodworth, 2016). The IEP also outlines measurable yearly goals for the student as well as current benchmark and short term goals. Other elements of the IEP include if, how, and when the student will participate in state and district testing standards and a behavior plan if necessary. The IEP must be reviewed annually to determine if the student's goals have been met, if any modifications need to be made, or if the student's special needs continue to impact their education (Woodworth, 2016).

Slightly less comprehensive than an IEP but serving a similar purpose is the 504 plan. The 504 plan stems from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a piece of federal legislation that guarantees certain rights to people with disabilities (Scruggs and Mastropieri, 2013). Section 504 expressly prohibits any program receiving federal funding from discriminating against people based on their disability status. If a student has special needs but does not require an IEP, they may receive a 504 plan, which addresses how their special needs impact their ability to participate in the educational environment (Woodworth, 2016). A 504 plan outlines any necessary accommodations in

the academic or social aspect of student's education, identifies who is responsible for providing these accommodations, and designates who will follow through on the implementation of these services. Both IEPs and 504 plans are crucial to ensuring that students with special needs receive the equitable educational experience to which they are entitled (Woodworth, 2016).

Section summary. This section established the purpose of special education to be to provide students with special needs with an educational experience equitable to that of students without special needs. It differentiated between the principles of equity and equality, and explained the importance of this distinction as it relates to special education. It reviewed the history of special education and the foundational federal legislation that governs special education practices. It concluded by analyzing the most relevant elements of this legislation as related to this project: "free and appropriate public education", "least restrictive environment", IEPs, and 504 plans. In the next section, existing academic literature on strategies for general education teachers to meet the learning needs of special education students learning in the general education setting is examined.

Strategies for Instruction

Modification, accommodation, and differentiation. The key to meeting the unique learning needs of special education students for general education teachers lies in three essential pedagogical practices: modification, accommodation, and differentiation. While all distinctly different, these three components of special education are often used in tandem to meet the learning needs of special education students (Friend & Bursuck, 2015). Modifications and accommodations fall under the umbrella of supplementary aids

and services within special education, a category consisting of a broad array of supports that enable students with special needs to participate in general education, extracurricular activities, and other school settings to the greatest extent possible (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). Differentiation, on the other hand, is a more general pedagogical practice in which the teacher provides multiple avenues for all students to acquire content, process ideas, and develop products so that each student can learn effectively (Tomlinson, 2001). These three practices are examined in greater detail below.

In basic terms, modification refers to *what* students learn within the general education curriculum (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). In the case of students with special needs, modification typically implies that some elements of the curriculum are removed. For example, a student with a significant intellectual disability may not learn all of the vocabulary in a particular science unit, but would instead focus on those vocabulary words that they are likely to encounter in daily life. The types of modifications to which students with special needs are entitled are established in the student's IEP. Modifications are the least common of the three pedagogical practices (Friend and Bursuck, 2015).

Modification is a practice with which general education teachers may struggle greatly. Teachers may feel as though they are “cheating” their students with special needs out of the education that their peers are receiving or that they are “cheating” their general education students by “taking it easy” on their students with special needs. This is where the equity approach to education comes into play. Modifications in instruction help students with special needs learn in a way that is best suited to their unique needs and abilities as determined by their IEP team (Woodworth, 2016). In this sense, modifications

are simply evening the educational playing field rather than unfairly advantaging or disadvantaging students with special needs *vis-à-vis* their peers.

As opposed to modification, accommodation pertains to *how* students learn within the general education classroom (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). Accommodations do not alter the information that students learn within the general education curriculum, but rather the way in which they learn it. For example, a student with a generalized learning disability may be learning the same math as their classmates but be assigned fewer math problems to complete because it takes them longer to complete each one. Or a student with dyslexia may respond to an essay question on a Social Studies learning activity by writing bullet points instead of sentences and paragraphs because it reduces the writing task while still allowing the student to engage in Social Studies learning, which is the real purpose of the activity. Accommodations are more common than modifications and are also outlined in a student's IEP or 504 plan (Woodworth, 2016). Again, the equity lens becomes crucial for maintaining the perspective of evening the playing field from the standpoint of the general education teacher.

Differentiation is distinct from modification and accommodation in that it is a more general pedagogical practice that is not mandated by law or established in an IEP or 504 plan. Rather, it is something that general education teachers should be incorporating into their instruction for all students, not just for students with special needs (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). All students have unique learning abilities and preferences. In the field of educational psychology, this is often phrased in terms of "multiple intelligences", the theory that human intelligence is not defined by a single general ability but rather can be

differentiated into distinct “modalities” (Gardner, 1983). In other words, every student has unique “intelligences” and thus learns and demonstrates learning in different ways. Therefore, teachers should differentiate their instruction in order to accommodate the unique learning abilities and preferences of all of their students. Although general education teachers may stress about differentiating their instruction, it can be as simple as giving instructions both verbally and in writing or using both visual-based and literacy-based learning activities (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). In the context of special education, differentiation is a beneficial pedagogical practice that is already taking place in the general education classroom. General education teachers may need to differentiate their instruction more intensely in order to meet the learning needs and preferences of special education students, but more specific adaptations would fall into the categories of modification or accommodation (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). Despite their differences, modification, accommodation, and differentiation have one key aspect in common: the general education teacher is responsible for their implementation.

Response to intervention and co-teaching. The existing literature on instructional strategies for general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiated instruction for students with special needs learning in the general education setting is vast. To review this collection in any detail is far beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, I elected to focus on two instructional strategies that are the most relevant to the research question that is the foundation of this project: Response to Intervention and co-teaching. These are two of the most widely-used models in contemporary teaching practice (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). In this section, I reviewed

these two instructional strategies in detail and consider their viability as models for secondary general education teachers to use to meet the learning needs of special education students.

The first model I analyzed is Response to Intervention (RTI). The National Center for Learning Disabilities RTI Action Network defines this instructional strategy as “a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs” (Gorski, n.d.). RTI is a process that typically begins in the primary educational setting with universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. Students who are identified as struggling learners are then provided with specific instructional interventions by general education teachers, special education personnel, or other specialists to accelerate their rate of learning. Students’ learning rates and levels of performance are then closely monitored to inform decisions about the intensity and duration of these instructional interventions (Gorski, n.d.).

The RTI model might be most easily understood as consisting of three tiers (Gorski, n.d.). The first tier consists of screening for and identifying struggling learners and then providing group instructional interventions for these students during the regular school day and in the general education classroom. Students who do not demonstrate adequate progress are then moved to the second tier and are provided with targeted interventions, which typically take place in small group settings outside of the general education classroom and are supplemental to general curriculum instruction. Students who continue to struggle move to the third tier, which involves individualized, intensive interventions. Those students who do not achieve progress to the desired level in response

to these interventions are then referred for a comprehensive evaluation and considered for eligibility for special education services. RTI is a general model, and its implementation can be modified to fit the particular needs of schools and students (Gorski, n.d.).

Although RTI is typically implemented in the primary educational setting, it is increasingly expanding to the secondary setting (Gorski, n.d.). RTI was developed as a preventative model to identify struggling learners and implement instructional interventions early in the educational process. It may appear incongruent to think about prevention in the context of secondary education because by the time students reach the secondary level, they often already have a history of academic failure that only worsens as they advance through middle school and high school (Ehren, Lenz, & Deshler, 2004). However, there are different ways to think about prevention with secondary students, particularly in the context of literacy. Because literacy is essential to academic success in the secondary setting, educators can help struggling students avoid more global school failure by focusing on proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Ehren et al., 2004). Prevention also relates to the negative consequences of poor academic achievement, including failure to earn a high school diploma and dropping out of school. More personal and social consequences of poor academic achievement include low self-esteem, alienation, and antisocial behavior (Ehren et al., 2004). From this perspective, prevention plays an essential role in the education of both primary and secondary students.

Despite this, secondary educators may be less than enthusiastic about RTI implementation because they may be pessimistic about what can be accomplished with

older students. Ehren et al. (2004) identify the myth that it is fruitless to spend time and money on struggling adolescents because they have passed the point at which instruction or intervention can make a real difference as a significant barrier to the viability of RTI in the secondary educational setting. Secondary educators may think that struggling adolescents are beyond help and that significant problems, especially with literacy, should have been taken care of in elementary school. Of course, in an ideal world, all learning problems would be identified and ameliorated before students reach the secondary level. However, that is not the reality of the education system as it exists in the United States. There are students in secondary schools who struggle with literacy, and evidence exists that intervention with them can be effective (Ehren et al., 2004). Because content mastery at the secondary level depends greatly on content literacy, RTI presents itself as a viable model for secondary educators to utilize to help provide struggling learners with the equitable educational experience to which they are entitled.

The second instructional intervention model I examined in this literature review is the co-teaching model. Co-teaching occurs when two or more educators share the instruction for a single group of students, typically in a single classroom setting (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). Although co-teaching can involve any two teachers in a primary or secondary educational setting, for the purposes of this project the co-teaching model discussed here consists of a general education teacher and a special education teacher sharing instructional responsibilities in the secondary setting. This model has become increasingly popular as a service-delivery option for inclusive schools seeking to meet the learning needs of special education students while complying with the LRE mandate of

IDEA (Walsh, 2012). Co-teaching of this variety most often takes place for a set period of time and in a classroom setting where the number of special education students and the nature of their learning needs justifies the presence of two or more teachers.

Although there are numerous possibilities for instructing students with special needs in the secondary general education classroom using the co-teaching model, Friend and Bursuck (2015) identify six of the most common as: one teach one observe, station teaching, parallel teaching, teaming, alternative teaching, and one teach one assist. The one teach one observe option consists of one teacher leading the lesson while the other gathers data on students to better understand their learning needs. The observing teacher pays particularly close attention to relevant student behaviors, such as attention to the lesson, ability to work independently, understanding of learning objectives, participation during instruction, and willingness to seek assistance. The teachers can then use this information to inform their specific instructional strategies and develop appropriate modifications, accommodations, and differentiation. For this reason, the one teach one observe method is perhaps most useful at the beginning of the school year or semester because the co-teachers can use the results of their observations to determine which specific instructional strategies to use with the other co-teaching arrangements (Friend and Bursuck, 2015).

Station teaching is a co-teaching method in which the classroom is arranged to facilitate three separate learning stations. The general education teacher leads one learning station while the special education teacher leads another, and the third is designated for individual or small group work. The general education teacher might be

teaching students using a particular instructional strategy at the first station while the special education teacher uses an alternative strategy at the second, and students work on an assignment at the third. Students rotate from station to station throughout the class period. The advantage to this method is that students are exposed to two different instructional strategies and then given the opportunity to use the strategy that works best for them to complete the individual or group assignment (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). Parallel teaching offers a similar advantage with a slightly different arrangement. The class is divided in half, and the two educators teach the same lesson using different instructional strategies. For example, the general education teacher might use a strategy that focuses on literacy skills while the special education teacher focuses on visual learning. Students can then choose the instructional method that works best for them. Teaming, on the other hand, calls for both teachers to be equally engaged in the instructional activities of the lesson. This co-teaching arrangement might involve role-playing, demonstrations, modeling, debating, or other collaborative instructional strategies that the teachers develop and implement to meet the learning needs of their students (Friend and Bursuck, 2015).

The final two co-teaching methods, alternative teaching and one teach one assist, are perhaps the most commonly used in co-taught classrooms (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). With alternative teaching, one teacher instructs the majority of the class while the other teacher works with a small group of students. One teach one assist, as the name suggests, calls for one teacher to lead the lesson while the other quietly assists individual students. Although the intention of both of these methods is for the general education

teacher and the special education teacher to alternate roles regularly, oftentimes the general education teacher takes the teaching lead while the special education teacher instructs the small group or provides individual assistance. While this arrangement might appear to be the most expedient, Friend and Bursuck (2015) warn that overuse could create a de facto segregated classroom in which the special education teacher works almost exclusively with the special education students separate from the rest of the class, relegating the special education teacher to the role of teaching assistant or paraprofessional while undermining the entire purpose of co-teaching, which is to educate students with special needs in as inclusive of an educational setting as possible. As with any instructional strategy, co-teaching should be implemented based on the needs of students as well as the resources available to schools and the professional skill sets of individual educators (Friend and Bursuck, 2015).

Section summary. This section of the project reviewed the existing literature related to instructional strategies for general education teachers to use to meet the learning needs of special education students in the secondary classroom. It focused primarily on two of the most widely used instructional models, RTI and co-teaching, whose effectiveness has been well established in existing research surrounding this topic (Huges & Dexter, 2011; Friend & Hurley-Chamberlain, 2009; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). The RTI model was analyzed and its relevancy to the secondary educational setting was established. The co-teaching model was examined through its six most common arrangements. These two models serve distinct purposes in that RTI is used primarily to identify struggling learners that are potential recipients of special

education services while co-teaching is an instructional strategy typically provided for students who are already receiving special education services. However, both models rely heavily upon the secondary general education teacher for effective implementation with the ultimate goal of providing all students with an equitable educational opportunity. In the next section, I shifted my focus from instructional strategies to assessment strategies.

Strategies for Assessment

Defining assessment. The research for this project centers on effective strategies for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of both instruction and assessment. In this section, I explore existing literature focusing on assessment strategies. For the purposes of this project, assessment refers to the ways in which students' learning is evaluated, the process and product of determining whether students have learned what they were expected to learn from instruction (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). It is the second variable in the academic equation; if the purpose of instruction is to provide students with the information and skills needed to meet academic objectives and standards, the purpose of evaluation is to determine the extent to which students have met these objectives and standards.

In the context of this project, "assessment" referred to classroom assessments, which are differentiated from large scale assessments. Large scale assessments are those assessments mandated by state and federal education policy with the purpose of measuring student success at meeting academic standards and holding schools accountable for the educational outcomes of their students (Thurlow, Lazarus,

Thompson, & Morse, 2005). As DeLuca (2008) states, contemporary emphasis on inclusive education in the United States means that students with special needs are largely expected to participate in large scale assessments, which has created its own challenges for educators and policymakers in determining how to accommodate the needs of these students in order to accurately assess their performance on these assessments. Despite the importance of this issue, examining modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for students with special needs as related to large scale assessments is beyond the scope of this project. The focus here was limited to effective strategies for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for students with special needs on the classroom assessments that teachers administer to measure students' academic success in their individual classes.

Classroom assessments can be broken down into two different types of assessment: informal assessment and formal assessment. Although no strict definition exists for informal or formal assessment, a way to differentiate between the two is that formal assessments typically require students to generate some sort of graded final product to demonstrate their learning whereas informal assessments do not (Hargrove, 2000). For example, a traditional pencil-and-paper test would be considered a formal assessment, whereas the teacher moving around the classroom and monitoring student progress on an individual assignment would be considered an informal assessment.

Classroom assessments are also subdivided into three different forms of assessment: prior knowledge assessments, formative assessments, and summative assessments (Reeves, 2011). As the name suggests, prior knowledge assessments are

administered by teachers at the beginning of a unit to determine what students already know about the content to be taught. A common prior knowledge assessment tool is the “Know-Want to Know-Learned” (K-W-L) three column chart where students write down what they already know about a topic in the first column of the chart. Formative assessments take place during the unit to determine the extent to which students are comprehending the content they have been taught up to that point in time. Exit cards, where students write down what they learned from the lesson on an index card and then turn it in to the teacher as they leave class, are a widely-used type of formative assessment. Summative assessments are given by teachers at the end of a unit to measure students’ mastery of the content, commonly taking the form of a test or some other graded final product. All forms of assessment are crucial to the educational process because they provide teachers with information about how their students learn, which in turn helps them to adjust their teaching practice to best serve the learning needs of their students (Gillies, 2014). This project focused on formal summative assessment because it is the most ubiquitous and decisive form of assessment for determining students’ academic performance (Friend and Bursuck, 2015).

Assessment strategies: testing and grading. Testing and grading are the two most common modes of formal summative assessment that secondary general education teachers use to evaluate their students’ academic performance (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). This is no different for students with special needs learning in the general education setting. For example, testing and grading are widely used to determine progress towards yearly goals established in IEPs (Standford & Reeves, 2005). However, the ways

in which secondary general education teachers test and grade general education students can be problematic for students with special needs if they do not take these students' unique learning needs and abilities into account. As Friend and Bursuck (2015) state, the most important aspect in testing and grading students with special needs is ensuring that the results reflect their knowledge and skills, not their disabilities. Therefore, it is the responsibility of general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation in testing and grading to ensure that this is so. In this section, modification, accommodation, and differentiation techniques were reviewed for administering traditional pencil-and-paper exams as well as alternative forms of testing and grading.

When administering pencil-and-paper tests, secondary general education teachers can make modifications and accommodations for students with special needs in three contexts: before the test, during the test, and after the test (Friend & Bursuck, 2015). Modification takes place prior to the test being given and may take myriad different forms depending upon the unique learning needs of the students. For some students this might mean simply reducing the number of questions they are required to answer on the test, while for others it may require a complete alteration of the test format from pencil-and-paper to oral or technology-based. General education teachers should review students' IEPs and consult with special education teachers when making decisions about modifications for classroom tests (Friend and Bursuck, 2015). Likewise, proper accommodations for students with special needs prior to classroom tests differ based upon students' abilities. However, some of the most common accommodations include

study guides, practice tests, individual or small group tutoring, and teaching test-taking skills, among many others (Friend & Bursuck, 2015). Again, general education teachers should consult with students' IEPs and special education staff to determine appropriate accommodations for their students with special needs.

During the test, common forms of accommodation include providing alternative forms of questions and alternative ways of administering tests (Friend & Bursuck, 2015). For example, the general education teacher might change an essay question to a multiple choice question or add a word bank to a fill-in-the-blank section for students with special needs. Alternative ways of administering tests might include allowing students with special needs additional time to complete tests, permitting students to use additional resources such as dictionaries or electronic spell checkers, or having students take tests in a location outside of the general education classroom under the supervision of a special education teacher or paraprofessional. As far as accommodations after the test, general education teachers can alter letter or number grades, change grading criteria, or use alternatives to letter and number grades (Friend & Brusuck, 2015). Teachers can change letter or number grades by adding written comments or giving multiple grades to help clarify what the overall grade actually means for the student. Teachers may also adjust grading criteria by basing a student's grade on the number of questions the student attempted to answer, allowing a student to retake the test and then averaging the two scores, or grading a student's test based on their IEP goals. As alternatives to letter or number grades, teachers could use pass/fail grades, competency checklists, rubric-based grading, and T-charts, among other options (Standford & Reeves, 2005). As with

modifications and accommodations made prior to and during the test, decisions by general education teachers regarding appropriate accommodations after the test for students with special needs should be made in consultation with special education staff and students' IEPs.

When it comes to traditional pencil-and-paper tests, modifications and accommodations are the most useful tools for secondary general education teachers seeking to ensure that the test results accurately reflect the knowledge and skills of their students with special needs. However, differentiation comes into play in considering forms of assessment other than pencil-and-paper tests that tend to focus on information recall and reading and writing skills. Two of the most frequently used methods of alternative assessment are performance assessments and authentic assessments.

Performance assessments are designed to measure how well students can apply what they have learned, emphasizing what students can do with their knowledge and skills (Reeves, 2011). For example, if a secondary Science teacher wanted to assess students' ability to determine the levels of pollutants present in a lake, a performance assessment might require students to collect a water sample from a lake and use the information and skills they learned in class to demonstrate this ability.

Similarly, authentic assessments are designed to measure students' ability to deal with situations or problems that occur outside of the classroom, in the so-called "real world" (Reeves, 2011). Proponents of authentic assessment argue that traditional pencil-and-paper assessments do not accurately replicate the types of scenarios that students will face in their daily lives outside of school. When faced with problems in the

outside world, people usually have time to think about the problem, consult with others, and revise the products they create (Reeves, 2011). An authentic assessment is a performance assessment that gives students the opportunity to practice using the skills and knowledge they will need in the future. Using the example science performance assessment, the teacher could make the assessment even more authentic by adding a second component in which students write to a local, state, or federal government representative advocating for pollution control measures or the establishment of additional environmental protections.

Performance assessments and authentic assessments present several potential advantages over traditional tests for students with special needs. First, they allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities in ways that do not rely exclusively on reading and writing. Second, they are not subject to the same time constraints of traditional tests. Third, they reinforce the connection between school tasks and tasks students will be expected to perform outside of school, a connection that may be difficult for students with special needs to make with traditional tests (Friend & Bursuck, 2015). However, performance assessments and authentic assessments may also present additional challenges for students with special needs, especially if students lack the necessary preskills for completing required tasks. In these cases, performance and authentic assessments may require the application of additional modifications and accommodations. Ultimately, secondary general education teachers must determine, in consultation with special education staff and students' IEPs, which types of assessment are most appropriate for their students with special needs.

Section summary. In this section, I analyzed the existing literature on assessment strategies for students with special needs. The focus was narrowed to formal summative assessments administered by individual secondary general education teachers. I first examined strategies for providing modifications and accommodations on traditional pencil-and-paper tests prior to, during, and after the test. I then reviewed strategies for differentiating assessments by using alternative forms of assessments, namely performance assessments and authentic assessments. In the following section, I established my rationale for pursuing this project based upon my research findings.

Rationale for Research

This project constitutes an attempt to determine which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment. As my review of the existing literature on this topic revealed, there is no shortage of proven strategies for teachers to use when it comes to modifying, accommodating, and differentiating instruction and assessment to match the learning needs and abilities of special education students. The purpose of this project, then, is to condense these numerous strategies into a model that is accessible and applicable for secondary general education teachers. The information about these strategies is scattered throughout the existing academic and professional literature, and it is only through a thorough review of that literature that this project is able to compress this information into a more concentrated format. The next step is to organize this information into a format that would save secondary general education teachers the time and effort of doing

so themselves, thereby increasing the likelihood that these strategies are applied in the secondary general education classroom and ultimately improving the educational outcomes for students with special needs learning in the secondary general education environment. The remainder of this project attempts to do just that.

Chapter Summary

The first section of this chapter established that the purpose of special education is to provide students with special needs with an educational experience equitable to that of students without special needs. It differentiated between the principles of equity and equality, and explained the importance of this distinction as it relates to special education. It reviewed the history of special education and the foundational federal legislation that governs special education practices. It concluded by analyzing the most relevant elements of this legislation as related to this project: “free and appropriate public education”, “least restrictive environment”, IEPs, and 504 plans.

The second section of this chapter reviewed the existing literature related to instructional strategies for general education teachers to use to meet the learning needs of special education students in the secondary classroom. It focused primarily on two of the most widely used instructional models, RTI and co-teaching. The RTI model was analyzed and its relevancy to the secondary educational setting was established. The co-teaching model was examined through its six most common arrangements.

The third section of this chapter analyzed the existing literature on assessment strategies for students with special needs. The focus was narrowed to formal summative assessments administered by individual secondary general education teachers. I first

examined strategies for providing modifications and accommodations on traditional pencil-and-paper tests prior to, during, and after the test. I then reviewed strategies for differentiating assessments by using alternative forms of assessments, namely performance assessments and authentic assessments. Finally, I established my rationale for pursuing this project based upon my research findings. In the following chapter, I use my findings from my research to describe the project I designed to achieve the stated goal of determining which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

This project investigates the following research question: Which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment? This chapter provides a thorough description of the project itself, drawing upon the research gathered from the literature review in the previous chapter. It begins with an overview of the project, followed by a rationale for creating and implementing the project. The purpose of these sections is to introduce the project and its foundational framework as well as to explain its contribution to the existing conversation surrounding the research question. A description of the setting and intended audience for the project as well as an outline of the project and a timeline for its completion are also included. These sections provide the parameters of the project and describe the way in which the effectiveness of the project was measured. The chapter concludes with a summary of the project.

Project Overview

The purpose of this project is to provide secondary general education teachers with effective strategies for modifying, accommodating, and differentiating their teaching to meet the unique learning needs of special education students learning in the general education classroom, specifically in the areas of instruction and assessment. The project

consists of four separate components. The first component is a four-hour-long large group professional development session. This session includes a pre-session survey, a Google Slides presentation, and a small-group learning activity. Upon completion of the workshop, participants receive a packet that includes relevant information and resources provided over the course of the session. The Powerpoint as well as links to all information and resources provided are also shared with participants via Google Drive. The workshop provides participants with a knowledge base regarding the purpose and structure of modification, accommodation, and differentiation as well as specific strategies for applying modifications, accommodations, and differentiation to their pedagogical practice. It focuses on two elements of pedagogy in particular, instruction and assessment, and provides an overarching framework for incorporating modification, accommodation, and differentiation into both areas in order to provide students with special needs learning in the general education classroom with the equitable educational experience to which they are entitled.

The other three elements of the professional development project are implemented during small-group professional learning community meetings at three different points throughout the first half of the school year. The first of these three sessions occurs in mid-October, the second in mid-December, and the third at the end of the first semester, approximately mid-January. The first session asks participants to reflect upon their use of the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy in their classroom instruction. The second session asks participants to reflect upon their use of the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy in their assessments.

The third session asks participants to complete an exit survey designed to measure the extent to which they utilized the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy throughout the first semester.

Project Rationale

At its core, the rationale for this project has its foundations in the primary responsibility of all educational systems, which is to provide equitable educational experiences for all students. My unique personal and professional experiences working with students with special needs as a peer tutor and SEA led to the realization that instruction and assessment strategies varied in their effectiveness from student to student based on their unique abilities and needs. In my role, I became quite familiar with the individual learning needs and abilities of the students with whom I worked. However, the level of effort that general education teachers put towards familiarizing themselves with the needs and abilities of these special education students learning in their classrooms and then adjusting their pedagogical practice to meet their needs and abilities varied significantly.

Additionally, my student teaching assignment in a secondary general education classroom helped me realize that many general education teachers do not have the same sort of experience that I had and therefore may find it more difficult to meet the learning needs of their students with special needs while also tending to their myriad additional responsibilities. These combined experiences inspired me to pursue the question of how to make the task of effectively meeting the learning needs of students with special needs learning in the general education classroom easier for all parties involved. As the review of the literature conducted in the previous chapter reveals, there is no shortage of existing

research related to this task. Nonetheless, there remains a disconnect between the development of effective strategies for modifying, accommodating, and differentiating instruction and assessment for special education students learning in the secondary general education setting and the implementation of these strategies by secondary general education teachers. Therefore, this project aims to address this disconnect by providing secondary general education teachers with accessible and attainable strategies for meeting the learning needs of special education students without neglecting the various additional demands of their position.

This project is founded first and foremost in a transformative worldview of education research. A transformative worldview demands that research inquiry be linked to a broader goal of political and social change to eliminate existing inequities in society (Creswell, 1994). It is transformative in the sense that it is coupled with a plan of action for reform to improve the lives of marginalized and disenfranchised societal groups. As previously stated, the impetus for this project is to address the issue of educational equity as it pertains to students with special needs. When secondary general education teachers fail to provide appropriate modifications, accommodations, and differentiation in their instruction and assessment of students with special needs learning in their classrooms, they fail to provide these students with an educational experience equitable to that of other students. As noted above, inequitable educational experiences for students with special needs frequently leads to a history of academic failure that worsens as they advance through middle school and high school, which is in turn linked to various personal and social consequences of poor academic achievement including low

self-esteem, alienation, and antisocial behavior (Ehren et al., 2004). Furthermore, poor academic achievement sets students with special needs up for failure in other spheres of life, such as securing adequate employment and financial stability. The purpose of this project is to address the educational inequities that exist between students with special needs and their peers, which reflect and often translate to broader inequities that exist within U.S. society as a whole.

Secondly, this project drew upon the principles of adult learning developed by Malcolm Knowles (1992). Knowles identifies the foundational principle of adult learning as allowing adult learners to be active participants in the inquiry process rather than passive recipients of information transmitted from teacher to learner (1992). Furthermore, Knowles states that the inquiry process should begin with and proceed from the backgrounds, needs, and interests of the participants (Knowles, 1992). By giving participants the opportunity to take initiative for their own learning and applying their learning to the context of their own lives, they are more likely to retain, internalize, and apply the knowledge and skills they acquire (Knowles, 1992). The project utilizes interactive grouping and collaborative activities that give participants the opportunity to apply the information presented in the Powerpoint to realistic scenarios they face in their daily lives. By promoting independent learning and skill development for participants, this project encourages participants to think critically about the content of the presentation and to actively process the information presented, thereby increasing the likelihood that participants retain, internalize, and apply the knowledge and skills the project promotes.

Project Audience and Setting

The goal of this project is to provide secondary general education teachers with effective strategies for modifying, accommodating, and differentiating their instruction and assessment of special education students learning in the general education setting in order to meet the unique learning needs of these students. Therefore, the primary audience for this project is secondary general education teachers. This includes general education teachers licensed to teach grades 5-12 in any general education subject. The project is intended for implementation at the individual school level. The strategies presented are general and therefore applicable to any general education classroom and not limited to any specific category of student disability. The project provides knowledge and skills that are applicable for secondary general education teachers regardless of their teaching experience, thus all secondary general education teachers teaching in the school are expected to attend.

Although the primary target audience is secondary general education teachers, the effective implementation of the strategies presented rely to some extent on collaboration between general education teachers and other staff and faculty members that work with special education students. This includes special education teachers, social workers, counselors, therapists, and special education paraprofessionals. Therefore, any special educational professionals working in the building are also expected to attend this professional development workshop. By familiarizing themselves with the modification, accommodation, and differentiation strategies that general education teachers apply to their instruction and assessment of students with special needs learning in the general

education setting, special education professionals will be able to work more effectively with general education teachers to ensure that the learning needs of special education students are being met.

The intended setting for the professional development sessions is at any school building that employs secondary general education teachers who are responsible for instructing and assessing students with special needs learning in the general education setting. As stated above, the strategies presented during the first session are general and therefore applicable to any general education classroom and not limited to any specific category of student disability, type of school (public, private, charter, etc.), school location (urban, suburban, rural, etc.) or special education setting (ranging from 1-5). The first session is intended to take place in a large common area that can accommodate all participants, is conducive to the physical movement of participants throughout the space, and allows for easy transition from lecture to small group or individual activities. The first session should take place from 2-5 days prior to the beginning of a new school year, starting with the 2021-2022 school year. The other three sessions should take place in the participants' normal professional learning community setting in mid-October, mid-December, and mid-January, respectively.

Project Outline and Timeline

This project centers on four primary objectives:

1. Participants will be able to differentiate between and explain the purpose of modification, accommodation, and differentiation.

2. Participants will be able to identify the different elements of the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy and provide an example of each element.
3. Participants will be able to apply the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy to demonstrate effective modification, accommodation, and differentiation of instruction for students with special needs.
4. Participants will be able to apply the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy to demonstrate effective modification, accommodation, and differentiation of assessment for students with special needs.

The effectiveness of the professional development project is measured in several different ways. First, participants respond to a survey at the beginning of the first session designed to assess their prior knowledge of modification, accommodation, and differentiation strategies for instructing and assessing students with special needs. The second and third sessions serve as a sort of formative assessment that reveal the extent to which participants have implemented the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy in the areas of instruction and assessment, respectfully. During the fourth session, participants complete the same survey they completed at the beginning of the workshop as a summative assessment. The results of the assessments are analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the project.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a description of the project that emerged from the following research question: Which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special

education students in the areas of instruction and assessment? The project description drew upon the research gathered from the review of the existing literature surrounding this research question. It began with a general overview of the project and its purpose. It also provided a rationale for the development and implementation of the project, including foundational theories and frameworks. The project description included an explanation of the intended audience and setting for the project. It concluded with an outline of the various components of the project as well as a timeline for its completion and the mechanisms for determining the effectiveness of the project. The next and final chapter provides a reflection upon the project as a whole, including limitations of the project as well as the potential impact of the project upon future research surrounding the professional development of secondary general education teachers teaching students with special needs in the mainstream general education setting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

The research question I sought to answer is as follows: Which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment? In this chapter, I begin by reflecting upon how I have grown as a researcher, writer, and learner through the process of creating this project. I then turn my focus to the literature review specifically, examining which portions of the literature review proved most helpful for crafting the project itself. Finally, I consider the implications and limitations of the project, including how this project positively contributes to the teaching profession.

Reflection Upon Learning

Upon thorough reflection about the process of creating this project, I identified several points of learning in particular. First, through my research, I learned that there is a wealth of available information related to providing modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment. However, this information is fairly scattered; there certainly was not a comprehensive strategy guide made specifically for secondary general education teachers, at least that I encountered through my research. This made the project itself all the more relevant, as it

sought to bring together the various strands of this research into a single resource that secondary general education teachers can easily implement and use effectively.

Second, the writing process reinforced the challenge of distilling the plethora of information related to this topic into a comprehensive yet feasible strategy. There is no question that the educational system in the United States places a tremendous amount of responsibility on the shoulders of teachers. Part of the inspiration for this project came from firsthand experience with juggling the demand for providing an equitable educational experience for all students with the myriad additional responsibilities that secondary general education teachers must address within the scope of their teaching practice. Writing this project challenged me to assemble a tool that secondary general education teachers might find accessible and useful. From my own experience, I know that teachers sometimes view professional development as just another hoop to jump through rather than a legitimate opportunity to learn and grow as an educator. In designing this project, I wanted to make participating in this professional development workshop as time-effective as possible for secondary general education teachers. Ideally, this professional development exercise will end up saving teachers time and reducing stress in the long run by making the task of modifying, accommodating, and differentiating instruction and assessment easier.

Third, my most valuable takeaway from this project as a learner has been the ways in which I have been able to apply it to my own teaching practice. As a first year secondary general education teacher myself, I have grappled with the challenge of modifying, accommodating, and differentiating my instruction and assessment to best

meet the learning needs of all of my students. This task has proven particularly pertinent for me so far this school year as I find myself teaching two “push in” sections in which one-third to one-half of my students are special education students. I find myself frequently referring to my own project for ideas about how to modify, accommodate, and differentiate my own instruction and assessment strategies. This reinforces the fact that we as teachers are not simply the keepers of knowledge, the vehicles for transferring essential information to our students. We, too, are constantly learning and growing from our professional experiences. Completing this project gave me a unique opportunity to teach and learn simultaneously, which is one of my favorite elements of the teaching profession.

Reflection Upon the Literature Review

The literature review proved to be an incredibly valuable foundation upon which I built this project. One of the central issues this project sought to address was the responsibility of educators to provide an equitable educational experience to all students. Gloria Ladson-Billings’s work, specifically her article “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools” (2006), was absolutely crucial for helping me problematize the issue of educational equity and apply it to the need to provide equitable educational opportunities to students with special needs learning in the secondary general education classroom. Friend and Bursuck’s book *Including Students with Special Needs: A Practical Guide for Classroom Teachers* (2015), gave me an excellent blueprint for assembling the project itself. As mentioned previously, much of the research related to the topic of modifying, accommodating, and

differentiating instruction and assessment for students with special needs is scattered across various articles and books throughout the existing literature. Friend and Bursuck provided a comprehensive framework for what I sought to accomplish with my project: to assemble this information into a single, streamlined tool for secondary general education teachers to utilize in their classrooms. In formulating the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy, Friend and Bursuck's work gave me a model which I sought to emulate.

A third source that was particularly helpful for creating this project was Anne Reeves's book *Where Great Teaching Begins: Planning for Student Thinking and Learning* (2011). Much of the literature I encountered in my research focused on strategies for modifying, accommodating, and differentiating either instruction or assessment for students with special needs learning in the secondary general education setting. However, with my project I sought to develop a strategy that could be applied to both instruction and assessment. Reeves's book played an essential role in helping me piece together such a strategy. Rather than treating instruction and assessment separately, Reeves focuses on the symbiotic relationship between the two and emphasizes the need to consider how one impacts the other when creating modifications, accommodations, and differentiated materials. The I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy is my best attempt at applying these principles that Reeves articulates in *Where Great Teaching Begins*. Needless to say, my project in its entirety would not have been feasible without the rigorous existing research on this nuanced issue which I had the privilege of exploring while crafting my literature review.

Applications, Implications and Limitations of the Project

In reflecting upon this project, it is essential to address its applications, implications, and limitations. The quantitative results of this capstone project are represented by the scores reported by participants on the pre-session and post-session individual surveys. These results will be communicated to teachers and administrators immediately after they have been gathered. They will also be analyzed in greater detail during a professional development session at the end of the school year, prior to summer break. Teachers and administrators will use the results to determine the effectiveness of the project and inform the decision of whether or not to continue utilizing the I.N.C.L.U.D.E. strategy. This project is a benefit to the profession because it aligns with a central tenet of contemporary special education policy, the principle of inclusion. In accordance with this principle, students with special needs are increasingly learning in the general education classroom among their peers. This places an additional responsibility upon general education teachers to ensure that they are meeting the unique learning needs of special education students learning in their classrooms. This capstone project seeks to equip general education teachers with a useful strategy for providing modifications, accommodations, and differentiation in the instruction and assessment that they deliver to their students with special needs.

The research question that this project addresses involves numerous stakeholders for whom this issue is extremely relevant. Because special education is governed primarily by federal legislation which outlines the duties and responsibilities of educational institutions and educational professionals for providing an equitable

educational experience for students with special needs, the potential impact of this project reaches, however indirectly, the highest levels of the United States government.

Furthermore, because the distribution of federal funds for the provision of special education services is tied to federal policy, funding for undertaking a project such as the one I created might be tied to the decisions made at the federal level. Accordingly, this project also holds ramifications for state-level government entities, including legislative bodies and education agencies, which are often charged with delegating federal special education funding as well as enacting and enforcing state special education law in addition to ensuring compliance with federal special education law. Of course, the significance then also reaches those elements of local government that are ultimately responsible for the implementation of and compliance with special education policy within individual school districts, such as school board members and superintendents.

The real implications of my project relates much more closely to the educational professionals that are capable of putting such a project into action within their individual schools. I am referring first to school administrators (principals, deans, etc.), who are typically in charge of organizing and leading professional development sessions as well as collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data to determine the extent to which their school is satisfactorily performing its duties and responsibilities as well as progressing towards established goals. Second, this project holds extreme relevance for both general education teachers and special education teachers as well as other educational professionals that often work closely with special education students (social workers, therapists, counselors, SEAs, etc.). These are the individuals who must work

together to ensure that students with special needs who attend their school are receiving the equitable educational experience to which they are entitled. Although this project is designed primarily to help general education teachers meet the learning needs of their students with special needs while learning in the general education classroom, many of these other educational professionals are also often involved in providing additional services for these students and therefore have a vested interest in the impact of such a project as related to the overarching goal of meeting the needs of these students in every aspect of their educational experience.

Of course, the most important stakeholders impacted by this project are the students themselves and their families and guardians. Students with special needs are entitled to an educational experience equitable to that of any other student. Collectively, we have defined, in the most general sense, the purpose of education to be to prepare young people to live within and contribute to our broader society. Therefore, we must provide an educational experience that gives all students the best opportunity possible to do so, including students with special needs. The families and guardians of these students must be able to trust that their children are receiving such an opportunity while at school, and the students themselves must be able to recognize this as well to the greatest possible extent. Ultimately, the purpose of this project is to help make this a reality.

In considering the broader implications of this project, it is essential to also acknowledge its limitations. Beyond standard concerns about time constraints, workload for teachers, and funding sources for a professional development exercise such as the one I propose, the most glaring limitation of this project lies in its generality. At its core, my

project centers on whether or not we as professional educators are providing each and every student with an equitable educational experience, which is our primary responsibility. Students who are entitled to special education services as established in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans, including accommodations and modifications to instruction and assessment in the general education classroom, are denied an equitable educational experience when general education teachers fail to comply with the requirements of IEPs and 504 plans. What is more, general education teachers who fail to familiarize themselves with the learning needs of students with special needs and differentiate their instruction and assessment accordingly are also failing to provide these students with the equitable educational experience they deserve. Given this, my project aims to help general education teachers provide their students with special needs with this equitable educational experience to which they are entitled. It does not, however, provide a flawless guide to addressing the issue of educational equity as related to students with special needs in every situation a secondary general education teacher could potentially face. My project provides teachers with a general framework, a potentially useful tool for making this task more feasible for educators. Although its broad application is one of its greatest assets, it is undoubtedly also its greatest limitation. Teachers must still do the work of getting to know their students, familiarizing themselves with their learning needs and preferences, and then adjusting their pedagogical practice to best fit these needs and preferences in the areas of instruction and assessment. This is an essential aspect of the art of teaching, something that no general strategy such as the one I propose in my project will ever be able to replace.

Chapter Summary

This concluding chapter centered on a thorough review of and reflection upon my project in its entirety. The inspiration for this project emerged from the research question I sought to answer: Which strategies are most effective for secondary general education teachers to provide modifications, accommodations, and differentiation for special education students in the areas of instruction and assessment? I first reflected upon my personal growth as a researcher, writer, and learner through the process of creating this project. I then revisited the literature review specifically, acknowledging the existing research that proved most helpful for producing the project itself. I concluded by considering the implications and limitations of the project. By far, my greatest takeaway from this project is the ways in which I have begun to and will continue to apply it to my own teaching practice. Ultimately, my project will have served its purpose when teachers who find themselves in a scenario such as the one I described in the opening vignette for this project can answer the rhetorical question “Will I be able to give all of my students the equitable educational experience they deserve?” with resounding affirmation.

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