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BEST PRACTICES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ALC TEACHERS
TO ASSIST GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Education.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

To the untrained eye, it may seem like an Alternative Learning Center is the place where students go only when they run out of other educational options. As a teacher who taught at an Alternative Learning Center (ALC) for three years, I can say that many of my students have chosen to be at an ALC over other schools. Some attend because they prefer smaller class sizes, some attend to take advantage of project-based learning, and others attend to take advantage of the individualized learning or work experience opportunity that the schools provide. In fact, upon reading more about my students during my first few weeks of work, I learned that many of my alternative students were previously labeled Gifted and Talented by other schools or districts. When looking at school-wide statistic from the Minnesota Department of Education's Report Card for the ALC I work for, it shows that three percent of students are enrolled in PSEO, and fourteen percent of students are on concurrent enrollment in order to receive appropriate services for their academic level ("Rigorous Course Taking", n.d., graphic 1). When researching the opportunities available for gifted and talented students at the ALC I worked for I found that there were no options to provide students with specialists or advisors trained in the subject area within the school. This fact led me to my guiding question for this capstone project: *How can ALC classroom teachers use best practices to teach Gifted and Talented Students and traditional ALC students at the same time, and how can a school use professional development to train teachers on the best practices?*

According to the most recent statistics available from the Minnesota Department of Education, 162,000 of Minnesota's students participate in an alternative education program, a population that represents seventeen percent of all students in Minnesota (MDE, n.d., para.1). As of 2011, there were 263 Area Learning Centers and 61 Alternative Learning Programs in the state of Minnesota that are state approved (MDE, n.d., para. 3). I did not realize the wide impact that alternative learning had on the state's population until I began my teaching career and found that many of the jobs available were for teaching positions in Alternative Learning Centers. My first permanent position was in an urban Alternative Learning Center (ALC).

Personal Inspiration and Influence

After graduating from college with a degree in Secondary Education and being licensed in the social studies content area I realized that I still had one more step in my professional goals to complete. Six months after graduating I decided to start the M.A.Ed program at Hamline and get a consecutive certification in Gifted and Talented Education. The reason I felt so drawn to complete the Gifted and Talented certification was because I grew up being labeled as academically and musically gifted. During my time at a suburban district in southeast central Minnesota, I felt supported by my teachers and the district, which helped me achieve many of my academic goals during the twelve years I attended school. Once I graduated from college and began to work as a substitute and interim teacher I began to notice that many of the ALCs in the urban area I worked in did not have the resources available for gifted and talented students.

When looking over student profiles and finding that many of my new students had been previously labeled gifted and talented in other schools and districts I began to wonder if their academic needs were truly being met at the ALC schools. From data compiled through the district's learning management system, I found that twenty-one out of thirty-four of my students had been previously labeled gifted and talented. That is nearly sixty-two percent of my actively enrolled students that could have benefitted from a more tailored curriculum. Though an ALC by definition is for students that are behind academically and is catering to a population of students that need to earn credits quickly, this does not mean that all students that attend the school do not have their own gifts and talents that need to be nurtured inside and outside of the classroom. I also noticed that a large number of students were considered *twice exceptional*, a term that describes gifted students that also "...give evidence of one or more disabilities as defined by federal or state eligibility criteria" (NAGC, n.d., para. 1). At the same time, I noticed that there seemed to be an epidemic of students in my classrooms that were "bored," or claimed that they were "just not interested in anything academic."

Through my experience working at ALCs with a large number of gifted and talented students or twice exceptional students, I came to realize that not a lot of resources were currently being offered for those students. As a school that is meant for catching up academically, it stands to logic that districts may believe they do not need to be funding advanced academic programs at these schools because they are not the intended student body. My argument is simple, as a part of a school that provides

individualized education to students in need, an ALC should not be neglecting the needs of students who excel in certain areas of school.

Literature suggests that when a teacher, school or district provides the appropriate level of rigor in the classroom for a student the student may become more motivated to learn. As mentioned in the article “Increasing Rigor,” Blackburn and Williamson, both professors of education and experts on rigor, mention that, “Rigor is directly connected to relevance. That is the value part of motivation,” (2009, para. 6). Until districts begin to fund ALCs to build accelerated or gifted and talented programs in their schools there must be some sort of training available to ALC teachers in order to best help their gifted and talented students stay engaged and interested in the classroom. These life experiences led me to my guiding question, *How can ALC classroom teachers use best practices to teach Gifted and Talented Students and traditional ALC students at the same time, and how can a school use professional development to train teachers on the best practices?*

Context and Rationale

Though I have outlined why it is important for gifted and talented students in the ALC setting to receive services that are tailored to their learning needs, I have not yet addressed why professional development on the topic is important. While completing my teacher preparation program in undergraduate school I noticed that there were a few areas that the program did not discuss. One topic was urban education, and another was alternative education. Best practices can always be reviewed with teachers who are new to jobs at alternative schools and even those who have been teaching at an alternative

school for years. Best practices change over time and with the advancement of educational research and professional development, it is a good way to keep teachers up to date with ALC program standards and teaching practices.

Individualized education is also important for gifted and talented students. It supports academic and social growth and prepares students for the rigor of post graduate life. With a lack of gifted and talented education specialists in alternative schools, it is not surprising to know that many ALCs do not meet the standards that gifted and talented students need to succeed. By melding together professional development on best practices for teachers in an alternative setting and best practices for teaching gifted and talented students we can find logical pairings of best practices to use in the setting. Not only to help students who are behind academically, but help students grow their gifts and talents making the programs more optimal for all students of every background.

Benefit to Stakeholders

Three main stakeholders would find optimal benefit from choosing to use and receive professional development on the topic of best practices for ALC gifted and talented students. The first stakeholder who would receive benefit would be the students. Inspiration to learn comes in multiple forms, one of which is the amount of care and thought educators put into their plans for students each day. Students feel either the lack of care and thought that an educator puts into individualized lessons each day, or the benefit of a carefully thought out lesson which serves their best interests and needs. By providing professional development courses on best practices, gifted and talented students who go to the ALC will ultimately reap the most reward of the process. This can

create a ripple effect on other students. If students who are in a classroom see other students who are passionate about their work, are interested in what they are doing, and enjoy showing up each day, morale could be boosted through the student body.

The second stakeholder group is the teachers. As all educators know, the best way to serve our students is to be up to date on the best possible way to teach and create relationships with our students. The more capacity built within our teachers, the more successful we can be on the job. By attending professional development sessions on updated best practices for ALC teachers, and updated best practices for gifted and talented students, teachers can more effectively blend the practices for the best possible outcome in classrooms. The best possible outcomes may include higher levels of student comprehension of state standards, higher assessment scores, and improved classroom participation and student motivation. More successful classrooms are highly regarded by administrations and district level officials who may work harder to see that the needs of teachers and students are being met in the classroom.

The final stakeholder who would benefit from holding professional development on best practices would be the school administration. School administrators are looking to keep attendance high enough at alternative schools to keep the school building running. The more we focus on helping all of our students' needs, including gifted and talented students' needs, the more likely these students are to choose to stay at the school and not look for other options such as online schooling, or other charters, ultimately dropping attendance at the alternative program. Professional development on the topic can boost classroom success and student happiness which then reflects upon

administrators positively. Success stories can be used to recruit more students and create a positive school environment of upward mobility and satisfaction in one's school.

Community members and parents can see the best practices in use, the positive reflection it places upon the school and continue to recommend other community members to send their kids to the ALC program. Overall putting a more positive light on alternative programming and the possibilities for students attending the program can be a positive reflection upon administration and create a higher level of success for the school overall.

Conclusion

In chapter one of my capstone project I outlined the importance of providing professional development for teachers to help establish best practices for both ALC and Gifted and Talented students and establish the guiding question, *How can ALC classroom teachers use best practices to teach Gifted and Talented Students and ALC students at the same time, and how can a school use professional development to train teachers on the best practices?* Chapter one also includes my personal background of teaching in an ALC setting and earning a certificate in Gifted and Talented Education, and also establishes the motive of my guiding question, which is to ultimately impact the field and most importantly, the students of alternative education by providing teachers with resources and practices to use in the classroom.

In chapter two of my capstone project, I review literature that is pertinent to the topic of best practices in ALCs and best practices for teaching gifted and talented students. The section provides scholarly and professional resources that help to guide the resources I choose to implement in the professional development seminars that will

subsequently be given. In chapter three, I provide an outline of the project and describe the main factors of the project such as the context, setting, format and schedule of the project. Finally, in chapter four, I provide a reflection of the project creation and record a conclusion to the overall product.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of chapter two is to review literature which will help me compile resources to plan a professional development session for ALC teachers, and answer my guiding question, *How can ALC classroom teachers use best practices to teach Gifted and Talented Students and traditional ALC students at the same time, and how can a school use professional development to train teachers on the best practices?* Teacher involvement in learning best practices for running ALC classrooms and teaching gifted and talented students is necessary in order to improve upon student experience at a school.

The review of literature defends the importance of providing an environment for all students in an ALC school that includes opportunities for the most traditional of students, to students who have been identified as gifted and talented. Essential elements of ALC classrooms and gifted and talented programs will be assessed including practices of differentiation, tactics of individualized education, and other non-traditional classroom practices. Professional education will also be highlighted and literature will examine the ways that teachers best learn through professional development. These most effective practices will later inform the format of the capstone project which will outline a professional development program in which to use with teachers in order to best inform them of ways to best teach gifted and talented students in an ALC setting.

Chapter Outline

This chapter will be divided into three subtopics in order to answer the guiding questions. These subtopics include 1) Best Practices for Teaching at an ALC, 2) Best Practices for Teaching Gifted and Talented Students, and 3) Effective Strategies to Implement Professional Development in an ALC setting.

Alternative Learning Centers and Best Practices

What is an Alternative Learning Center? In January of 2020, the Minnesota Department of Education released its *State-Approved Alternative Programs Quick Reference Guide*. The guide serves as a resource for Minnesota schools and educators to use to make sure that alternative schooling programs are meeting state guidelines and laws. According to the Minnesota Department of Education's guide and the U.S. Department of Education, alternative education is defined as:

Schools and programs designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools. The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school). (MDE, 2020, p. 4)

According to the 2017-2018 school year survey conducted by the state of Minnesota, 11,180 students were enrolled in Alternative Learning Centers statewide (MDE, n.d.). As of the year 2018, there were 266 available area learning centers in Minnesota for students to choose from. Alternative Learning Centers are well known as

“last stop” or “last resort” schools for students who have behavioral issues, an unstable home life, unexpected pregnancy, or a failure to conform to traditional school standards (Aron, 2006). Although this is what is commonly believed about Alternative Learning Centers, or ALCs, a main point is being ignored. ALC’s are available to students who have trouble learning in a traditional public-school environment, whether it is because of a cognitive disability or a learning preference. ALC’s strive to provide individualized and non-traditional styles of education for students who learn better through alternate routes. Hands-on education, technological education, work-based learning, and investigative and research-based education are some forms of schooling that alternative schools provide. As cited by the Minnesota Department of Education:

Alternative learning centers help meet individual student learning styles as well as social and emotional needs. Teachers build connections with students and focus on vocational and career skills, including independent study options. Community, county and state partnerships provide additional support and resources. (Special Education in School Choice Settings, n.d., para. 2)

Though traditional classroom pedagogy may still be used in some alternative classrooms, ALCs strive to adjust pedagogy to students’ optimal style of learning. One way teachers adjust pedagogy is through Individualized Educational Plans or IEPs. In the state of Minnesota, ALCs use a special type of IEP for all of their students called a CLP or a continual learning plan. According to Minnesota’s State-Approved Alternative Programs Quick Reference Guide a CLP is required for each student at an ALC. The CLP must include, “...the learning experiences that must occur...and are necessary for grade

progression...” (MDE, 2020, p. 11). The CLP outlines for a student, parents and teachers how the student will earn credit to cover graduation requirements. Some options for learning which are provided at ALCs include project-based learning, online learning, work-study, group learning, and service-based learning. Type I alternative schools or schools of choice provide students with the opportunity to enroll regardless of their home district location or zone within a district. These schools tend to provide students with the previously mentioned opportunities or thematic based learning such as multicultural learning. ALCs can also be considered a Type III alternative school that focuses on remedial classes and helping students catch up on credits for graduation. Type IV alternative schooling or hybrid schooling, which may be a mixture of the two previously noted types and another option called Type II or ‘last chance schools’ that focus on detention and remediation is also an applicable model for an ALC to run on (Hazeldine, 2017; Lange et al, 2002; Raywid 1994).

Effective features and elements of an ALC. As cited by Kerka in her study and review of literature pertaining to alternative education and at-risk students there are eight features of effective alternative education programs that drives student success. These features include caring adults who provide an environment of trust and learning, a sense of community and belonging, a focus on developing civic commitment, conflict resolution, goal setting, building strong character, self-esteem and sense of responsibility, respect for student talents and intelligence, high expectations for academic progress and behavior, a holistic and responsive curriculum, authentic connections between school and life, and long term support and services for students (Kerka, 2003). Most of these features

are accomplishable in an ALC setting when provided with the right tools and services for students and teachers.

In her 2017 thesis capstone in affiliation with Hamline University, Hazeldine pointed out another key aspect of best practice which helps with student success which is teacher and student cooperation rather than hard and fast punishment as well as clear expectations and daily monitoring of goals and expectations (2017, p. 49). For instance when beginning the year at an ALC an important part of student success is to create goals, expectations and boundaries with students. By reviewing expectations with students daily, students may be more likely to internalize the expectations. When a student is then reprimanded for not adhering to behavioral expectations they are likely to be more responsive to a cooperative approach than a punishment for unruly behavior such as detention as it gives the students an opportunity to rectify their behavior and feel autonomous and in control of their future at the same time.

Other attributes of a high quality alternative education centers include the implementation of personalized learning plans, creative instructional staff, opportunities for teachers and staff to attend professional development which helps assist them in working with alternative learning populations, and a strong sense of relationship between administration and staff, staff and students, and administration and students (Aron, 2006). Personalized learning plans ensure that students from all educational backgrounds receive the highest quality education which coincides with their personal learning style and needs. Students who attend schools that provide personal learning plans show more motivation to learn than students who attend classes that are built as “one size fits all”

models. The creativity of teachers and staff in the classroom closely relates to personalized learning. ALC's provide a space where students can learn in a non-traditional environment. According to the Minnesota Department of Education a traditional classroom environment may include an, "Instructional model where student attends a school with teacher instruction in a classroom setting. Classes meet daily and attendance is required" (MDE, 2020, p.21). Therefore instructional design and lesson planning are different in ALC schools than traditional K-12 schools. The more creative a teacher is in helping students meet learning objectives and goals, the more successful the student will be at school.

Student, staff, teacher and parent/guardian relationships are also important regardless of the type of school being run. Success stories and needs should be shared between all parties to better be able to problem solve in a school setting. Open communication between administration and teachers can lead to better resources for students and teachers at the ALC. Communication between teachers and parents can help keep students on track with their individualized learning plans and graduation goals. Lastly communication between students and teachers in an open format can create a relationship of trust which can build a foundation for more effective learning.

Benefits of alternative learning for students. Besides the benefits of individualized learning, close teacher/student relationships, and alternate options for learning, students "...in alternative programs reported fewer disruptive behaviors by the end of the study compared to the students in traditional school settings" (Gold & Mann, 1984; Lange & Sletten, 2002). The lessening of disruptive behaviors could be attributed

to choice and flexibility (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The reduction of disruptive behaviors could be attributed to better self-regulation skills that students report having after attending an alternative education program (Nichols & Steffy, 1997). In a study done in the Midwest completed by Nichols and Steffy, students also reported higher school and peer self-esteem. Although results of studies in alternative settings on attendance, grades, and dropout rates versus student retention are inconclusive, possibly because of such high fluctuations in attendance of the schools and the short term nature of the studies it has been shown that at-risk middle school students who attended alternative learning programs in Minnesota were much less likely to drop out than their counterparts at other public schools (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998/2002).

Gifted Students

Who are gifted students? According to the National Association of Gifted Children, the federal definition of gifted and talented students is:

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (NACG, n.d., para. 22)

This is the official federal definition of a gifted and talented student. Signs that indicate a student is gifted may include being a perfectionist, heightened sensitivities, being asynchronous in development or learning, being an abstract thinker and a master problem solver for their age group. Asynchrony in gifted students is defined as, “A markedly uneven development experienced internally due to different rates of cognitive, social,

emotional, and physical growth and manifested externally due to a lack of fit with age mates and with societal expectations” (Silverman, 1991, p. 2).

Signs of giftedness. Though public schools screen for giftedness, it is not always their first priority. Many gifted students are either unrecognized due to asynchronies or being twice exceptional (experiencing both gifts and talents and physical, mental or psychological disabilities), or because of a manifestation of behavioral issues which overshadow giftedness. One major reason for unrecognized gifts and talents due to asynchronies, being twice exceptional or having behavior issues is called masking. According to McCoach (et. al.) a professor of education at the University of Connecticut and the co-editor of *Gifted Child Quarterly*, masking, “...refers to the principle that many gifted students with learning disabilities have patterns of strengths and weaknesses that make them appear to have average abilities and achievement” (McCoach et. al., 2001, p. 405). Though not just a problem with identifying gifts and talents, but also with identifying learning disabilities, masking can prevent students from receiving educational services they need to succeed.

Whether or not a student is labeled gifted does not give them access to a gifted education at an ALC, in fact most ALC’s do not provide gifted and talented specialists or services for their students. This fact makes it pertinent that teachers know exactly how to identify, teach and guide these students to success. In general, the signs to look for when identifying a gifted student may include perfectionism and over idealism, heightened sensitivities to expectations given by themselves and others, asynchrony, showing competency in half a year or more ahead of their fellow students, being an exceptional

problem solver, signs of thinking abstractly and complexly and may give high importance on not failing (NSGT, n.d.).

Twice exceptional students, or 2e students, are people who are gifted and talented and also have an overshadowing disability. 2e students can find a traditional school setting overwhelming or difficult. Current studies suggest that approximately twenty percent of gifted students show signs of being twice exceptional (De Bonte, 2019). Some have trouble with organization, participation and long term planning over the course of their academic careers. In a traditional school setting, 2e students may have a difficult time keeping up with a particularly rigorous course, the high demands of academic performance and tend to be labeled by educators as ‘difficult’, ‘lazy’, or ‘unmotivated.’ This may be from the discouragement felt from struggling in the traditional education sector (NAGC, n.d.). According to Austina De Bonte and the National Association for Gifted Children (2019) it is, “not uncommon to see a downturn in middle or high school when an unsupported 2e student can no longer compensate for their challenges—when more reading, writing, listening, organization, and time management is required” (p. 15). These challenging factors alone can place students into a category where education professionals may suggest an alternative education environment, one that can provide the differentiation of instruction, curriculum, and support for physical and learning disabilities that they may need. Regardless of whether a gifted and talented student has an underlying disability that may affect their performance, that student deserves the correct individualized education that all students have a right to receive, whether the education is gained at a traditional or alternative school which starts with the proper diagnoses and

identification. If a school is only addressing one side of the issue for a student such as a cognitive disability, but not addressing their dual giftedness, that child is still not receiving the proper education. By compiling a usable list of best practices for both the 'typical' ALC student and the gifted ALC student teachers may begin to see remarkable gains in their students.

Best Practices

According to Walker-Tileston (2011), author and doctorate of education from Texas A&M University, there are ten best practices for modern teaching competency. These ten practices are creating an environment which facilitates learning, differentiating for different learning styles, helping students make connections from prior knowledge, teaching for long term memory, constructing knowledge through higher-level thinking processes, fostering collaborative learning, bridging the achievement gap for all learners, evaluating learning with authentic assessments, encouraging in-depth understanding with real-world applications, and integrating technology seamlessly into instruction (Walker-Tileston, 2011). All of these best practices are most importantly realistic and simply implemented into classrooms if incorporated in the right manner. Even in an altered setting such as an ALC many of the best practices can be implemented into classrooms with ease.

Best teaching practices at an ALC. The National Alternative Education Association, or the NAEA has outlined fifteen research based practices for effective alternative education programs. Some of the practices include goals for the administrative level of an ALC, while others concern teachers and students (Appendix A). I will be

focusing on the best practices which involve teaching practices and student involvement, as it best pertains to my research question. The third listed best practice for teaching at an ALC is focused on climate and culture. An exemplary ALC promotes connections between students and staff to achieve social success, promotes safety, establishes clear expectations for learning and behaviors which are taught and rewarded at the end of a term or year using positive behavioral methods (NAEA, n.d.).

The fifth best practice establishes goals for exemplary curriculum and instruction at an ALC. An exemplary ALC teacher will implement formal and informal assessments and provide rubrics for students to follow, active in and out of classroom learning in which students use inquiry skills, critical thinking and problem solving. Examples of active learning which can be conducted inside and outside the classroom are apprenticeships, life skills, cooperative learning, advance organizers, researching and reporting (NAEA, n.d.). Arts may be used to enrich and expand the ALC curriculum. An exemplary ALC should also have a literacy program that focuses on writing for authentic audiences, reading for pleasure, graphic organizers, public speaking, explaining, summarizing, researching and reports through note taking, writing and peer collaboration.

The sixth best practice outlines successful student assessment. An exemplary ALC should use assessments that can monitor students' growth and adjust student services accordingly. Assessments should be useful to the student and immediate in nature and students should be informed of their progress on a regular basis. Data from assessments should be used to frequently modify instruction based on student need and should be easily explained by the use of a rubric. A successful ALC should also

implement graduation plans with students beyond giving students final transcripts. Career paths and higher education plans should be explored while the student is still in high school. The incorporation of digital and virtual learning are also considered best practice and the use of such technology should be woven into the standard curriculum to support instruction. 21st Century skills through the use of technology should be taught and used by students to prepare them for the working world, and computer-assisted learning should be blended into classroom learning time and available for students who need it (NAEA, n.d.).

Finally, including non-traditional educational plans is considered best practice at an ALC. Non-traditional education plans assist students while in school and while transitioning into higher education or the working world. The plan should include academic goals, behavioral goals, and factors which may impede upon student success along with coping strategies and skills for students to use when they encounter these factors (NAEA, n.d.).

Best instructional approaches for ALCs. Three common instructional approaches that can be utilized in an ALC are project-based learning, genius hour, and experiential learning (Owens, 2016). Unlike traditional instruction, or teaching to the assessment, project-based learning or PBL is unique because it allows students to show their mastery of a concept, standard or benchmark that is of importance to the courses they are taking in the form of a project. PBL can be tailored to individual students based on their current levels of mastery and can be tailored to individual student interest or a group of students' interests. Multiple standards and benchmarks from across disciplines

can be included in a single project-based learning assignment. Examples of PBL assignments and courses that can be found in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota include jewelry making, pottery, short story writing, computer coding, drone making, and photography portfolios. The use of genius hour coinciding with PBL is a great use of school work time and allows students to take a break from more traditional learning styles within the alternative school setting. During genius hour a teacher may use a broad overarching guiding question for all students in her class or can create a guiding question or have her students create a guiding question for themselves to work on during the allotted time. Experiential learning has also been found to be beneficial to students at ALCs. Experiential learning occurs when students are introduced to a new concept through non-traditional school experiences. An example of experiential learning may be an apprenticeship or internship at a job site.

Best teaching practices for gifted and talented students. The National Association for Gifted Children, one of the largest advocacy groups for gifted and talented students and educators in the United States, outlines a few key practices to help gifted and talented students inside the classroom. Ability grouping, or most simply ‘grouping’ is the first key practice to note. Ability grouping is defined as, “When students of a similar ability or achievement level are placed in a class or group based on observed behavior or performance” (NAGC, n.d., para. 1). Grouping allows teachers to more effectively deliver differentiated instructional strategies to learners with similar educational needs (NAGC, n.d., para. 2). Cluster grouping is the most common form of grouping for gifted and talented students in mixed ability schools that do not have

specific gifted and talented programs for their students, such as the ALC. Cluster grouping puts the top five to eight students in a given classroom together and allows them to work together on differentiated curriculum and receive differentiated instruction from the classroom teacher (NACG, n.d., para.7). Unlike performance grouping in which students are placed in groups together based on intelligence or aptitude testing, ability grouping using the cluster method groups students together based on strength in ability in subject or content area. This avoids a sense of non-inclusion throughout the school day as cluster groups may change from class to class. This type of grouping may also be called flexible grouping. “True flexible grouping permits students to move in and out of various grouping patterns, depending on course content” (NAGC, n.d., para. 26).

Acceleration is another best practice used by educators who teach gifted and talented students. According to the NAGC, acceleration is, “A strategy of progressing through education at rates faster or ages younger than the norm. This can occur through grade skipping or subject acceleration” (NAGC,n.d., para. 2). Arguments against grade or subject skipping acceleration include asynchronous development that occurs in gifted and talented students and the existence of twice exceptional students. Acceleration through grades has become less and less common of a practice in the primary, formative years of a student’s life as their affective needs may not be aligned with their current intelligence, also known as asynchrony. Asynchrony is defined as “...disparate rates of intellectual, emotional, and physical rates of growth or development often displayed by gifted children” (NAGC, n.d., para. 10). Social and emotional development of a twelve year old child that has the mathematics ability of a senior in high school may not be developed to

that of a seventeen year old student. Thus putting the twelve year old in the 12th grade would not behoove the student or work in their favor other than challenging that student mathematically. On the other hand, acceleration programs that group students together in classes that are more accelerated for their age level may be extremely beneficial to gifted and talented students. Of course this would mean the creation of an accelerated or gifted and talented program that ALC's tend to lack.

Independent study is another practice that can be used with gifted and talented students in a mixed ability level setting. Independent study is a teacher guided study time for a student based on their own interests or desires. During independent study, the student takes more accountability and responsibility for their own learning. Independent study time can also incorporate acceleration techniques.

Summary and Use of Best Practices

Along with following the best modern teaching practices an ALC can create a safe climate and culture, use formal and informal assessment that monitors student growth and help to adjust services for the student, use active learning practices such as project based learning, experiential learning and genius hour, and help a student create graduation and career paths. In order to best assist the gifted and talented students at an ALC, different types of grouping can be used such as cluster grouping and flexible grouping, the use of acceleration and independent study. While using best practices for teaching and learning at an ALC as a baseline, this capstone project will address how to incorporate best practices for gifted and talented students into that baseline.

Professional Development for ALC Teachers

According to Vermut et. al. (2014) effective teacher education and professional development can lead to a logical outcome of improved student learning outcomes. When teachers participate in any type of professional development that is researched based and backed by standard teaching practices it leads teachers to better understand students' learning environments and learning processes. When teachers better understand how to create an effective learning environment, students may feel more comfortable to learn and feel safer to take educational risks and reap the rewards from fixing their own mistakes when they occur. All teachers also benefit from learning updated information about student learning processes. When teachers participate in professional development that allows them to explore new student learning processes it is more likely that students will have an increased or changed knowledge and understanding of the subject matter that the teacher is teaching, growth of new skills, higher motivation and more regulated emotions toward learning (Vermut, 2014).

Effective professional development. There are three sources of teacher learning when participating in effective professional development. The first source is scientific or theoretical knowledge. This knowledge helps teachers understand the theories of education, pedagogical models, and other learning theories. The second source is experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge includes the practical teaching experience one gains during teacher training or while executing one's job. Reflection is the most important part of teacher experiential learning. Without personal reflection of a teacher's strengths and weaknesses, there is a less likely chance of the teacher learning

anything from the experience, or showing initiative to change their environment in order to improve their practice. The third source of valuable learning for teachers through professional development is learning from experienced mentors, in specific other educators, specialists or teachers in their subject area or age range. Collaboration of professional teachers and educators is beneficial for both the experienced and “inexperienced” parties. Experienced professional educators can share their wisdom of accumulated years of practice in the real world classroom, while inexperienced teachers can share the most updated pedagogical, instructional and learning theories and research findings (Vermut, 2014).

Leading research shows that professional development is not meant to be a short term practice, but a long term career objective (Richter et.al., 2011). Some professional development seems to work better with some teachers over others and a lot of the success of professional development can be attributed to years of teaching experience. The most successful professional development includes both formal and informal strategies. Some formal strategies are distributing literature for teachers to read and holding large formal meetings or classes to discuss the objectives of the subject of professional development. Informal professional development can be spending time observing other teacher’s classrooms, conducting discussion between experienced and inexperienced teachers and collaboration between teachers of like subjects and interdisciplinary subjects (Richter et.al., 2011).

Turnaround training. One of the most effective, time saving, and financially responsible ways to conduct professional development is called turnaround training. As

noted by Thomas et. al. (2012), learning is both social and individual and is enhanced when both experts and novices work together to practice their profession. During turnaround training, select colleagues are chosen to receive higher educational training on the topic of professional development chosen. Those colleagues then become an expert on the topic who train other novices at their school in best practices. Turnaround training allows the expert in charge to know the novices and work with their teaching and learning styles and can be easily tailored to each school environment specifically needed (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Turnaround training as professional development for teachers is a multi-stage process. The first part of turnaround training is having experts trained in the subject matter and then having experts train novices in real time classroom experiences. The second part of the professional development is split into three stages. Stage one consists of data collection from the novices on turnaround professional development activities. The second stage includes post training online surveys and reflections from all parties involved in professional development. The final stage includes semi-structured focus group sessions and interviews in order to better explore survey results and personal teacher reflections (Thomas et al., 2012).

Applications of Professional Development Research

The capstone project is inspired by some of the basics of turnaround training. Because I have been trained in gifted and talented education I would be the expert on the subject matter of gifted and talented education. I would use my knowledge of best practices to hold a three stage professional development. The first stage will be the

frontloading of knowledge of best practices through form of lecture and large group discussion. The second stage will be a mixture of planning time, active in classroom practice of best practices for gifted and talented students, active reflection and data collection. The final stage will be held as a large group discussion and data gathering process between all teachers involved in the professional development.

Online Professional Development and Advantages

Just as curriculum and instruction have advanced technologically, so should professional development for teachers. Taking advantage of online opportunities, “...ensures flexibility and versatility, the potential to build community among teachers, and across groups, new possibilities for accountability, and improvement of teacher retention by enabling teachers to become more directly involved in their own learning and professional growth” (National Research Council, 2007). When utilized along with traditional professional development practices of providing face to face training, discussion groups, active research and practice, and reflection online professional development can enhance the teacher experience which in turn can affect the future use of professional development skills in the everyday classroom (National Research Council, 2007). Using those skills can ultimately benefit the students and stakeholders of professional development training leading to a better environment for student learning.

Allowing teachers to participate in online professional development allows teachers to participate anywhere and at any time. The flexibility that online training provides for teachers allows for professional development to not interfere with in-classroom time with students or even preparation periods. Much more content can be

shared in an online setting providing teachers the ability to keep other stakeholders up to date on current data and success of training, or shortcomings that are included in training that could be narrowed out for the next year (National Research Council, 2007). Other teachers involved in the professional development can use realtime classroom data to use as a measuring stick or guideline to follow when practicing their newly learned skills.

Online professional development can also narrow the feeling of isolation some teachers may experience during training. Using public and private online reflections and chats through discussion boards teachers may feel less alone when embarking on a new practice in the classroom. Discussion boards and reflections can also help build a better community between teachers within a school or district and can provide more support than infrequent training meetings and group discussions that may only happen once or twice throughout the course of professional development (National Research Council, 2007).

Along with a bigger and more positive sense of community in which online professional learning can provide it also increases teacher accountability during the training process. Online activities that teachers are required to participate in push teachers to actually complete active practice in the classroom. If a teacher is held accountable to a trainer who is constantly checking their online progress the motivation to complete the tasks assigned during active practice of the professional development process can be raised (National Research Council, 2007). Procrastination during active practice of skills learned through professional development can be easy to do. Setting off using those skills and practices in the classroom until a week before reconvening for a professional

development reflection with other colleagues can skew results and data. Logically, this could be a reason why many teachers do not feel the information provided during professional development works when applied in the classroom, because they have not given adequate time for students or themselves to get used to new practices and expectations outlined by professional development.

Utilizing online methods for professional development could also increase new teacher retention (National Research Council, 2007). Teachers fresh out of preparation programs or undergraduate studies are likely to be accustomed to learning and sharing progress through online learning methods. Continuing the practice of online learning for these teachers would be beneficial because of their current technological training. If newer teachers feel uncomfortable by the prospect of traditional professional development practices, online professional development could be a way for them to participate more fully in the practice. Newer teachers could also use their technological expertise as a way to get to know other more experienced teachers who may be new to online learning methods. Sharing technological knowledge can provide novice teachers an opportunity to build their in school communities through professional development.

Review of Chapter Two

In the literature review chapter, I readdress the importance of meeting gifted and talented students' needs in order to create an effective learning environment, and then discuss the definition and meaning of an ALC school and gifted and talented students. Furthermore, best practices for instructing ALC students and gifted and talented students are outlined, as well as successful ways to implement professional development for

teachers. The research provided in this chapter provides support for a capstone project outlining best practices for teachers to use in an ALC setting with gifted and talented students. The capstone project will include materials to provide to teachers through the most effective means of professional development for teachers at all stages of their career to help implement those practices founded in research.

Chapter three will outline the most effective instructional approaches for ALC teachers to use in the classroom with gifted students, while still attending to the needs of the general ALC population. Then it will provide a plan for sequencing professional development which will include pre-learning, active practice, and post reflection processes. Finally the chapter will review the intended audience, give step by step details on how to best present the professional development course to teachers and staff, and provide an outline of how to put together the professional development course in a school setting as well as provide a realistic timeline for presentation, practice and review.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this capstone project is to address the need for providing adequate classroom instruction and support for gifted and talented students in an ALC setting. The research question that guided my review of literature in chapter two is: *How can ALC classroom teachers use best practices to teach Gifted and Talented Students and traditional ALC students at the same time, and how can a school use professional development to train teachers on the best practices?*

Chapter one reviewed the topic and discusses the need for more support in the ALC classroom for gifted and talented students. It also reviews the context and rationale for finding more adequate pedagogy and instructional approaches as urban schools and ALCs provide a different atmosphere for teaching and learning than other public schools in the United States. Chapter two reviewed the most current literature on best practices for teachers in an ALC setting, best practices for gifted and talented instruction and how the two coincide with one another. It also reviewed current practices of professional development for teachers and research that backs the need for multiple approaches to professional development based on the experience level of each teacher. Chapter three outlines a plan and the materials to be used for a professional development course on teaching gifted and talented students in an ALC setting.

Outline and Framework

The professional development project will be utilizing Vermut's (2014) idea as an outline. The practice, outlined by Vermut, author of *Teacher Learning and Professional Development*, combines theoretical knowledge, experiential knowledge and collaboration. During the initial training day collaboration and theoretical knowledge will be demonstrated through a lecture and discussion on gifted and talented students, how to identify them, and the best practices and instructional approaches that a teacher can use at an ALC. Collaboration is evident through the use of turnaround training (Thomas et al., 2012). During the second phase of professional development, experiential knowledge will be gained by implementing best practices with students in the classroom. During this time online professional development tools will be used to track data, successes and failures of the experience and personal reflections from the participating teachers. The last phase of the professional development course will be discussion based. Final data will be reviewed as a large staff group and plans for future implementation will be discussed.

Phase One of Professional Development

During phase one, or the experiential knowledge phase, teachers will be introduced to the concept of identifying students who are gifted and talented, and starting new individualized instructional approaches for students in their classes who are gifted and talented. Many teachers already know which of their students show signs of gifts and talents. I would hold a short lecture and slideshow for teachers to absorb knowledge on how the National Society for the Gifted Children describes a gifted and talented student

so that teachers may be guided in choosing students to implement strategies with during the experiential knowledge phase of professional development.

The main idea of the professional development series is strategies for teaching Gifted and Talented students that are realistic and easy to implement in an ALC classroom. These strategies and best practices outlined by the National Association for Gifted Children include:

- Ability Grouping
- Cluster Grouping
- Acceleration
- Independent Study

Each practice and strategy will include online resources for teachers to further their knowledge on the practice and gain an understanding of how they can use the practice in their classroom and can be referred to in detail in chapter two.

Phase Two of Professional Development

Phase two will consist of time for teachers to do independent active practice in their classrooms using the provided information and strategies which were talked about in Phase One. Teachers will have the time to identify students who are gifted and talented if they do not already have a good idea of whom they would like to use the strategies with, and begin to implement one or more strategies of their choosing that they believe will work best in their classroom. After sufficient time for active practice in the classroom as predetermined by staff in phase one, teachers will begin to collect qualitative data on their successes and failures in the classroom using the outlined best practices. Teachers

will have the opportunity to reflect on student progress, or lack of progress using new techniques using online platforms, and connect with other teachers through discussion boards about their active practice.

Phase Three of Professional Development

Phase three is a combination of collaboration, reflection, and problem-solving for the teachers involved in the course. Teachers will come together for a final meeting to discuss their progress with the best practices, whether or not they believe the strategies are realistically attainable in their ALC classroom, and brainstorming and troubleshooting with their expert colleagues running the turnaround training on how to solve current issues in the classroom while using the new strategies for their gifted and talented students. Overall data and progress would be assessed as an interdisciplinary group of teachers as well as on a content area level. The goal of phase three is to determine a good fit for the use of gifted and talented instructional approaches within the ALC.

Project Description

The professional development series I made on how to best assist ALC students with gifts and talents in the classroom comes in three phases. The first phase is the frontloading of knowledge of the best practices to use in the classroom when teaching gifted and talented students. This knowledge was presented to the involved teachers via PowerPoint presentation and large group discussion. The second phase is active practice and active reflection. Teachers receive a week to choose one or more of the best practices to implement in their classroom and plan using resources that were provided on the professional development resources website. They then have two weeks to actively

practice these practices in the classroom. During this time teachers will select students in the classroom that have been previously labeled gifted and talented. These students will be the focus of the use of best practices and the students the teacher will use when recording data for phase three. While actively teaching using the best practice(s) teachers will use a data collection sheet in order to rate the success and weaknesses of the practices when used with each student. The professional development resources website also includes twice weekly reflections through the format of Google Forms. Each week a different guiding question will be used to help the teacher reflect on the process of teaching gifted and talented students. In phase three, another large group discussion will be held and personal teacher data will be shared out. Questions about the effectiveness of active practice will be discussed as well as a determination made on whether or not to continue the practices in the future, and if the teachers can modify the practices to better fit their personal plans.

Presentation and Assessment

The presentation of this capstone project will come in a variety of formats with appropriate resources. The first being a face to face meeting with teachers and colleagues in order to train on best practices. A PowerPoint presentation will be used as well as videos and other media to train teachers in a large group setting. Teachers will have access to the presentation online to refer to throughout the second and final phases of professional development. Resources will be provided for teachers on a course website which will also allow for reflection and qualitative data collection by individual teachers as well as provide discussion boards for further expansion of knowledge on the topic.

Staff reflection on successes and failures will be taken into consideration and used during the third phase of training to troubleshoot issues in a face to face format and will be used as an assessment of the effectiveness of the professional development project. The qualitative data provided through teacher, student and administrator reflection will provide a baseline for further implementation at the ALC and a plan for future steps to success in helping gifted and talented students thrive in the classroom.

Timeline

As the professional development course provides three phases the timeline for completion will be determined based on personal administrative and staff decisions. The course should take no longer than one school quarter or half semester, two months at the most. This project requires one day of face-to face training for phase one, six weeks of implementation in the classroom, and one day of face to face meetings to review successes and failures and make decisions on whether to further implement the program on a school wide basis.

Chapter Three Summary

Chapter three outlined the essential research question: *How can ALC classroom teachers use best practices to teach Gifted and Talented Students and traditional ALC students at the same time, and how can a school use professional development to train teachers on the best practices*, and provided an outline of professional development training, information and research to be delivered during professional development, practices used during professional development and a scale for assessment of the research project. Chapter four will outline further details about the project including details of

implementation, timeframe, resources used and provided to teachers during professional development and conceptualizes the use of Turnaround Training and online professional development tools.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

Introduction

This capstone is based on the research question: *How can ALC classroom teachers use best practices to teach Gifted and Talented Students and traditional ALC students at the same time, and how can a school use professional development to train teachers on the best practices?* This chapter will be divided into six different sections. The first section will focus on the project description. The second section will focus on what I learned while creating the project and a reflection of my work. The third section will focus on the literature review and which sources were most applicable and influenced my work the most. The fourth section will discuss the limitations of the project I created. The fifth section will discuss future research that may need to be discussed based on the findings from my professional development project. Section six will be a discussion of the results of the professional development series, and the seventh section will outline how the project is a benefit to the profession of teaching.

Project Description

To complete the requirements for the Masters of Arts in Education degree from Hamline I decided to create a series of professional development for teachers at an ALC to better help and serve the gifted and talented population. The professional development series comes in three phases and focuses on five best practices for teaching gifted and talented students. These best practices include curriculum compacting, ability grouping,

cluster grouping, acceleration, and independent study. The first phase introduces the best practices through a PowerPoint lecture and discussion with attending teachers. The second phase provides a website for teachers to use to develop the best practices in their classroom and reflect upon their practices actively while testing them in the classroom with their current gifted and talented students while also collecting data. The third phase is a reflection and sharing phase in which attending teachers analyze the results of active practice, talk about how to keep and modify the practices for their individual classrooms, and decide to continue or discontinue the practices. The professional development series would be held by me, a teacher with gifted and talented educational training, and I would assist teachers throughout the entire process of choosing best practices, executing best practices and analysing best practices.

Major Learnings and Reflection

While creating this professional development project I found that many of the best practices for gifted and talented students aligned with the basic best practices of an ALC. An ALC school already has the format of a CLP in which teachers can provide personalized learning details for students. The integration of best practices when creating each student's CLP would be a simple addition to make before the process of administrative approval. The ALC I work for also integrates PBL for all students on a once weekly basis. PBL is also a great format to use with gifted and talented students and provides opportunities for higher level learning and a more inspired academic product or outcome.

While doing research for my literature review, and the professional development project I created, I noticed it was slightly difficult to obtain information about gifted and talented students who are enrolled in ALC's throughout the state. Percentages of students who were already labeled gifted and talented while enrolled are hard to come by unless you have exclusive access to a districts learning management database. Other search terms must be used to find and pinpoint the gifted and talented students, terms like 'concurrent enrollment', and 'post-secondary enrollment options.' Even at this point, if you don't have access to individual student data you cannot accurately track what type of concurrent enrollment or post secondary options students are taking advantage of. The thought of this information not being public disappointed me because it is valuable information for the public to know when considering what school to attend or send their students to in the future.

Influential Literature

Each section of the professional development project I created was based on particularly influential literature. The order and distribution of the professional development series is inspired by Vermut's *Teacher Learning and Professional Development* literature (2014) that described three sections to professional development that includes "theoretical knowledge" of experiential learning which coincides with phase one of the professional development project, the second being "experiential knowledge" that coincides with the second phase of active practice and reflection, and a third of "collaboration" which coincides with the third phase of group reflection and data collection.

My professional development project is also highly influenced by Thomas et. al. (2012) who described the concept of Turnaround Training. The professional development series that I created uses turnaround training, as the first second and third phases all include myself, a trained expert on gifted and talented education that helps the involved teachers learn about the practices, choose which practice to use in the classroom, collect data, reflect, and decide whether to continue with the practices in the future. The National Research Council's research on online professional development (2007) was also very helpful and inspired the professional development resources website I created for phase two. The website that is affiliated with this professional development includes resources for teachers to use to incorporate best practices to help plan and execute active practice, weekly reflections, and data collection worksheets. In an attempt to increase teacher motivation to participate in the professional development series, all of these resources are included online on one website that provides ease of access and ease of active reflection.

The information from the *Glossary of Terms* website provided by the National Association of Gifted Children largely influenced the four best practices that I chose to include in this professional development series. Combined with my knowledge of working at an ALC and what would most naturally fit into the format of the school, the Association provided good base terms and definitions for the frontloading process including ability grouping, cluster grouping, acceleration and independent study.

Limitations

As with every professional development series, there are a few limitations that must be discussed. The first limitation of my project that I noticed was time. ALC teacher

schedules can be quite heavy. A typical ALC teacher at the school I work for is expected to have five classes to teach, an advisory period, and an association to a project based learning activity that is conducted once per week. It takes up a lot of time in a teachers daily schedule to accomplish all of these duties. To add planning time in to modify lesson plans for their gifted students will take a little extra time per week to accomplish. I see this being a limitation for some full time teachers that have their schedules stretched thin.

Another limitation I noticed while creating the project is a possibility of a learning curve within the group of participating teachers. Some teachers may already know some or many of the best practices that are to be reviewed in phase one. Other teachers may have never been introduced to the practices and may need a little more guidance during the active practices phases. I believe that if the teachers and the professional running the series were to be truly collaborative, helping one another with each phase of the series this limitation can be avoided. Expert teachers could begin to help novice teachers and also leave more time for the trainer to help out novice teachers that are struggling to implement the practices in their classrooms.

Future Research Prospects

Upon the creation of the professional development project for best practices to assist gifted and talented students at an ALC, I noticed room for future topics of research in the fields of alternative education and gifted and talented education. Some research that could be done at the state level is an assessment of the amount of gifted and talented students in Minnesota that attend ALC schools. The first step to providing services to a student demographic is to identify the demographic, and truly knowing how many

students we have in programs that do not provide services for them would be helpful in determining future services. Other research that could be conducted could include the effectiveness of concurrent enrollment for students at an ALC school as a solution for providing services to gifted and talented students, or social research on how gifted and talented students feel about their education at ALCs. My ultimate recommendation based on my current research is for policy change at ALCs at the state level. If students who have previous gifted and talented labels are allowed to enroll at Minnesota ALCs they should be provided with adequate educational services no matter their academic status.

Communication and Use of Results

I expect to find that ALC teachers will have a mixed reaction to the proposed best practices for gifted and talented students. Some teachers may already be using some form of the best practices suggested which may incline them to more actively participate. Others may be familiar with the need for more specialized educational practices for their gifted and talented students in their classroom and may be inclined to at least try the best practices. Some teachers may find that only certain practices work with their subject matter, while other practices are nearly impossible to complete in their classroom. Others may not be super excited to begin because they view it as an extra workload on top of their daily activities. My best estimate is that there will be a mixture of the three different viewpoints. The goal of phase three of the professional development series is in part to air these issues as a large group and decide on a new action plan for the ALC teachers. My best suggestion is to examine the data and continue the best practices in classes that are hospitable to the strategies. Science and computer technology courses may notice a

struggle in implementing the best practices which is okay. The goal is to positively affect the gifted and talented students that we have at the school currently, before moving on to ventures far into the future.

As a conclusion to the professional development series, data will be collected from all teachers on classroom satisfaction and student grade and motivation increase. That data can be shared with administrative leaders at the school and district levels, as well as with parents of students in the form of a yearly update. As long as student information stays anonymous, I do not see a detriment to sharing the information with the public.

Benefits to the Profession of Education

The professional development series that I created to fulfill my capstone project requirement can most impact the fields of gifted and talented education and alternative education. I believe the benefits of this professional development series most positively impact the students. Although teachers benefit from higher participation rates and motivation of students, the students themselves will benefit the most from feeling more interested in participating and staying motivated in their studies. Student self-esteem has the potential of raising when students feel they are actively supported in the classroom, which can lead to them reaching farther into their studies and view themselves as academics with a future of post-secondary education. The accurate use of the best practices outlined in the professional development series should help the future academic trajectory of students.

Conclusion

As a result of conducting a literature review on best practices for teaching gifted and talented students and creating a project based on these best practices, I have found a solid set of steps to incorporating realistic practices into an ALC classroom. These best practices include ability grouping, cluster grouping, acceleration, and independent study and can be easily integrated into most school subjects and content areas and a way to present these practices to ALC teachers in a professional development setting. My hope in sharing this project with the public is to open our public school parents, teachers and students' eyes to a need that is sometimes pushed to the wayside because it is interpreted by others as “less important” to include in ALC basic practices. My goal is to shed light on the need and provide a realistic way for educators to create a more equitable learning experience for all students in their classrooms.

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APPENDIX A

List of National Alternative Education Association's Exemplary Practices:

- 1) Vision and Mission
- 2) Leadership
- 3) Climate and Culture
- 4) Staffing and PD
- 5) Curriculum and Instruction
- 6) Student Assessment
- 7) Transition Planning and Support
- 8) Family Engagement
- 9) Collaboration
- 10) Program Evaluation
- 11) School Counseling
- 12) School Social Work
- 13) Digital and Virtual
- 14) Policies and Procedures
- 15) Personalized Education Plan