**Collaboration Between the Special Education Teacher, Paraeducator, and the General**

**Education Teacher to Promote Inclusion for Students with Disabilities**

by

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One barrier to successful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education is lack of communication between the special educator, paraeducator, and general educator. This problem of practice occurred in a public, suburban school district in a Life Skills and Autistic Support grades three, four, and five classrooms. The school did not have a system of communication in place between the special education teacher, general education teachers, and paraeducators in order to improve inclusion of students with severe disabilities. The main stakeholders were students, the director of student support services, paraeducators, general education teachers, and special education teachers. The goal was for students with disabilities to have rich learning experiences while they are included in their general education classrooms. Quantitative and qualitative measures of professional and student behavior were collected and analyzed to examine the effects of the implemented change. The results demonstrated a correlation between communication between the adults and meeting student needs in the classroom. Data from the study provided evidence that the intervention increased engagement in the inclusive setting, but there is still more work to be done.

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## Dedication

In memory of my loving mother, Eileen M. Kline (1960-2021).

Her selfless devotion, acceptance, kindness, courage, and love are enduring blessings and models

to us all.

## 1.0 Introduction: Naming and Framing the Problem of Practice

## 1.1 Broader Problem Area

As a special education teacher, I want to investigate ways of collaborating with paraeducators so that I can improve the experiences of students with severe disabilities in the education setting where I work. Students with disabilities deserve to be fully included in their environment. Schools are still adjusting to deeply rooted struggles for justice. Like race or gender, "disability is simply another difference," and it is the responsibility of professionals in schools to make classrooms physically, emotionally, and mentally welcoming to all students (Liebowitz, n.d.).

Meeting inclusion goals in the classroom can be challenging for a host of reasons. For one, it is possible for students with disabilities to be present in the physical space but not fully included in the classroom community or engaged in the learning of the classroom. Students with disabilities have a spectrum of strengths and needs. Engaging students physically, emotionally, and academically is a challenge because they are unique in their own ways. There is no blueprint on how to work with students whose minds think differently, even if there is a plan on paper. School staff has to be comfortable and make efforts to engage and to include students with disabilities.

A second challenge is the need for multiple adults to coordinate the care and instruction of students with disabilities. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) Policy is responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities are educated with students without disabilities to the maximum extent possible (Bureau of Special Education Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2017). As this policy has been mandated in schools, placement of students with disabilities in the

general education classroom with their non-disabled peers has increased, which, in turn, has increased the need for additional adult support. Positive experiences in inclusive settings rely on the opportunities the paraeducator facilitates for them (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). Throughout the research, scholars refer to paraeducators as paraprofessionals, teaching assistants, or personal care aides, all of whom I refer to as paraeducators in my writing. The school does not have a system of communication in place between the special education teacher, general education teachers, and paraeducators in order to improve inclusion of students with severe disabilities.

## 1.2 The System

My problem of practice occurs in a public suburban school district. Its mission is "to cultivate academic, artistic, and athletic excellence of the whole child by fostering the skills to be confident, ethical, empathetic, and responsible global citizens" ("Mission Statement," n.d.). The school district campus where the mission statement is implemented has four school buildings: the elementary school, the intermediate school, the middle school, and the high school.

The intermediate school has classrooms for grades three, four, and five. Each grade level has 10 to 11 general education classrooms made up of 24 to 28 students. The intermediate school has four special education classrooms and one speech and language services classroom that offers a continuum of services for students who qualify for special education services. I teach the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom. The students who qualify for services in the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom have cognitive, physical, and/or emotional impairments that impact their functioning in everyday life. Students who qualify for this classroom often have autism and/or

are considered to be severely disabled. Each student is exceptional in their own way with unique talents and needs.

The team designs a program to support students' goals, sustain future community relationships, engage in employment, and have social independence. Depending on the individual student, the student spends time in the regular education classroom every day. Time spent in the regular classroom is outlined in the Individual Education Program (IEP). The IEP is the program designed by the multidisciplinary team that contains goals, specially designed instruction, services, and placements. In the plan, the paraeducators' services are outlined. In the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom the paraeducator travels with the student/s for the regular education classes. In addition, the Positive Behavior Support Plan (PBSP) aligns with the IEP in order to shape behavior. This is a detailed plan from a Functional Behavior Assessment.

Currently, the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom contains myself, the special education teacher, and four paraeducators for six students who have disabilities. This can change year to year depending on student identification.  I interact with the paraeducators within the special education classroom when the students are in the classroom. In addition, I speak with the paraeducators before and after they transition the students to their general education classes.

The majority of the students participate in the general education setting with their non-disabled peers for 35 percent of the school day and spend 65 percent of the school day in the special education classroom. In the 2017-18 school year, the school district had 2,300 students enrolled. Of that, 284 were enrolled in special education, which is 8.8 percent of the student population (Penn Data Special Education Data Report, n.d.). As my position is set in the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom, there are systematic factors that shape the structure.

### 1.2.1 Accountability

The state implemented the LRE policy to hold schools accountable for integrating students with disabilities in the general education setting with their non-disabled peers. My role as a special education teacher is to provide instruction in the special education classroom and ensure that a rich learning experience is occurring in the general education classroom, which is the inclusive setting. When the student and paraeducators are in the inclusive settings, I do not know what kind of value of instruction is being provided because I am not there. Many times, the paraeducators bring the student/s back in the special education classroom and report the material is not being adapted and modified to meet their needs in the general education classroom and, as a result, the student is exhibiting disruptive behaviors. The intent of the policy was to hold school districts accountable for inclusion, but the outcome in the school is playing out differently. The state is holding the school district accountable to include students, but it is difficult to know what is holding the staff accountable for quality evidenced-based inclusive practices in the general education classrooms.

### 1.2.2 Performance Management

Evaluation and feedback are designed to hold employees accountable for their performance, celebrate what is working, and implement continuous improvements. The structure of the school district includes the superintendent, two assistant superintendents, the director of student support services, the school board, the teacher's unions, the paraeducators union, building administrators, teachers, paraeducators, district employees, parents, and, most importantly, students. Administration and teachers do have an evaluation system. Despite the importance of performance evaluations, there is not a formal process in place for paraeducators to be evaluated

and receive feedback. The paraeducators are part of a union, as are the teachers. Without formal evaluations or a feedback process, it is difficult to know how paraeducators are doing in meeting their responsibilities set forth in their job descriptions. In addition, it is difficult for the paraeducator to feel like a valued team member for their work.

### 1.2.3 Training

As the district is growing, the need for certain trainings for different groups of staff is growing. Currently there is a lack of training for special education teachers and for paraeducators. Thinking back to my coursework, and throughout teaching, I have not had training on how to supervise multiple adults. Paraeducators are not only adults but frequently are people who are not trained in the field, are older than me, have their own beliefs, and do not have any accountability from the school district to do their job. Additionally, paraeducators may come in with no experience, get their assignment on the first day, and receive no training. During the school day, there are six students in the classroom, and no allotted time to train on the job. In return, this situation puts both myself and the paraeducators in a situation where we do the best we can in the moment.

### 1.2.4 Leadership and Hierarchy

The leaders in a school district who make system-wide decisions are the superintendent, the director of student support services, the school board, the teacher's union, and the paraeducators union. In the building, the principals and assistant principals make building-level decisions daily. It is the leader's job to have a school district that functions, communicates, and

problem solves. The leaders in the district have to use their power to shape the staff and students for the best results.

## 1.2.5 Equity. Justice. Power. Unions

With two unions in the school system, there are regulations that I will need to consider when making certain changes in the classroom. The teachers and paraeducators are in different unions. The teacher's union, the paraeducators union, administration, and the school board all have regulations and values that can promote or prevent change. The power dynamics of the parties is constantly changing. The importance of the special education program and its district policies varies by the stakeholders and district. The forces that are driving change are the students, parents, and educators. Some of the restraining forces are the unions, money, time, volume of students, competing priorities, and staff dispositions. As the force fields compete, change is in the middle. Student success remains the priority.

## 1.3 Stakeholders

In addition to the stakeholders below, the following are also stakeholders: superintendent, assistant superintendents, the school board, building principal, building assistant principal, the teachers union, the paraeducator union, and families. The relationship is intermixed as the goal is everyone working as a team to develop the best care for all students. Trust, judgement, and politics are all factors that play roles in decision making. The superintendent must approve everything before presenting it to the school board to approve.

### 1.3.1 Students

Students are the primary stakeholders. Students attend their public school to receive an education in order to make progress academically, emotionally, and socially, and to obtain life skills for their futures. Students with disabilities have IEPs that are designed to build on their strengths and address their needs in order for them to make progress. Some students with disabilities require a paraeducator with them due to the nature of their disability. The care they receive from the team of adults throughout the school day directly relates to their education. The implementation of their programming has to be implemented in an effective manner. Students deserve care that is well planned and designed for their success.

### 1.3.2 Director of Student Support Services

In the Lion School District, the Director of Student Support Services assists the administrative team as a leader in developing, achieving, and maintaining K-12 student support service programs. In special populations programming, the Director of Student Support Services implements and trains on best practices. The Director of Student Support Services provides expertise on student instruction and student school experience without barriers.

The Director of Student Support Services has the power to allow for small trials of change to occur in the special education department. I want students with disabilities to be able to meet their goals, sustain relationships, and work independently in all settings and times of the school day. Since the Director leads the department, they have the ability to assist to approve and implement change. Although the Director of Student Services can support change, many of the decisions are controlled by teacher and paraeducator union contracts. In order to work towards my

problem of practice, the Director of Student Support Services has authority to work with the unions and clarify roles and expectations in order to work towards using paraeducators effectively. The Director of Student Support Services can benefit from changes to the approach because staff will be communicating to deliver the best services that will, in turn, benefit the students.

**1.3.3 Paraeducators**

In the Lion School District, paraeducators are responsible for assisting the student/s in academic, social, emotional, and functional skills throughout the school day. They are to care for the student by using the PBSP and implementing the student's IEP. Paraeducators assist regular and special education teachers in all facets of the educational program to maximize the students' participation and success in the least restrictive environment.  They serve to assist students in self-sufficiency, communications, interpersonal skills, mobility, and behavioral skills. When the student is in the regular education classroom, the paraeducator serves as a translator in order for the student to interpret the information. The role of a paraeducator is unique in that they often have the least amount of experience, yet have the closest interactions with the students with severe disabilities. Their exact role is different as each student's needs are different.

Within the Lion School District, paraeducators are preferred to have a two-year degree. Some may have experience in education, while others do not. Paraeducators have their own paraeducator union. Paraeducators get paid hourly anddo not have an evaluation system. They report to the teacher, the building principal, and/or the Director of Student Support Services. Paraeducator job assignments and positions may change during the school year or year-to-year based on special education student needs and special education populations in each building.

Paraeducators support the student while they are included throughout the school day. Currently, paraeducator accountability measures are difficult to gain because the school district does not evaluate the effectiveness of paraeducators. If a paraeducator were to have an issue, the building administration would report them to Human Resources. An investigation meeting with the Director of Human Resources, the paraeducator, the paraeducator union representative, and the building principal would take place. At that meeting, it would be decided if a Loudermill hearing (a step in due process), which the superintendent would attend, would be needed. At that hearing, disciplinary action would be decided. If a plan were made to be in place surrounding communication, the paraeducator would be affected because this would require them to follow an additional directive from the school district.

### 1.3.4 General Education Teachers

In the Lion School District, general educators create a classroom environment for learning and personal student growth. They establish effective rapport with students and motivate students to develop skills and knowledge to provide a foundation. General education teachers instruct all students in their classroom in citizenship and their subject specified in state law and administrative regulations and procedures of Lion School District. Teachers develop lesson plans and materials to provide individualized and small group instruction to meet the needs of every student.

General education teachers are required to have their Pennsylvania teaching certificate and their certification in which they are hired to teach. All of the teachers in the building are a part of the teacher's union. Teachers get paid by salary. General education teachers report to and are evaluated by the building principal which is communicated to the building principal for review.

General education teachers are part of the team of adults coordinating care for students with severe disabilities. Students with severe disabilities are to be included in their classroom for portions of the school day. They are to abide by the IEP which aligns with the PBSP. General education teachers are responsible for using inclusion methods. In order for all students to be included the environment, culture, and assignments would have to be tailored to the needs of all students. This would require general education teachers to create well thought out units, as well as modifications and adaptations for individual student needs. In addition, they would need to communicate these plans to the paraeducator, as well as the role the paraeducator plays in that lesson. The paraeducator has to communicate with the general education teacher and follow the plans that were provided.

### 1.3.5 Special Education Teachers

In the Lion School District, special educators work to create a program and classroom environment for academic, emotional, social, and functional skills. Their role is to design individual programs for students with disabilities to encourage and develop skills to make progress. Special education teachers must follow all state and federal guidelines in regards to special education for the students they serve. They are responsible for IEPs, functional behavior assessments, re-evaluation reports, and aligning the PBSP. Special education teachers develop lesson plans and materials to meet the needs of the student.

In the Lion School District, special education teachers are required to have their Pennsylvania teaching certificate in special education and it is preferred that they have their general education teacher certificate as well. Special education teachers are a part of the teacher's union.

They get paid by salary. Special education teachers report to and are evaluated by the building principal.

Special education teachers meet with a multidisciplinary team to decide on goals regarding the academic, behavior, social, emotional, and functional needs of each student. The teacher can design a plan, but cannot control what the adults coordinating care do at all times. In addition, the student's needs change at a moment to moment basis. The special education teacher is the one who specialized in interventions. They are a member of the team coordinating care for students with severe disabilities. Special education teachers are responsible for making sure students are included in the school and are making progress towards their goals. This occurs simultaneously as special education teachers are teaching lessons in the special education classroom.

## 1.4 Fishbone

A fishbone diagram looks at the problem and causes. The problem is at its head with the root causes as its bones. The problem is that communication methods between the special education teacher, the general education teacher, and the paraeducator need to improve in order to advance inclusion of students with severe disabilities. The special education teacher, who is the expert on inclusion strategies, is scheduled to teach inside of the special education classroom. The special education teacher is supposed to pass on his/her expertise to the paraeducator and general education teacher so that they can support the student in the general education setting. The students with severe disabilities are scheduled to go to their homeroom classes with the paraeducator. The special education teacher and the classroom teacher give instructions and directions to the paraeducator. The special education teacher is not in the classroom to see what is going on. The

general education teacher is teaching the class, and cannot control what the paraeducator is telling the student in real time. The paraeducator uses their own judgement with the student, but does not have direct supervision. In turn, the most severe students in the school are under the supervision of the least trained adult and have no solid structure/routine for the special education teacher to effectively communication, monitor, or provide feedback to the paraeducator on their implementation, which could result in sub-optimal services to the student with the disability.

The root causes are split into the multiple adults coordinating care and how to get there. The main three adults the student/s spends time with daily are the special education teacher, the general education teacher, and a paraeducator. The adults coordinating care have some similar and different drivers, which all contribute to their role and why they may do what they do. The other side of the fishbone are policies that contribute to inclusion and principles and approaches that scholars report are successful in communication between the special education teacher and paraeducator. Between the multiple adults coordinating care and how to get there, there are many root causes and drivers that contribute to the problem.
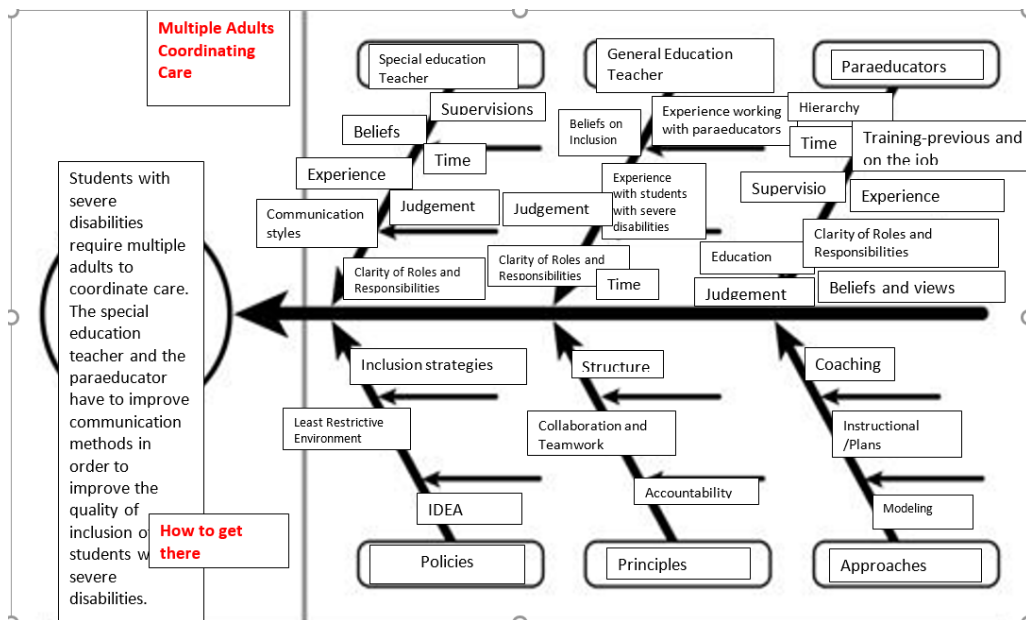


**Figure 1. Fishbone Diagram**

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## 1.5 Statement of the Problem of Practice

A model of support between the special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator is needed in order to implement communication practices that will benefit students with severe disabilities within the classroom setting. Engaging students academically, emotionally, and socially is a challenge because each student has their own strengths and needs that need to be met. There is the need for multiple adults to coordinate the care and instruction of students with disabilities. Meeting goals of inclusion can be challenging for multiple reasons. One reason is that students with disabilities can be in a classroom space, but the classroom is not set up for their engagement or learning needs. The staff has to be knowledgeable, comfortable, proactive, and responsive to make efforts to engage students for inclusion.

### 1.5.1 Challenges of the System

There are multiple factors complicating the challenge of close collaboration amongst special education teachers and paraeducators. One is the steady increase of paraeducators in U.S. schools; as of 2016, the number of paraeducators employed was over 1.3 million people (Teacher Assistants: Occupational Outlook Handbook, n.d.). This increase in the number of paraeducators in schools may be due to a rise of concerns about inclusion, the increase of identification of students with behavior disorders, standards-based reforms, parental advocacy, and a shortage of certified special education teachers (Douglas, Uitto, Reinfeld, & D'Agostino, 2019).

In regards to hiring paraeducators, many scholars recognize that paraeducators have limited training prior to the job, have not received training on strategies during the job, lack supervision, do not have clarity of roles and responsibilities, lack formal education, are reluctant to discuss

uncomfortable topics, hold different views, and have difficulty in professional behavior and work ethic (e.g., Brock & Carter, 2015; Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016; Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2012). In other words, the least trained staff are assigned to work with students who require the greatest amount of support. Additionally, Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2016) discuss shared challenges, guiding beliefs, and hierarchy which include notable age differences, burnout, compliance demands, perception of roles, characteristics of people who fill the roles, and the inherent positions in hierarchy, all of which create challenges for the special education teachers to supervise the paraeducators and the time to communicate the information that is required for the student to be set up for success.

Just as paraeducators are viewed as unprepared for the job, much of the literature suggests paraeducators themselves feel they lack resources, training, and appreciation. Walker (2017) studied paraeducators' views of their perceived skill level and the results suggest that paraeducators report low skill levels and have high education needs. Giangreco, Edilman, and Broer (2003) remind us that paraeducators feel underappreciated, undercompensated, and asked to undertake critical instructional responsibilities without sufficient role clarification. Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) recognize that when the paraeducator is in the general education classroom, they do not have direct supervision from the special education teacher and the general education teacher may not have the knowledge or training. This results in the paraeducator feeling uncertain and isolated. Riggs and Mueller (2001) found that since paraeducators have no training, relatively untrained paraeducators were mentoring new inductee paraeducators. In addition, the paraeducators indicated they felt a lack of training in managing challenging behaviors and making curriculum modifications and adaptations on their own (Riggs and Mueller, 2001). Because of these reasons described, the system involving paraeducators and special education teachers is not

set up for success. I wonder whether focusing on strengthening ways that special education

teachers and paraprofessionals communicate about their shared students could make a difference.

## 2.0 Review of Supporting Knowledge

To learn more, I examined the various interventions in which previous researchers have found to improve communication and accountability methods with staff who work with students with disabilities.

I sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the key characteristics of productive professional work among special education teacher, general education teachers and paraeducators?

- What are approaches for improving professional communication about students between special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraeducators?

## 2.1 Roadmap

This literature review comes from a variety of sources. To explore my questions, I reviewed bodies of scholarship that related to strategies of supervision and communication of paraeducators. I chose these sources based on their significance to my questions. The majority of the works included are empirical studies. I decided to include pieces about the communication and supervision because that is where I want to make a difference in my place of practice. I excluded pieces centrally focused on inclusion because many of the sources told benefits of inclusion, but not how staff and their practices were able to make inclusion successful. In what follows, I first present a principles section that responds to my first question, and then I move to approaches from the literature responding to my second question. Together, these studies will inform how I can

better help staff engage in the process of helping students with severe disabilities have meaningful opportunities in the school setting. I end by articulating specific change ideas and other implications related to my problem of practice and my professional context.

### 2.1.1 What are the Key Characteristics of Productive Professional Work Among Special Education Teachers and Paraeducators?

Collaboration, teamwork, accountability, and structure are characteristics in the relationships between the special education teacher and paraeducator that are evidenced in productive professional work that benefits students with severe disabilities.

#### 2.1.1.1 Collaboration and Teamwork

Collaboration is a key characteristic of professional work amongst special education teachers and paraeducators. Collaboration and teamwork throughout the literature represent work done jointly by several associates together in an efficient endeavor. Instead of using the word collaboration, some pieces use the word teamwork. The collaboration and teamwork between the special education teacher and paraeducator appears to be important for creating meaningful experiences in a shared space that is the best for students with severe disabilities.

Collaboration can start from the supervisory role such as the special education teacher. Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan (2016) wanted to gain a better understanding of current practices in paraeducator supervision. The authors interviewed 13 special education teachers who were viewed by special education administration as exemplary supervisors of paraeducators. The themes that emerged from the interviews were creating effective teams and ensuring appropriate training and evaluation. Special education teachers are responsible for the supervision of paraeducators and

working as an effective team, therefore the special education teacher should set up team meetings, communicate with team members, and define roles. Paraeducators are expected to execute their training and provide feedback to teachers and administration. The team relationship worked best for everyone through teamwork, mutual respect, and good communication (Douglas et. al., 2016).

When reviewing how the team works together, it is important to view how the members of the team feel. Combining the paraeducator and special education teacher views, Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2016) conducted interviews with a total of 22 teachers and paraprofessional comprising of nine educational teams to see what influenced the quality of their professional relationships, as well as exploring the convergence or divergence between their perspectives. The findings highlight the complexity of the relationships and the importance of teachers and paraprofessionals as they work together to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. Their research stressed the importance of being flexible and having the mindset that the student always comes first (Biggs, Gilson, and Carter, 2016).

Equally important, finding the experiences of individual team members can be helpful in how to better work together as a whole. Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2019) later conducted in-depth individual interviews with members of nine educational teams- a total of 22 teachers and 13 paraprofessionals. The authors sought to find the competencies they considered important for special education teachers to work effectively with paraprofessionals. The authors recommended that if both are doing their job well, then the special education teacher and paraeducator will be empowered to do what they are required to do. The participants identified assertive communication, collaboration skills, coaching skills, organization skills, and conflict management skills (Biggs, Gilson, and Carter, 2019).

Similarly, additional research was completed to see how the special education teacher and paraeducator should treat each other in order to work productively together. Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, and Hunt (2012) researched documented evidence related to the relationship existing between paraeducators and teachers in early childhood settings; exploring the duties of paraeducators and their working relationships with the teachers. The authors discovered that in order to increase teamwork, joint trainings between the paraeducator and teacher are recommended to work effectively as a structured team. Paraeducators must see themselves as partners in the classroom. In order for this to be successful, there has to be an understanding that they work as partners in the classroom, identify and appreciate the strengths and unique characteristics that each member brings to the team, develop communication skills for ideas and concerns, and share the expectations that team members have for one another (Jones et. al., 2012). Collaboration and teamwork was a dominant theme found in the literature, but not the only one.

**2.1.1.2 Accountability**

Accountability arose as another characteristic in productive professional work between the special education teacher and paraeducator. Brock and Carter (2015) define accountability as ensuring participants attempt to implement the intervention in everyday practice. In their study, the strategies were modeled for the paraeducator, then the paraeducator was observed implementing the strategy. Following the observation, productive feedback was provided to the paraeducator. This held the paraeducator responsible for attempting to implement everyday practices to the best of their ability and ways to improve their implementation in working with students with disabilities. By holding paraeducators accountable, their work with students with disabilities improved, thus the student made progress.

Like anyone completing a job, paraeducators work in a school setting need to be held accountable so their work has value. Capizzi and Da Fonte (2012) reviewed the role of being a special education teacher who has to supervise paraeducators and a plan that can help collaboration is a structured template. A part of the structure of the plan was providing feedback to hold the paraeducator accountable. The authors found that everyone wants to feel appreciated for their work and be a valued member of the team. The authors believe that constructive feedback on performance is a valuable component of effective communication with paraeducators (Capizzi and Da Fonte, 2012).

As being held accountable is valuable, how feedback is delivered is also important to know if you completed your job correctly. Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan (2016) believe in the importance of paraeducator feedback as part of training and supervision to achieve accountability. Teachers stated the importance of telling paraeducators not what they are doing incorrectly, but how to do it correctly. For administrators, evaluation was done once a year with a combination of written feedback and/or a meeting to hold the paraeducator accountable (Douglas et. al., 2016). Accountability was found important in making sure everyone did their job as a team member.

**2.1.1.3 Structure**

Having a structure of communication between the special education teacher and paraeducator emerged as a characteristic in productive professional work. Several authors found that providing structure is important to defining roles and providing a framework for success for the students.

Structure helps each member explicitly know what is expected of them to make the program work for students. Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl (2001) measured the competencies of teachers who supervise or direct the work of paraprofessionals in educational

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settings. The study had administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals respond to a survey of prospective competencies for teachers supervising the work of paraprofessionals. The competencies that were rated very important by the participants were: Communication with Paraprofessionals, Instructional Support, Planning and Scheduling, Modeling or Paraprofessionals, Public Relations, Training, and Management of Paraprofessionals. By these ratings, the authors show the value of structure to teachers who supervise paraeducator (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl 2001).

Additionally, the structure of the classroom set up by the special education teacher and paraeducator can value students with disabilities. If staff knows what their job is within the schedule, the students know who they are working with. Capizzi and Da Fonte (2012) reviewed the role of being a special education teacher who has to supervise paraeducators and a plan that can help collaboration in a structured template. The authors state that evidence based practices lie within the responsibility of teachers and paraeducators. By having a structured routine of the roles and responsibilities, the special education teacher can help the members meet their expectations and be prepared for their responsibilities with students (Capizzi and Da Fonte, 2012).

Not only does there have to be a structured routine, but each member needs to know the strategies in their part of the routine in order to provide effective instruction to students. Similar to Capizzi and Da Fonte (2012), Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, and Hunt (2012) discuss the importance of knowledge and skills that paraeducators are expected to demonstrate. Paraeducators must know the roles, responsibilities, and expectations. This can include instructional strategies, behavior management strategies, effective communication strategies, and observation and assessment techniques (Jones et. al., 2012).

Structure can also be important in performing evidenced based practices in the classroom by the special education teacher and the paraeducator. In an empirical study, Douglas, McNaughton, and Light (2013) examined the impact of a structured online program combined with a live practice play session to train the paraeducators. The procedures were in three phases; baseline, training, and maintenance. The structure of the online program made use of a mnemonic to support memorization of steps by the paraeducators to implement which was found effective when implementing the strategy with the student. As a result of the structured set up, the paraeducators increased opportunities for communication, the children increased the number of communication acts they performed (Douglas, McNaughton, and Light, 2013).

All in all, the structure and routine set up in the classroom can value students with disabilities. Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2016) conducted research to see what influenced the quality of their professional relationships. The authors claimed that paraprofessionals in the study value clear and explicit communication about tasks and that teachers consider their strengths when making decisions in a structured way. By providing this structure, it focuses on the students and the paraprofessionals abilities and performance (Biggs, Gilson, and Carter, 2016). Structure was found important to contribute to paraeducators implementing instruction to students with disabilities.

### 2.1.1.4 In Sum

From the literature, collaboration, teamwork, accountability, and structure are features that help create an efficient relationship between the special education teacher and paraeducator to make meaningful opportunities for students with severe disabilities. Although there may be other important characteristics, these were the ones most consistently found in the literature that related to the topic. These driving principles can help guide the team to a successful plan.

**2.1.2 What are Approaches for Improving Professional Communication About Students Between Special Education Teachers and Paraeducators?**

The literature recommended approaches for improving communication between the special education teacher and paraeducator. Modeling, Instruction/Plans, and Coaching are approaches that authors found effective to improve communication.

**2.1.2.1 Modeling**

Throughout the literature, modeling was found as a way to improve paraeducator performance while working with students with disabilities. Brock and Carter (2015) define modeling as trainers clearly communicating how to implement an intervention. In their study, modeling was done by video and included a description and demonstration of instructional practice and the situations where practitioners might have to perform the practice. The practitioners had the opportunity to review the steps and plan how they might implement the practice in the classroom with the student. This modeling format was found to be effective in their research (Brock and Carter, 2015).

When introducing new instructional methods to paraeducators to implement with students, modeling was found successful. Douglas, McNaughton, and Light (2013) questioned whether modeling techniques were effective in teaching new information to paraeducators who were working with young students with complex communication needs. During the modeling, the paraeducator had opportunities to ask questions about the strategies and steps. Following practice, paraeducators got to self-reflect on their performance. Modeling was found effective for new information for the learner. From these strategies, students with complex communication needs were provided more communication opportunities and the children then communicated more

frequently because of the training the paraeducators participated in (Douglas, McNaughton, and Light, 2013). Modeling was found as a productive way to guide the paraeducator to implement strategies.

### 2.1.2.2 Instructional Plans

Instructional plans, with organized components and explicit expectations, were found as a beneficial approach to supporting paraeducators in the school setting. One piece of literature recommended a structure of a plan that promoted collaboration. Capizzi & Da Fonte (2012) designed a Collaborative Classroom Support Plan (CCSP) designed to encourage open communication and sharing information in addition to specifying responsibilities between the special education teacher and the paraeducator.  Collaboration was claimed to identify potential training needs, enhance overall procedures, and facilitate communication among administrators, teachers, and paraeducators. In this CCSP formatted plan, it offers the opportunity to create an open discussion on work ethics, expectations, personal style of work, response to feedback, and opportunities to improve professional skills (Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012). This structured plan appeared an effective way to introduce the roles and responsibilities of the paraeducator in the beginning of the school year.

Other studies focused not on the instructional plans themselves, but rather on the approaches for using instructional plans effectively.  Reid and Parsons (1995) discussed the importance of monitoring staff performance through the instructional plans given to them. The authors recognize that the staff has to have a clear understanding of exactly what is expected of them, including the varied nature of the work and that the work they are doing at the time may not be obvious. When giving instructions to staff, supervisors have to carefully specify the instruction in terms of specific work behaviors. The authors found that in order to successfully monitor a staff

member, the supervisor should obtain information regarding performance by directly observing them. The supervisor should monitor consistently so each time a particular work activity is observed; the monitoring process is the same. This will in turn provide more successful outcomes for the staff implementing a plan (Reid and Parsons, 1995).

Not only can instructional plans help in the special education classroom, but when the student and paraeducator are in an inclusive setting, instructional plans can be a value in guiding the paraeducator as well. Guay (2003) argues the need to address classroom leadership and supervisory skills in preservice and in-service teacher education programs for best practices for students with severe disabilities within the art classroom. The author believes that how students and adults act toward one another and value one another is reciprocal and formed by interactions in the classroom. The author's research showed that instruction to students with disabilities and the reciprocal process create interpretations for students. Guay (2003) revealed that if teachers understand the supervisory role and communicate parameters then for the engagement of adult paraeducators will increase. By setting these plans and providing instructions to the paraeducator, the engagement of the student responding in the class should be reciprocal (Guay, 2003).

Having instructional plans in advance can help each party know what is expected of them. Communicating the plan while it is happening can cause confusion and lack of clarity. Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) validated the importance of training content and documentation to effectively deliver instruction to paraeducators across training formats. The review included a study that reported that many times, special education teachers do not plan ahead of time for paraprofessionals, and those teachers who did, relayed the information orally. The author pointed out that when directions are transmitted orally, the oral directions can be misconstrued. The authors felt that the importance of clear plans for the paraprofessional is

paramount to them delivering the plan effectively (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle , 2010). By the special education communicating effectively and efficiently in instructional plans, the researchers found the paraeducators were able to implement their roles.

### 2.1.2.3 Coaching/Performance Feedback

Coaching and providing feedback is an approach that authors found successful to promote communication between special education teachers and paraeducators. Many of the literature pieces found that one-time workshops were not successful. Approaches that coach the paraeducator, followed by feedback throughout the year are more successful for communication and for providing a successful education to the student.

In addition, coaching and performance feedback was found to be successful when training paraeducators as well. Coaching and performance feedback is defined by Brock and Carter (2015) as the follow up with participants to reinforce what they are doing well and to help them correct their mistakes. In Brock and Carter's (2015) study, they designed training considering the logistical and resource constraints of public school districts. The participants were provided training, models, coaching, and then targeted instructional feedback. The coaching was completed in-person and in the natural setting. Coaching alone was found the most effective in the study, showing significance in the approach (Brock and Carter, 2015).

Coaching has to be implemented in an effective way in order to have positive results. Reid and Parsons (1995) specify that skills have to be taught, with a checklist, verbally described, physically demonstrated, observed on the practice of the skills, and then followed up with corrective and/or approving feedback to staff based on their demonstration. The feedback provided directly afterwards depends on how successful the feedback is with improving staff performance.

When descriptive and evaluative information are included, the staff members learn what the supervisor wants in order to gain approval (Reid and Parsons, 1995).

Coaching helps staff experience what is expected with the students while every day disruptions can occur. Coaching in the natural setting can help staff prepare for situations. Ledford, Zimmerman, Chazin, Morales, and Bennett (2017) researched coaching and brief post-session feedback to improve the use of environmental arrangement, prompting, and praise in inclusive classrooms. The authors' findings suggest that in-situ feedback is a promising practice for paraeducators for improving evidenced based practices in early childhood settings as an alternative to the more typical professional development practices (Ledford et. al., 2017).

When working with students with severe disabilities, coaching on how to work with student behavior can help paraeducators know how to respond to the student. Mason, Schnitz, Gerow, An, and Wills (2019) studied the impact of coaching with performance feedback from teachers on accuracy of paraeducators' momentary time sampling data of students on-task behavior. Using multiple baselines across paraeducator, the relation between coaching and accuracy of the data collection was evaluated. From baseline data, the authors found that some paraeducators required explicit instruction on how to collect data with fidelity. Once coached, with performance feedback from teachers, there was an increase in accuracy of data collection by paraeducators measured by inter-rater agreement. Coaching was feasible and effective for increasing paraeducators data collection accuracy (Mason et. al., 2019). The coaching approach was valuable in the studies to train paraeducators working with students with disabilities.

## 2.2 Synthesis

Most scholars that study the relationship between the special education teacher and the paraeducator agree that their supportive relationship is an effective way to help students with severe disabilities be more successful in the school setting. Although there seems to be no consensus on which principle or approach is the most effective, studies have found that the key principles and approaches have positive student outcomes. Collaboration allows for open discussion of roles and responsibilities, decision making strategies, and knowledge of each other's roles and backgrounds. Effective teamwork can assist in delegating responsibilities, listening to each other's recommendations, and solving problems in a partnership. Accountability, meaning holding each other responsible for meeting expectations, is important, as is valuing each team member for their contribution. An emphasis on structure offers affordances for every team member to meet expectations and know their role.

In addition to the principles, several approaches were found to be effective. Modeling can show the expectation of the task, an example of how to manage behavior, and how to manage modifications and adaptations. Instructional plans provide clear, explicit parameters for the job roles. Coaching and performance feedback generalize for the future, discuss things that were done well, places to improve, and opportunities to learn from.

The literature review helps me understand my problem of practice in four main ways. First, it has affirmed my belief that the system is not currently set up for success. Second, it informs me about the many variables that go into a special education classroom and the staff in the classroom. Third, despite the fact that there is no formula for success, it is clear that there are some effective practices that could be applied to my study. Finally, the literature supports my understanding that the relationship between the special education teachers and paraeducators takes time and planning

in order to be tailored to fit the students' needs.  All of these factors will help me in crafting a study to address my problem of practice in the school setting.

## 2.3 Connections to Context

There are system issues that I related to from the literature. First, when the student and paraeducators are in the inclusive settings, I do not know what kind of value of instruction is being provided. From the literature, this problem can attempt to be fixed by clarifying who should be modifying the academic assignments, modeling how to prompt the student in the inclusive setting, structured planning by the general education teacher, and holding the paraeducator accountable. In turn, the students' time in the general education classroom has value.

Another systemic issue is the lack of training for myself and the paraeducators. Thinking back to my coursework and throughout teaching, I have not had training how to supervise multiple adults. Not only adults, but people who are not trained in the field, are older than me, have their own beliefs, and do not have any accountability from the school district to do their job. Additionally, paraeducators come in with no experience, get their assignment on the first day, and receive no training. During the school day, there are nine students in the classroom, and no allotted time to train on the job. In return, this puts both myself and the paraeducator in a situation where we do the best we can. From the review of literature, this is a systemic problem in not just my place of practice, but a true problem in the system.

When starting my literature review, I wanted to find feasible ideas to address these issues to promote more valuable experience for students with disabilities. From the literature, there was no exact calculation, but instead principles and approaches that were found successful. My main

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takeaway is that that small changes can make a difference. Although this is a systematic problem, I can make changes in my classroom using the principles and approaches to make a difference. I still have questions that I will need to have clarified about the paraeducator union and the teacher's union. With unions in school, there are regulations that I will have to keep in mind when making these changes within my classroom. Furthermore, it seems simple to make changes in the principles and approaches in the classroom, but with my experience, it is a lot to manage at one time.

## 2.4 Conclusion

As a special education teacher, I feel as if I need to better collaborate with paraeducators in the classroom to improve the experiences of the students with severe disabilities within the educational setting where I work. Since students with severe disabilities are different, they have a program written for success. Students may physically be included in the general education classroom, but may not be included in a beneficial way. Multiple adults work together to coordinate the care and instruction for students with disabilities, but it is not cohesive. Since much of the student's experience relies on the paraeducator in the general education classroom, the special education teacher and paraeducator have to come up with strategies to work together so the student can have meaningful experiences.

There is no guide or calculation on how to make this relationship perfect. Based on my review of the literature, I believe that information about the principles and empirical evidence of the approaches have shown to be effective can be combined in a way that is utilized to effectively benefit my students with severe disabilities. Productive directions for approaching my problem is

creating a plan with paraeducators in the classroom that is structured, promotes collaboration and teamwork, and holds everyone accountable for their role.

I want to investigate how, as a grade three to five life skills and autistic support teacher, I can design a collaborative support plan that will provide cohesion between the special education teacher and paraeducator in order to provide more opportunities for students with severe disabilities. My research questions are:

- How can I support the paraeducators that I work with to address issues directly with students with severe disabilities?

- When a program between the special education teacher and paraeducator is developed, to what extent will students with severe disabilities have more opportunities to learn?

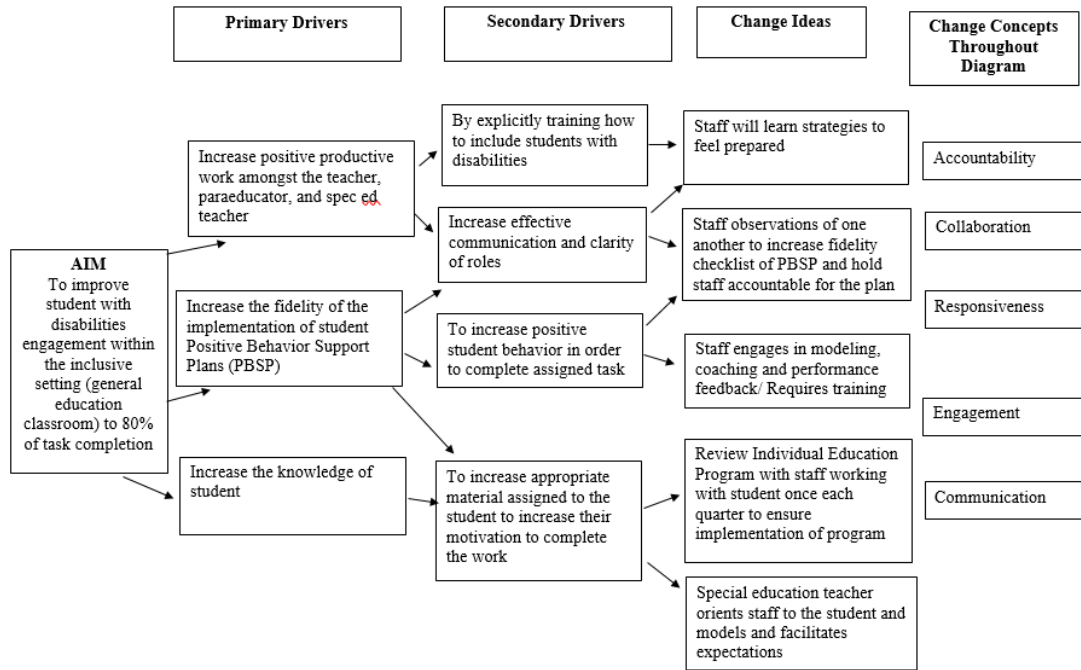# 3.0 Proposed Methods

## 3.1 Theory of Improvement



**Figure 2. Theory of Improvement Framework**

## 3.2 Participants

The participants in the study included the paraeducators assigned to the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom grades three, four, and five, the general education classroom teacher who has a student who is in the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom grades three, four, and

five, and myself, the special education teacher. Since this project occurred during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the participants are those who are attended school in person.

Three students were signed up to receive their education in person. All of the students were males in the fifth grade. Two of the male students are White/non-Hispanic origin, and one male student is Multi-racial. None of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. All of the students have a primary and secondary disability.

Two paraeducators were assigned to the three students. Both paraeducators identify as females. One paraeducator is White/non-Hispanic origin, and the other is Multi-racial. One of the paraeducators has a master's degree, the other has a bachelor degree. One paraeducator has been in the school district for four years, while the other has been in the school district for three.

Two general education teachers were assigned the two students. One is a male teacher, and the other is a female. Both teacher have master's degrees. Both came to the district with previous teaching experience greater than five years.

During the 2019-2020 school year, there were six students in the classroom, and four paraeducators. The 2018-2019 school year, there were nine students, five paraeducators, and two full time nurses. Each year the number of student and staff varies.

### 3.3 Setting

My problem of practice occurred within a public, suburban school district in the intermediate school (grades three, four, and five). Third, fourth, and fifth grade general education classrooms are made up of 24 to 28 students. The intermediate school has four special education classrooms. The Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom contains myself, who is the special

education teacher and paraeducators to support students on my caseload. I interact with the paraeducators within the special education classroom when the students are in the classroom. In addition, I speak with the paraeducators before and after they transition the students to their general education classes. The majority of the students participate in the general education classroom for 40 percent of the school day and 60 percent of the school day in the special education classroom.

In the 2017-18 school year, the school district had 2,300 students enrolled. Of that, 284 were enrolled in special education, which is 8.8 percent of the student population. 62.4 percent of special education students in the school district are included in the general education setting 80 percent of the school day. 4.0 percent of students in special education are included in the general education classroom, less than 40 percent of the school day. 7.3 percent of the special education population is placed in other settings. The students in the classroom I teach are included in the general education classroom less than 40 percent of the school day (Penn Data Special Education Data Report 2017-18 School Year).

### 3.4 Goal to Accomplish

My goal was for students with disabilities to have rich learning experiences while they are included in their general education classrooms. A rich learning experience consist of an environment that is challenging, engaging, and flexible. This requires the student to be in an environment where they feel regulated and comfortable in their learning environment in order to complete tasks that are assigned to them. Strogilos (2018) defines inclusion as, "all people are valued and treated on equal terms" (p.1). Furthermore, inclusion continues to require teachers to use practices that benefit all students to meet the diverse and assorted needs of students with

disabilities by modifying and adjusting instruction to allow all students to access the general education curriculum (Strogilos, 2018).

Meeting the goals of inclusion can be challenging for the student and the staff because each student is unique in their own way, with individualized plans to set them up for success. Although it is challenging, inclusion has shown to benefit all students. Inclusion of students with disabilities has social, emotional, and academic benefits for students with and without disabilities. Emotionally, inclusion helps all students feel accepted and supported, along with helping them to feel a sense of belonging. In addition, studies have shown that students with and without disabilities benefit in behavior and social skills (Eredics, 2018). Academically, studies have shown that all students maintain or gain in the inclusive setting (Eredics, 2018).

In order to make inclusion successful for students, the multiple adults coordinating care have to implement all the aspects of each IEP and respond to the student in a way that is productive. The students and staff must be able to embrace diversity and responsiveness. Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2016) found that although it is a complex relationship, it is important that teachers and paraprofessionals work together to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. Their research stressed the importance of being flexible and having the mindset that the student always comes first (Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2016).

**3.4.1 Increasing Productive Work Among Staff**

The daily staff coordinating care for students with disabilities include the special education teacher, the paraeducator, and the general education teacher. In order for students with disabilities to increase their engagement in the classroom, the staff has to ensure that the student is set up for success.

Each year, a new team of adults works with each student. During the summer months, the administration decides on the student's homeroom teacher and paraprofessional. The paraprofessional assignments are not known by the paraprofessional or the special education teacher until the professional development days before the students' first day at school. For the student to have a successful environment, the staff must be trained on how to work with students with disabilities. Joint training between the paraeducator and teacher are recommended to work effectively as a structured team (Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2012)..

As the special education teacher is certified to teach special education, they are not trained in managing all the colleagues with whom they work. The paraeducator is required to have a two-year associate degree, which does not have to be in education. The general education teacher has a degree in teaching, but not necessarily special education. With the variety of backgrounds, the student still must be served appropriately. With only a few days to orient general education teachers and paraeducators on their student, a plan for communication and a time to learn about the student needs to be in place to better equip the student for a successful start of the year.

In addition to time to plan, a successful communication system requires roles that are clear. By having a structured routine of the roles and responsibilities, the special education teacher can help the members meet their expectations and be prepared for their responsibilities with students (Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012). Not only does there have to be a structured routine, but each member needs to know the strategies in their part of the routine in order to provide effective instruction. If the staff has a positive partnership and a training on how to navigate their relationship, the students will benefit and hopefully be able to increase their productivity in the inclusive setting.

### 3.4.2 Increasing the Fidelity of the Positive Behavior Support Plans

For students with disabilities to improve their engagement in the inclusive setting, their behavior has to be positive. Every behavior communicates something and can be shaped. If a student with a disability has behaviors in the school setting, a PBSP is in place to address these behaviors. PBSP is an approach for organizing the physical, social, educational, biomedical, and logistical supports needed to achieve basic lifestyle goals while reducing problem behaviors that pose barriers to these goals (Sugai & Horner, 2008). This approach helps students and their supporter to achieve a quality life that is defined by their personal choices (Sugai & Horner, 2008).

If the plan is followed, it increases positive student behavior in order for the student to complete the assigned tasks in the inclusive settings. Fisher and Pleasants (2012) explain that much of the success of the students with disabilities can depend on the support of the paraeducator. The paraeducator must implement the plan with fidelity in order to see a responsive student.

One measure that can reflect the implementation of the PBSP is if the student is able to stay in the general education classroom for their scheduled time. Outlined in the PBSP is the paraeducator response to student behavior. If the student begins to engage in certain behaviors, the paraeducator should transition them to another spot in the building to provide a safe setting. One measure to track student behavior is by tracking the amount of time the student is in the general education classroom during their scheduled time, and, if removal is necessary, the duration of that removal and if they were able to return to the classroom.

### 3.4.3 Increase Student Knowledge

Having knowledge of the student can help improve the way staff interact with that student. If staff knows the students' program, proactive interventions, and how to respond, the student will be better set up for success. If the student has the tools to be successful, then they will be able to improve their engagement in their inclusive setting by engaging with their peers in a way that is comfortable for them.

One way of improving the knowledge of students is knowing their Individual Education Program (IEP). There are sections about the student in the IEP that explains the student, parent information, goals, and how to design their instruction. Reviewing the plan, the goals, and the specially designed instruction as team members in a living document, will help the team collaborate on what is working for the students and address any issues that come up.

The beginning of the school year sets the tone and schedule for the year. By knowing this information a few days in advance, the knowledge and expectations the special education teacher has for the student could be clearly communicated. Through staff knowing the student, the plan, and the expectations, the student will be better understood to engage in their learning environment in order to increase their interactions in their environment.

### 3.4.4 Change

The goal is for students with disabilities to engage in their inclusive settings academically, behaviorally, and socially. Inclusion has shown success in academic, behavior, and social areas. By measuring student task completion (academic), student time in the general education classroom (behavior), and interpersonal interactions (social), change can be tracked. In order for students to

show change, the team of adults who coordinate their care have to increase their positive productive work amongst each other, increase the fidelity of the PBSP in place, and increase their knowledge of the student. If change is made in these areas, change will reflect in how the student responds in the inclusive setting.

Within my sphere of influence, I am able to make a change in the way collaboration and communication is completed with the team of staff working with the students with disabilities.

The change in collaboration and communication focuses on goals that are best for the student so the student can increase their learning experience in the general education classroom.

## 3.5 PDSA Cycle

The PDSA cycle chart (See Figure 2) shows the change, the goal, questions related to change, predictions, and details of the data plan. The outcome measures look at including students with severe disabilities in the general education classroom. The lagging change, the change of inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education setting, will take a long time to determine if there was an improvement. The leading change, the student with a disability success in the general education setting, can be set up with strategy and planning, implemented with the team of adults coordinating care, analyzed by the adults coordinating care, and reflected upon for improvement. This may take several cycles. The process measure of the data can track how the change is working. Following is the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) Cycle:

| Tester: | Elizabeth Kline | | Date: | August 13, 2020- October 22, 2020 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Change Idea: | Collaboration between the special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator to hold staff accountable, to be engaged, responsive, and increase communication to provide adequate opportunities for inclusion in the general education setting | | | |
| Goal of the Test | Students with disabilities to increase their time in the general education setting without being removed, increase their task completion, and improve their social interactions. | | | |

**1. PLAN**

| Questions: | Predictions: |
| --- | --- |
| How can I support the paraeducators that I work with to address issues directly with students with severe disabilities? | I predict that communication will increase, but there will be further recommendations to how to further improve. |
| When a program between the special education teacher and paraeducator is developed, to what extent will students with severe disabilities have more opportunities to learn? | I predict that the change will provide structure for change that positively impacts students with severe disabilities. |

Details:

Collection of data:
- Student task completion- # of completed assignments/ # of assigned tasks
- Student behavior- time spent in gen. ed. setting/ time spent in gen. ed. setting without removal
- Student social interactions- Daily Behavior Rate by paraeducator with gen. ed. peers
- Focus group- qualitative notes on perceptions, effectiveness, and feasibility
- Individual surveys- individual perceptions of effectiveness, feasibility, time, support, suggestions
- Communication with staff- number of communication occurrences informal and formal
- Communication with caregivers on their use of data collection

**2. DO:**

Orientation/ "on boarding" for the school year including: Review of IEP, Review of PBSP, Collaboration of student data sheet creation (written sheet will be produced), Clarity of roles, Review of Schedule (written and verbal), Discuss Shared Vision of Inclusion

Track all communication with the general education teacher and paraeducator about student (phone call, hallway conversations, texts, emails)

Electronic living document of student centered questions for teachers/paraeducators updated weekly (By Friday each week, all team members will be asked to complete their portion. If a team member does not complete their portion by Friday, I will send an email reminder on Monday asking them to complete the sheet)

**3. STUDY**

What were the results:

What did you learn?

**4. ACT**

**Figure 3. Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) Cycle**

## 3.6 Procedures and Measures

The change idea is based on the concepts of accountability, collaboration, responsiveness, engagement, and communication. The change idea leading the intervention is to have the team (special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator) regularly discuss their roles and the students' progress in completing tasks in the inclusive setting (general education classroom).

### 3.6.1 For Staff

### 3.6.1.1 Orientation and Living Document

Starting in the beginning of the school year, the special education teacher will orient the general education teacher and paraeducator to the student. The orientation will include the review of the student's IEP, review of the student's PBSP, a discussion on a shared vision of inclusion, collaboration on the paraeducator's schedule, staff roles, group collaboration of the individual student data sheet, and the electronic living document. At this time, the team can ask any questions and clarity they need to feel comfortable.

During this initial meeting, the agenda will be set for the team to create an individualized daily student sheet that will be handed off to one another with the measures on that student, along with other pertinent information for that specific student. The individualized student data sheet will intentionally be designed so that each person is assigned to filling out a portion in a quick and deliberate way to gather data. Since the sheet will be designed by all the team members, each person will know the purpose and importance of the data on the sheet. This orientation will occur before the students start school on the professional development days of August 13th, 14th, or 17th. The agenda and notes during the meeting will be used as an artifact.

The analysis of the information will show the collaboration between the general education teacher, special education teacher, and paraeducator. I am hoping to see that staff gains an understanding of the student and the plan moving forward. At the end of the meeting, the creation of the data sheet for each student will be made with each member's input. Each member will sign the IEP review sheet and PBSP review sheet to document that they received the documents. The purpose of the document is so that each member has a voice in the plan and understands their role, schedule, and responsibilities.

In addition to the orientation, each team member, including myself (special education teacher), paraeducator, and general education teacher will participate in creating a living, student-centered document. As nice as it would be for the team to meet weekly in person, this may not be feasible because of scheduling and work hours. The purpose of the living document is to have a place to communicate how the student is doing, including successes and concerns. This document will be shared and each member will be asked to update the document weekly (at minimum). If members do not fill out the document by Friday, I will send an email reminder on Monday. This document will serve as an artifact of implementation of change. Additionally, from experience, staff members use informal communications as well as formal communications. If they have questions, they will stop in the room, ask in the hall, send a text message, send an email, and/or call during class. I will be tracking these unscheduled communications as they occur. Along with providing student information, these notes on all communication will help me analyze if communication is increasing, if the team is on the same page, if one method of communication is preferred, and if communication is altogether increasing throughout the nine-week period.

In addition to serving as a place to update information, this documentation will serve as a member check. Goldblatt et. al. (2011) explains, "The process has a twofold intent: from a methodological perspective, to minimize misinterpretations of participants' accounts; from an ethical standpoint, to empower participants, through their active involvement in the study." From the orientation and electronic living document, I hope to find out what I missed in designing the intervention for staff and to find out how much communication is necessary for inclusion between the adults coordinating care.

### 3.6.1.2 Focus Group and Individual Surveys

Although some may feel comfortable in a focus group, others may want to talk individually. An individual survey will be sent to each teacher and paraeducator at the end of the nine-week period (October 22nd). This survey will have options for participants to add their own notes and consist of questions on a scale from 1-5 on effectiveness, implementation, and feasibility. For analysis, this survey will show their individual perceptions of the study. If needed, the individual could request to have a follow-up conversation with me about their experience. See Table 1 for previous processes and the intervention put into place for this study.

**Table 1. Previous and Current Processes**

| Previous | New this year |
|---|---|
| • Received IEP and SDI's<br>• Signed off on IEP Review Sheet | • Orientation before student arrived- vision, reviewed student IEP, student PBSP. schedule, roles, student data sheet, living document, scheduled time with each student team<br>• Signed off on IEP Review Sheet |
| • Communication about student as needed (verbal or email) | • Google Internet document each week to communicate about each student in addition to verbal and email communication about student |
| • Home note filled out either paraeducator or special education teacher, not designated | • Home note filled out by designated person for each part |

### 3.6.1.3 Survey Questions

What was your overall experience of the process that was new this year (see above) in terms of strongly negative (1) to strongly positive (5) on the following:

- Overall experience

- The orientation before the school year in regards to understanding the student.

- The orientation before the school year in regards to collaboration with the other adults coordinating care.

- The living, electronic document in regards to collaboration.

- Compared to before, the impact on student success in the inclusive setting.

- The success of the intervention.

- How much effort it took.

- The comfort level in the inclusive setting with the student.

  Please answer the following questions:

- What was your favorite part about the process that was new this year (see above)?

- What was your least favorite part about the process that was new this year?

- Do you have any recommendations or changes for this new process in the future?

- How does the new process compare with processes in the past in terms of inclusion? As much information as you can provide the better.

- Do prefer the new process or processes in the past? Why?

- Additional concerns or notes?

I hope to find out how they felt about the process, the collaboration, and the impact on the students. This survey will be done first, so the focus group can be informed further by the survey results.

At the end of the nine-week period (October 22nd), a focus group will be held. Wildmuth (2017) explains, "The goal is to identify important themes or categories within a body of content, and to provide a rich description of the social reality created by those themes/categories as they are lived out in a particular setting." I plan to have paraeducators and general education teachers participate as one group.

In order to have participants speak more freely, a facilitator will conduct the focus group. Since I will continue to work with staff after the project is over, I do not want my role to impede their answers in any way. The person conducting the group will ask ahead of time to audio record the group. If the group feels uncomfortable with this, the person will ask to take notes to reflect and analyze. The focus group questions will be informed from the survey. The interview will be semi-structured with some questions informed by the results of the survey. Following are some sample questions that we would like to discuss:

- What was successful during the intervention?

- What were the challenges during the intervention?

- What do you hope we continue to do?

- Was the intervention and time worth it?

- Was this beneficial for inclusive practices?

- Do you think about your work with students with disabilities any differently?

I will explain the study to the facilitator before the focus group. The facilitator will be open to new categories and listen if there are other categories that need to be spoken about. Providing two spaces to share results will assist in validating the results.

### 3.6.2 From Caregivers

In addition to finding out how the general education teachers and paraeducators felt about the intervention, I would like to find out how the parents felt about the individualized student data sheet. At the end of the nine-week period (October 22nd), I will call the caregivers and obtain their input by taking notes during the conversation. I hope to find out if they liked the information on the individualized data sheet, along with how they use this data. Some sample questions will be:

- Did you notice the new process?

- Did you use the information in any way?

- Do you receive this information?

- Do you think we should continue this?

### 3.6.3 For Students

The goal is for students to increase their task completion in the general education classroom. Each student is included in their general education homeroom classroom for different amounts of time according to their IEP. If the IEP and PBSP are implemented, each student will be assigned tasks that they can complete to increase their learning. The collection of data will begin the first day of school and continue daily for the remainder of the nine-week period. The general education teacher will have the task expectations planned for the student and communicate these to the paraeducator. The paraeducator will implement the strategies for the student to complete the expected tasks. On the daily data note, the number of completed assignments will be divided by the number of assigned tasks to get a percentage of daily tasks completed by the student in the inclusion setting in the academic content area classes. With that percentage, I hope to see adequate opportunities for academic inclusion in the general education classroom. With the collaboration of adults, I hope that the student is able to increase their task completion. I will interpret the results by trying to evaluate if the plan is holding staff accountable implementing the IEP and showing if the staff collaboration had an impact on student academic performance.

In addition to collecting academic data, behavioral data is important to track. Behavior has a significant impact on student ability to complete academic tasks. With the PBSP in place, the student ideally is set up for success, but student behavior is not always predictable. The collection

of data will begin on the first day of school and be collected by the paraeducator and marked on the daily data sheet. The paraeducator will indicate on the daily data sheet if the student had to be removed from the general education setting, the amount of time removed, and if the student returned. The paraeducator will note what time the student is in and out of the classroom. The percentage of time the student spends in the general education classroom will be divided by the total amount of time the student is assigned to be in the general education classroom. I will ascertain if adequate opportunities occur for behavioral interventions implemented in the general education classroom along with time increasing in the classroom verse out of the classroom. This data point will hold staff accountable for removing the student for only necessary behavioral interventions and will indicate if the staff collaboration has an impact on student behavioral performance.

Along with academic and behavioral data, social interactions are just as important. The general education teacher and paraeducator will use a Daily Behavior Rating (DBR) to determine if they observe the student improving their social interactions. Fabiano et al. (2017) suggest, "The DBR has been rigorously evaluated in numerous studies to support its use as a reliable, valid, defensible, flexible, efficient, and repeatable assessment of school behavior."

The DBR will be recorded daily. This will show adequate opportunities of socialization in the general education classroom and the teacher and paraeducator perceptions of how the student is socializing. This again will hold the staff accountable for making sure the student has opportunities to socialize and show if the staff collaboration has an impact on student social interactions. The results of these measures will be reflected on to see if students were provided more opportunities in the general education classroom as a result of the increased collaboration and communication between the adults who coordinate their care throughout the school day.

## 3.7 Coronavirus (COVID-19)

On March 13, 2020, the Lion School District had its last day of in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The remainder of instruction for the 2019-2020 school year was online.

To start the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, students in Lion School District were offered a cyber-program or a hybrid model in the brick and mortar setting. Of the five students who qualified for the Intermediate School Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom, three students chose to come into school, and two chose the cyber-program. Since the students have a high need, the district offered for students who have IEPs come in five days a week.

COVID-19 continues to impact everyday school routines. In the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, each school entity created a Healthy and Safety Plan that served as a guideline for school reopening. The Lion School District developed a Health and Safety Plan for the unique needs of the district and consulted with the Allegheny Healthy Department. This plan was designed to be flexible and adapt to the ongoing changes throughout the school year.

For teaching, this meant setting up a classroom on a new online platform, spacing students six feet apart, wearing masks, teaching the importance of not spreading germs, keeping up with the constantly changing recommendations from the Health department, communicating the changes with parents, and attempting to keep school as normal as possible. Another challenge was transitioning students back to the school building, as they had been receiving online instruction for the past five months. The impact was increased demands on school staff. There was additional paperwork for special education teachers. All teachers had trainings on the new learning management system, and, in one week, had to be prepared to have students enter into their classroom in person and online with the use of live cameras. With the new learning management

system, teachers were expected to take all of their curriculum and materials and upload them in a manner that was friendly for their students. In addition to the normal challenges during the beginning of the school year, the pandemic added new challenges. From these new challenges, teachers felt very overwhelmed.

The repercussions from additional, and new, responsibilities caused me to observe teachers crying in the hallways and taking time off of work to be with their families. I noticed this stress did not ease throughout the first quarter. New challenges continued to present themselves. The balance of work, health, and family was becoming more and more difficult. As I set out on the quest to complete my project, I do not believe this school year to be "normal." Despite the circumstances I do believe that the data collected is valuable.

# 4.0 Results

## 4.1 Implementation of Change

In the beginning of the school year, I, the special education teacher, set up an orientation meeting for each student on my caseload with the general education teacher and paraeducator regarding each student. The orientation reviewed the student's IEP, reviewed the student's PBSP, discussed a shared vision of inclusion, collaborated on the paraeducator's schedule, determined roles, collaborated on the individual student data sheet, and reviewed the electronic living document. I scheduled each meeting to last 60 minutes. I printed copies of all the materials in a folder and uploaded them online to review together.

I hosted three separate student meetings, one for each student returning to school. Throughout the results section, I will refer to the students as Student One, Student Two, and Student Three. Each of the three meetings had 100 percent attendance. Throughout the meeting, the staff members had the opportunity to ask questions and to clarify their responsibilities. Each meeting lasted a different amount of time, but all meetings were under 60 minutes. At the conclusion of each meeting, each staff member reported that they had an understanding of the student and the plan moving forward.

During the orientation meeting, the individualized daily student sheet was customized with pertinent information for each student. The individualized student data sheet was intentionally designed so that each person is assigned to filling out a portion in a quick and deliberate way to gather data. Each person at the meeting participated in this collaboration, along with who would

fill out each part. Throughout the study, the sheet was completed with 100 percent compliance by the staff.

In addition to the orientation, each team member including myself, the paraeducator, and the general education teacher, was asked to participate in a living, student-centered document. The team discussed how it would be helpful to meet in person or virtually each week, but with the increased demands of the school year, agreed it would not be feasible. The living document was discussed as a place to communicate and reflect on the questions about the student, which included the successes and concerns. I shared the document each week. For those who did not update it by Friday, I sent a reminder email the following Monday.

My plan was to track all informal and formal communication throughout the first quarter. Shortly into the study, I continuously reflected on what counts as informal and formal communication. It seemed that informal discussions with the paraeducators were constant. As the paraeducator's "home base" was in the classroom, it was not always clear to me what was an official informal communication about a student, and what was conversation. I was spending so much time tracking the conversations that I was losing my ability to be present. I made the decision to informally observe the communications versus track them. From my observations, the discussions with the paraeducators were ongoing every time I saw them. The teachers averaged one to three informal conversations a week about the student. I had fewer formal and informal conversations with the general education teachers than the paraeducators.

## 4.2 Effectiveness of the Change on Communication and Collaboration Across Adults

### 4.2.1 Focus Group

### 4.2.1.1 General Education Teachers

The two general education teachers who participated in the study attended a virtual video call with the facilitator to participate in the focus group. The facilitator asked questions, and the general education teachers took turns answering. One general education teacher expressed that the beginning of the year orientation was successful to them because they gained knowledge of the student and the meeting opened the communication for the school year. In addition, both general education teachers stated that the weekly electronic documents made them reflect on their inclusive practices. Both general education teachers stated that they think the changes were worth it for inclusive practices and made them more aware of each student's need in their classrooms because of the communication.

When asked about challenges, one general education teacher reflected on the impact of COVID-19 on the information. Since he was juggling so many changes throughout the year with COVID-19, he wondered if it was a typical year and if he would have been able to plan and communicate better in advance.

In regards to communication, both teachers stated the most helpful part of the interventions was the beginning of the year orientation. In the future, they both hope this orientation continues when they have students with IEPs and PBSPs in their homerooms. The teachers thought the knowledge they gained about the students was necessary in order to prepare for a successful school year.

**4.2.1.2 Paraeducators**

The two paraeducators who participated in the study attended a virtual video call with the facilitator to participate in the focus group. The facilitator asked questions, and the paraeducators took turns answering. Both paraeducators asserted that the communication in the special education classroom between us (the paraeducator and the special educator) was the most successful part of the intervention. They both stated that our communication was open. They felt comfortable asking for help and brainstorming adaptations for assignments. Since I did not know what was going on in the general education classroom, they stated our conversations were helpful because they felt like they could brainstorm ideas on how to individualize assignments.

One of the biggest challenges the paraeducators discussed was communication with the general education teacher. They both stated that in order for them to provide adaptations, they needed to know ahead of time the assignments and expectations.  Since this did not happen, they were trying to figure out the moment they got to the general education classroom what the assignment was and how to adapt it. For one student in particular, since he did not know ahead of time, this impaired his ability to complete the assignments the rest of the class was doing at that time.

When asked what should be continued, both paraeducators would like communication with the general education to be more open. One paraeducator would like to be included in the grade-level team meetings in order to have an understanding of what the plan is in the classroom. The other paraeducator mentioned that not only are the paraeducators in the dark, but the special education classrooms are not included in the weekly grade level meetings or plans, which presented a problem.

When responding to the questions regarding whether the interventions were worth it, the first paraeducator stated that it was worthwhile because it can show how to better meet the needs of the students. For the students who go between the special education classroom and general education classroom, it brings to light that the paraeducators need to be included the unit plans ahead of time. The other paraeducator liked that the weekly living document was implemented in order to reflect on the week and see the successes of the student.

Both paraeducators felt like the interventions can be worthwhile it if everyone participates and fulfills their roles with the communication. The paraeducators stated that they do not look at their work differently with students with special needs, but this intervention showed them how separate special education is from the rest of the school. Although they want to help close the gap, there still need to be some changes higher up in order to lessen the gap. The paraeducators expressed that they would like a time to communicate with the general education teachers in order to prep for their student before each unit.

**4.2.2 Survey**

**Table 2. Results of Collaboration for Inclusion Survey Regarding Communication and Collaboration Across Adults**

What was your overall experience of the process that was new this year (see above) in terms of strongly negative (5) to strongly positive (1) on the following:

| Question | Mean |
|---|---|
| Overall experience | 1.33 |
| The orientation before the school year in regards to collaboration with the other adults coordinating care. | 1 |
| The living, electronic document in regards to collaboration. | 2 |

| Please answer the following questions: | |
| --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Response (s)** |
| What was your favorite part about the process that was new this year (see above)? | • I realized how much collaboration is necessary to make the student's time in the regular education classroom go smoothly.<br>• The collaboration between all of the teacher and staff for the students.<br>• I liked sitting down together as a team at the beginning of the year.<br>• Ease of use. |
| What was your least favorite part about the process that was new this year? | • Not having enough collaborative time with the regular education teacher to modify assignments prior to them being passed out.<br>• N/A<br>• Overall, I liked all the parts that were newly implemented. If I had to choose one, it would be the weekly communication via google doc.<br>• It wasn't my least favorite, but I feel like it would have been more beneficial to the team if I kept up with the living document as much as I should have. |
| Do you have any recommendations or changes for this new process in the future? | • I think the weekly meetings to discuss upcoming assignments and the student's progress would be beneficial.<br>• No<br>• I think that additional scheduled collaborations between the team members throughout the school year could be beneficial. There was still a disconnect. We would go to the regular ed classroom unaware and unprepared of the class events.<br>• N/A. |
| Do prefer the new process or processes in the past? Why? | • I like the new process because it keeps everyone informed.<br>• I definitely prefer the new process. The more collaboration the better.<br>• I enjoyed the new process. The new process allowed me to reevaluate weekly the students in my class.<br>• I think the new process opened up the opportunity for more communication. I do think there still needs to be more. |

### 4.2.2.1 Parent Feedback

Parents received the daily data sheet. The students previously each had a daily data sheet that went back and forth between home and school. I called the parents before the beginning of the school year and made them aware of the changes on the daily home note to include data for my study. 100 percent of the parents agreed to add the additional information. When the nine-week period finished, I called each student's parents again. 100 percent of the parents reported "yes," they liked the home note information and requesting that it continue to communicate. The parents reported they used the information to gain what their child did that day in school. 100 percent of parents reported that they used the home note to communicate with their child how their school day was.

### 4.2.2.2 Informal Observations and Conversations

I was unable to track the exact number of informal observations. The paraeducators have their "home base" set up in the special education classroom. This is the area where they store their belongings and spend their time when the students are not at school. Since we share the same space, I observed that communication was open throughout the nine weeks, both formal and informal. Every encounter with each paraeducator was surrounding a conversation about the student, the schedule, or assignments. Although the conversation might begin or end with something personal or non-school related, it always included something about that day with our work. I observed the paraeducators being comfortable asking me how to adapt assignments or tasks for the inclusive setting for the student they were supporting. The general education teachers communicated less with me than the paraeducators. On average, I received informal communication from them one to three times a week. This was normally when I was in the hall with a student or when they were walking by the classroom. I observed they were comfortable

communicating with me if they visually saw me, but did not go out of their way to contact me. I observed between the paraeducator and the teacher limited informal communication. In addition, there was less opportunity for the general education teacher to see the paraeducators in an informal situation. Typically, the teacher was teaching whole group instruction while the paraeducator was assisting the student.

### 4.2.2.3 Weekly Electronic Document

For Student One, the general education classroom teacher completed the living document zero out of nine weeks, 0 percent of the time. The teacher was sent emails the following Monday. During informal communications, the teacher reported that with all the demands of the school year, he kept forgetting. The paraeducator completed the living document nine out of nine weeks with 100 percent participation. For Student Two, the general education classroom teacher completed the living document, 100 percent of the time. The paraeducator completed the living document six out of nine weeks with 67 percent communication. For Student Three, the general education classroom teacher completed the living document, 100 percent of the time. The paraeducator completed the living document six out of nine weeks with 67 percent communication. Student Two and Student Three had the same paraeducator.

## 4.3 Effectiveness of the Change on Student Behavior

### 4.3.1 Focus Groups

As the general education teachers and paraeducators both participated in the focus groups, both discussed how effective the intervention was on student behavior. Both teachers stated that the interventions increased their knowledge of the student and gave them background so they could plan for the student in their classroom. Both teachers spoke about the benefits of knowing about the students before school started and preparing as much as they could.

One challenge a teacher thought was detrimental was the inability to organize small group instruction due to COVID-19. One of her teaching techniques in order to adapt instruction for specific students is to work with them in small groups. Since this was not possible with the Health and Safety Plan in place, she was attempting to learn new techniques to adapt the instruction. More positively, during large group instruction, this teacher observed the other students in the class embraced having different kind of learners alongside them.  This teacher observes that during large group instruction, certain behavior was eliminated because the norms of the class were set.

As both paraeducators expressed their input on the study, they mentioned concern for student behavior. They both stated that it was difficult to show up to class and find out the student assignments in real time. The paraeducators felt like they need to know in advance the assignments and expectations from the general education teacher in order to prompt the student to complete the work without addressing behaviors. One paraeducator stated that she was unable to assist her student without him demonstrating behaviors because the assignment was not adapted to his needs when they arrived in the classroom. They each expressed that they could have had their students do more if they could have known beforehand.

## 4.4 Graphs

Academic, behavioral, and socialization data was collected on the student daily data sheet. The data collection began the first day of school and continued for the remainder of the first quarter nine-week period for three data points. Days when there is not a data point in the graph, the student, special education teacher, general education teacher, or paraeducator was absent. The results of these measures were graphed on three different graphs per students.

One of the goals as a result from the increased adult communication was for students to increase their task completion in the general education classroom. On the daily data sheet sent home to parents, the number of completed assignments was divided by the number of assigned tasks to get the percentage of daily tasks completed by the student in the inclusion setting in the academic content area classes. This data is shown in the first graph for each student.

Along with collecting academic data, behavioral data was collected. The paraeducator indicated on the daily data sheet if the student had to be removed from the general education setting, the amount of time removed, and if the student returned. The percentage of time the student spent in the general education classroom was divided by the total amount of time the student is assigned to be in the general education classroom. This data is shown in the second graph for each student.

In addition to academic and behavioral data, social interaction data was collected daily. The general education teacher and paraeducator used the Daily Behavior Rating (DBR) to observe the student on social interactions in the inclusive setting. This data is shown in the third graph for each student.
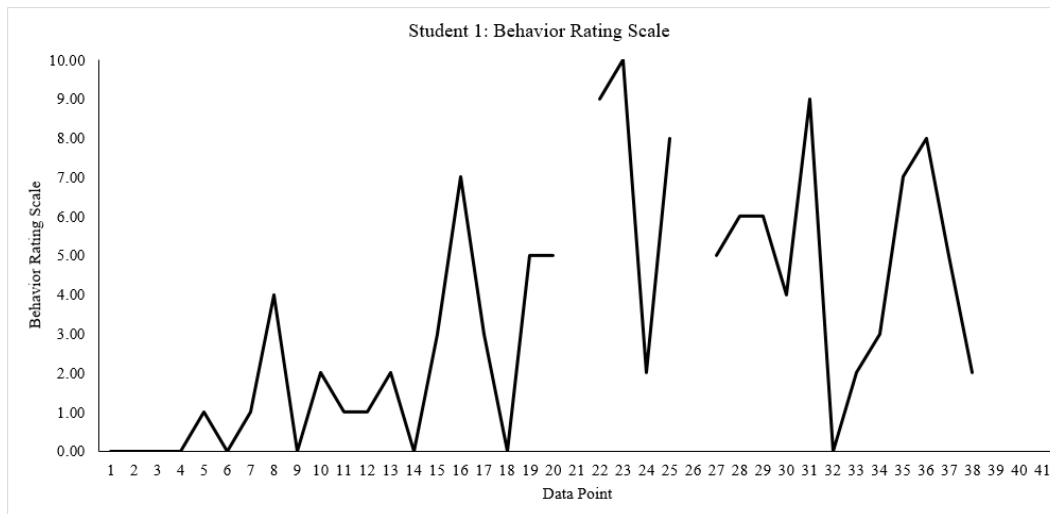
## 4.4.1 Student One

The following three graphs include data collected on Student One.
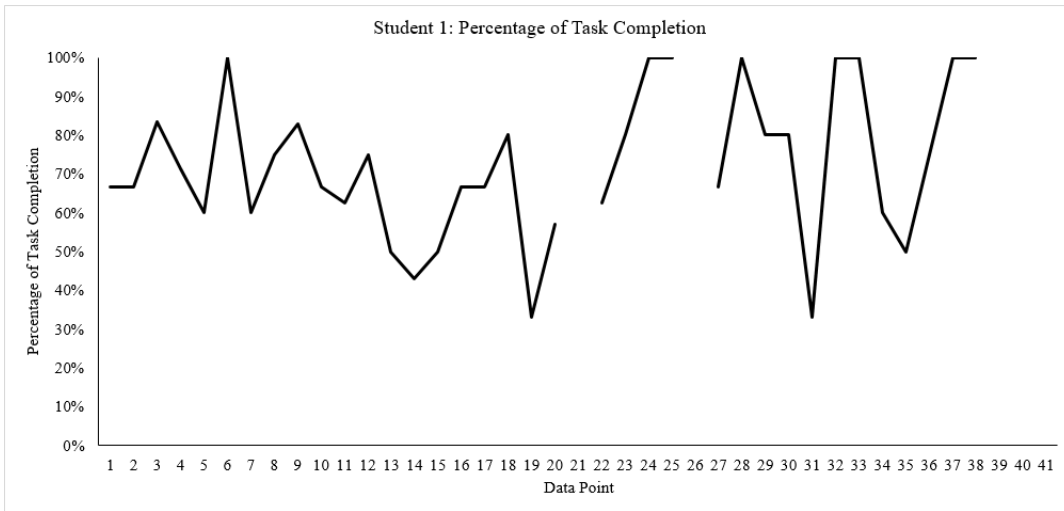


**Figure 4. Student 1 Percentage of Task Completion**
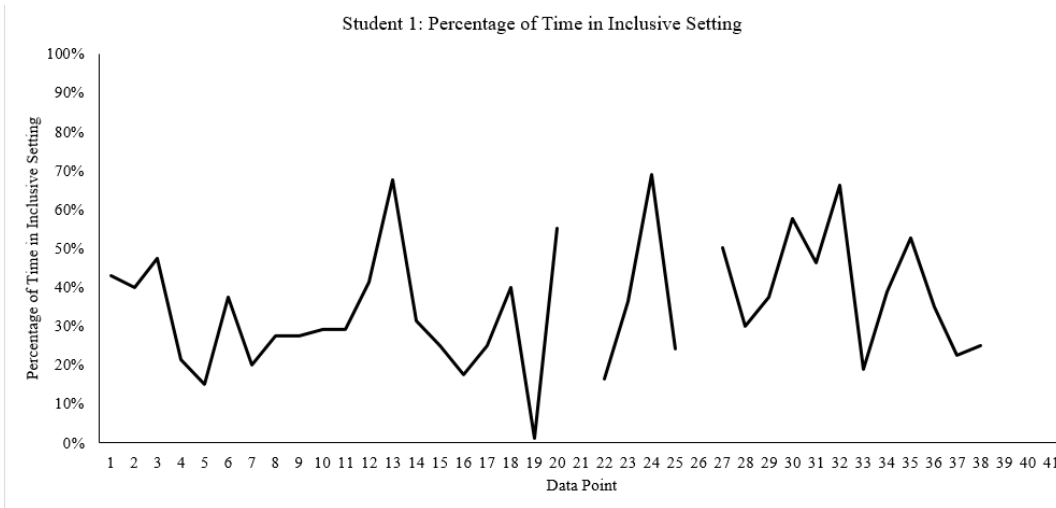


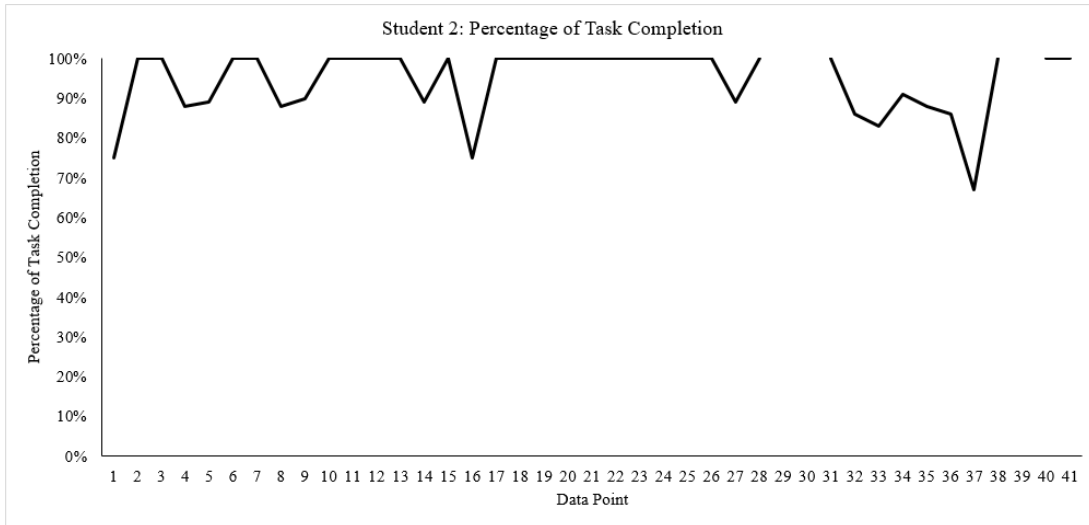**Figure 5. Student 1 Percentage of Time in Inclusive Setting**

**Figure 6. Student 1 Behavior Rating Scale**

From the first graph, Student One completed at least one task 100 percent of the days in the inclusive setting. The majority of days the student completed more than 50 percent of the tasks assigned to him. Despite having inconsistent patterns of number of tasks completed, the student always completed a task he was asked to do. Student 1 averaged 73.08 percent task completion. As noted in the second graph, Student 1 was not able to stay an entire class period throughout the first nine weeks. The most time he was able to be present was 67.5 percent of the class. The least amount of time he stayed in the class was 1 percent of the time. 100 percent of the days, the student attempted to go to the inclusive setting. The average amount of time he stayed in the inclusive setting was 35.24 percent. From the third graph, the student averaged a DBR of 3.32. His highest number was 10.0 and his lowest was 0.0. His behavior throughout the nine weeks was consistently inconsistent.
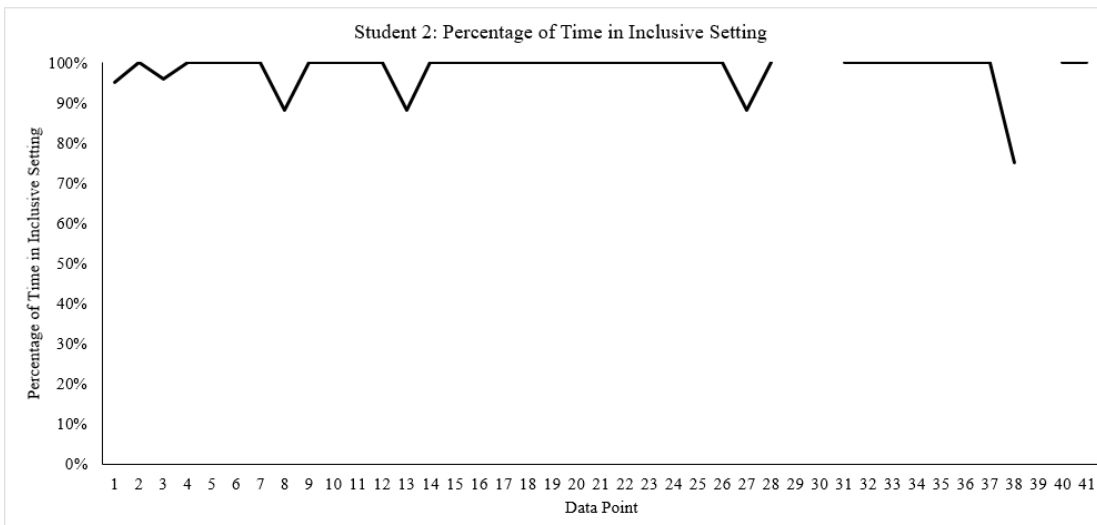
**4.4.2 Student Two**

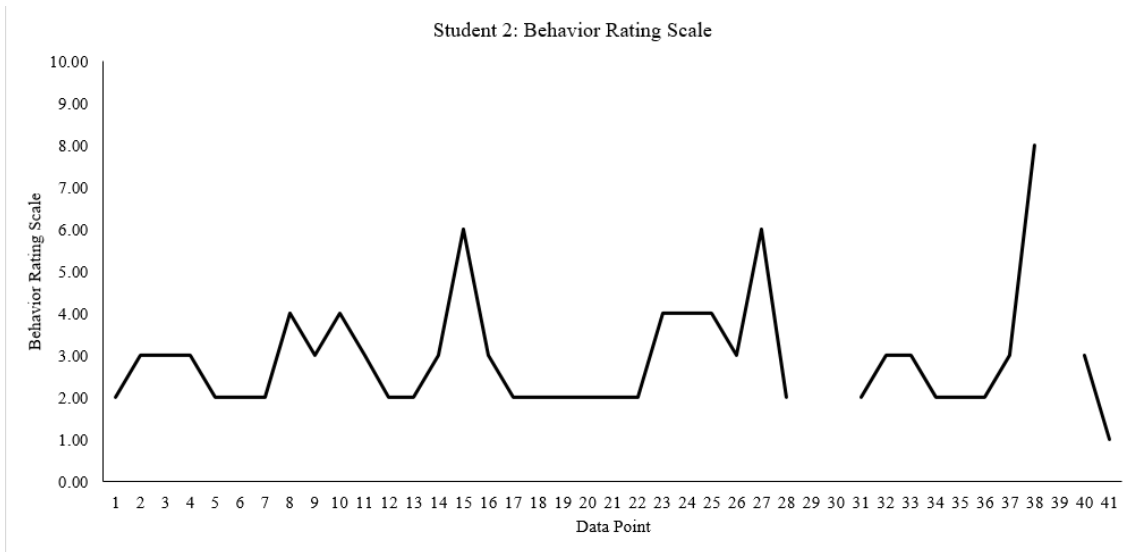The following three graphs include data collected on Student Two:

**Figure 7. Student 2 Percentage of Task Completion**



**Figure 8. Student 2 Percentage of Time in Inclusive Setting**

**Figure 9. Student 2 Behavior Rating Scale**

From the first graph, Student Two averaged 94.32 percent task completion during the first nine-week period. Student Two completed 100 percent of the tasks presented to him 63 percent of the school days. His lowest daily task completion was 67 percent. From the second graph, Student Two was able to stay through the entire class without being removed 87 percent of the school days, being removed 13 percent of the school days. His average time spent in the inclusive setting was 98.16 percent. For 100 percent of the days, the student attempted to go to the inclusive setting. From the third graph, the student averaged a DBR of 2.92. His highest number was 8.0 and his lowest was 0.0. The mode was DBR was 2.0, which was reported 45 percent of the school days during the first nine-weeks.

### 4.4.3 Student Three

The following three graphs includes data collected on Student Three:

63

**Figure 10. Student 3 Percentage of Task Completion**



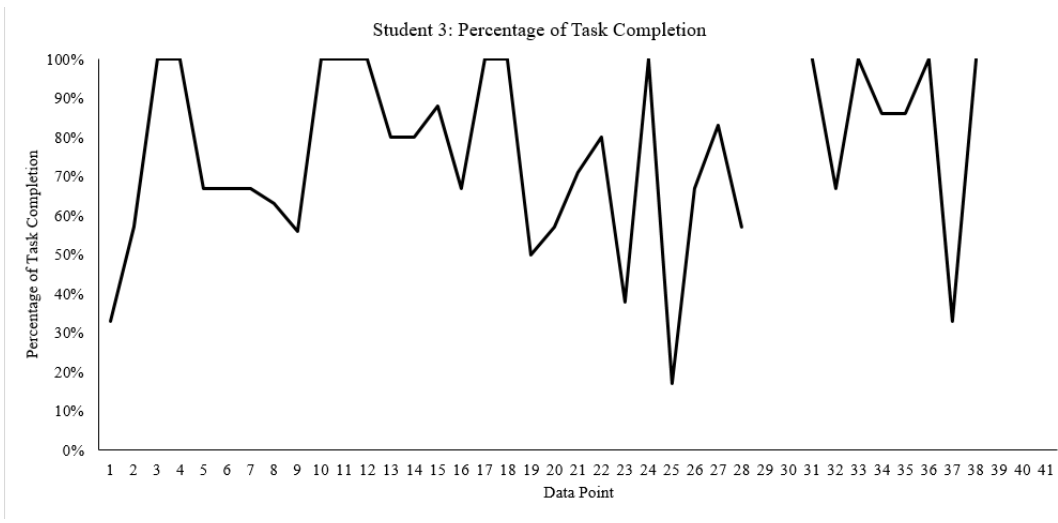**Figure 11. Student 3 Percentage of Time in Inclusive Setting**
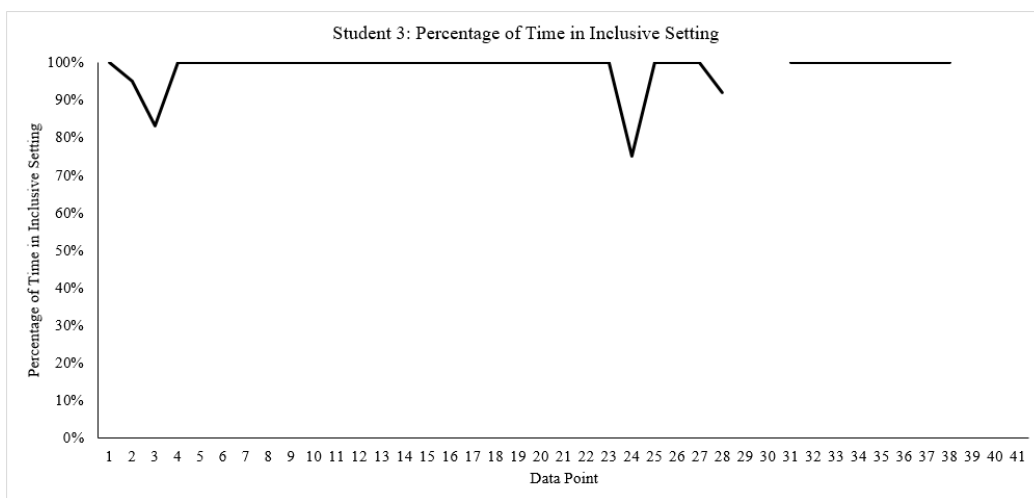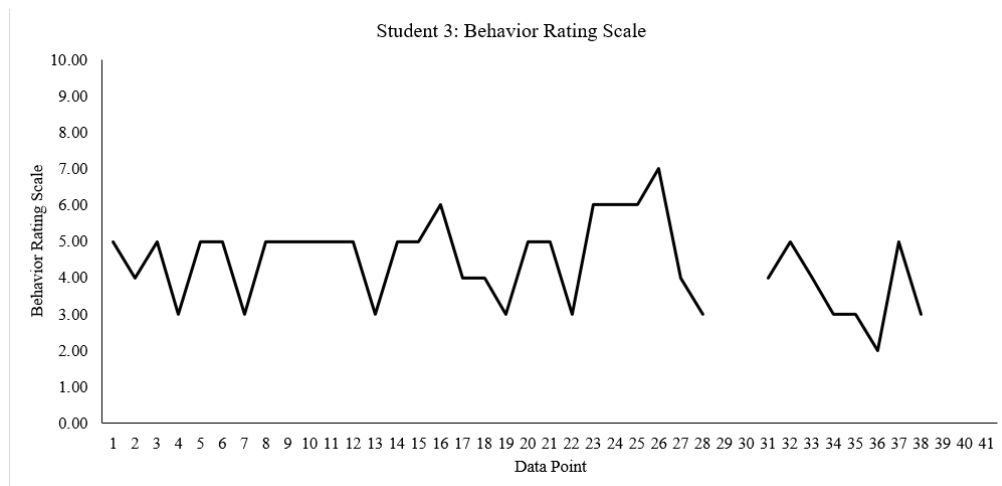
**Figure 12. Student 3 Behavior Rating Scale**

From the first graph, Student Three averaged 75.24 percent task completion during the first nine-week period. Student 3 completed 100 percent of the tasks presented to him for 32 percent of the school days. His lowest daily task completion was 17 percent. From the second graph, Student Three was able to stay through the entire class without being removed for 89 percent of the school days, being removed 11 percent of the school days. His average time spent in the inclusive setting was 98.51 percent. 100 percent of the days, the student attempted to go to the inclusive setting. From the third graph, the student averaged a DBR of 4.46. His highest number was 7.0 and his lowest was 2.0. The mode was DBR was 5.0, which was reported 41 percent of the school days during the first nine-weeks.

# 4.5 Surveys

**Table 3. Results of Collaboration for Inclusion Survey Regarding Student Behavior**

What was your overall experience of the process that was new this year (see above) in terms of strongly negative (5) to strongly positive (1) on the following:

| Question | Mean |
|---|---|
| The orientation before the school year in regards to understanding the student. | 2 |
| Compared to before, the impact on student success in the inclusive setting. | 3 |
| The comfort level in the inclusive setting with the student. | 2 |
| The success of the intervention. | 3 |

Please answer the following questions:

| Question | Response |
|---|---|
| How does the new process compare with processes in the past in terms of inclusion? As much information as you can provide the better. | • This process is much better because it keeps everyone informed and increases communication amongst the team.<br>• A useful part that helped with inclusion was the beginning of the year collaboration. During that meeting the regular ed teacher got an understanding of the student and their needs and because of this they were able to adapt the way they interact with the student to better suit the student's needs. In the past, I do not think the homeroom teachers got this much of an in-depth introduction to students. Which has led to the students feeling less comfortable in their homeroom leading to a decrease in time there.<br>• The new process allows teacher the ability to gain important information in their students. It also allows the regular education teacher and the special education teacher to collaborate and reevaluate the students weekly to hear student's learning.<br>• I think it made myself as a paraeducator more aware of how much more communication is needed between the teachers and paraeducator so everyone has an understanding of what is happening when we come into the classroom. In the past I was in the regular classroom setting all day so there was time to talk with the teachers about what was coming up and how we would go about it. |

## 4.6 Informal Observations/Conversation

From the informal communications with the general education teachers and paraeducator, I noticed that paraeducators reported to me daily on their students. The informal communications with the paraeducators were my connections to what was happening in the general education settings. This communication made the largest impact on the assignments the students were completing in the inclusive setting. As the general education teacher plans the lessons in their classrooms, it was the discussion between the paraeducators and myself to set the expectations for the student despite not aware of the lessons and plans. There was no informal communication from the general education teachers about problems they had with us adapting the work. There was informal communication from the paraeducators to myself how they felt isolated and unprepared in the general education classroom when they were not aware of the assignments. The paraeducators informally communicated to me that they could better prepare for students if they knew the expectations from the general education teacher in advance, and not in real time.

## 4.7 Parent Feedback

Parents reported that the daily home note information was the way they measured their child's day at school. Sixty-seven percent of the parents used the data at school for rewards at home. One hundred percent of parents used the student data to take to their child's doctor regarding their medications. Since the beginning of the school year with the additional data on the home note, I have noticed a decrease in email and phone calls from their parents. From the parent's signature on the home note, this indicates to me they understand the information about their child.

From their verbal feedback on the phone, they are comfortable with the amount of information they are receiving from school.

## 4.8 Feasibility of Change

### 4.8.1 Focus Groups

From the focus groups, both the general education teachers and the paraeducators, did not express that the intervention was demanding of them. One of the general education teachers did not fill out the electronic living document for the student in his class. One of the paraeducators stated in the focus group that the electronic living document became redundant. The general education teacher who did not fill out the electronic living document and the paraeducator who mentioned it was redundant worked with the same student.

### 4.8.2 Surveys

**Table 4. Results of Feasibility for Inclusion Survey**

| What was your overall experience of the process that was new this year (see above) in terms of strongly negative (5) to strongly positive (1) on the following: | |
| --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Mean** |
| How much effort it took | 3.0 |
| Please answer the following questions: | |
| **Question** | **Response (s)** |
| Additional concerns or notes? | •None<br>•N/A |

### 4.8.3 Informal Observations/Conversation

From my informal observations and conversation with staff, this school year was an outlier because of the global pandemic. Staff appeared more stressed than normal with all the changes. The demands of implementing these interventions was not observed to be causing additional stress. From the conversations, staff liked the communication and want it to continue even more. Although it is feasible to continue with three students, I wonder if my caseload was at capacity (eight students) if this intervention would be manageable.

## 5.0 Discussion

## 5.1 Previous Research and Purpose

Based on the literature reviewed, the most important principles to create an efficient relationship between the special education teacher and paraeducator to make meaningful opportunities for students with severe disabilities were collaboration, teamwork, accountability, and structure (Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2016; Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012; Douglas et. al., 2016; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl 2001). In addition, modeling, coaching, and performance feedback were approaches found to be effective (Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012; Douglas, McNaughton, & Light, 2013; Mason et. al., 2019). In alignment with previous literature, there was no exact calculation, but instead principles and approaches that were found to be successful. These driving principles and approaches were taken into consideration when designing the intervention for a successful plan.

Using the small changes, a model of communication support between the special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator was needed in order to implement communication practices that would benefit students with severe disabilities within the classroom setting. The goal was to engage students academically, emotionally, and socially by having the adults who coordinate care be knowledgeable, comfortable, proactive, and responsive to make efforts to engage students for inclusion.

## 5.2 Research Questions

I investigated how, as a grade 3 to 5 life skills and autistic support teacher, I could design a collaborative support plan that would provide cohesion between the special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator in order to provide more opportunities for students with severe disabilities. My research questions were:

- How can I support the paraeducators and general education teachers that I work with to address issues directly with students with severe disabilities?
- When a program between the special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator is developed, to what extent will students with severe disabilities have more opportunities to learn?

## 5.3 Supporting Paraeducators Who Work with Students with Severe Disabilities

My first research question was how can I, as the special education teacher, support the general education teachers and paraeducators who work with the students in the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom. The daily staff coordinating care for students with disabilities are the special education teacher, the paraeducator, and the general education teacher. In order for students with disabilities to increase their engagement in the classroom, the staff had to ensure the student was set up for success by being prepared themselves. I wanted to provide support to the paraeducator and general education teacher so they would feel more prepared to work with the student in the inclusive setting.

My hypothesis was that communication would increase between staff members, but that there would be further recommendations to how to further improve. The results indicate that my hypothesis was correct. The focus group responses demonstrated that there is a correlation between adult communication and meeting the student needs in the classroom. Consistently in the focus groups, both the paraeducators and the general education teachers stated that communication was increased from the start of the school year at the orientation meeting. When asked their overall experience of the orientation before the school year in regards to collaboration with the other adults coordinating care, the survey results recorded an average of 1 (strongly agree) in response. In line with the hypotheses, in the survey open-ended responses, a paraeducator recommended further places for communication like the grade-level team meetings. Another paraeducator acknowledged that there was still a disconnect in the general education classroom with the planning and preparation of assignments for students with disabilities. Both of these I consider ways to further improve the work of collaboration among the staff which I predicted in my hypotheses.

## 5.4 Effect of the Change on Students

The second research question was, when a program between the special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator is developed, to what extent will students with severe disabilities have more opportunities to learn. The goal from the increased collaboration across adults was for students with disabilities to have increased engagement in their inclusive settings academically, behaviorally, and socially. I predicted that the change would positively impact students with severe disabilities in their inclusive settings. From the data that was collected, I can

argue that there was evidence that the intervention increased engagement in the inclusive setting, but on the other hand the intervention is not a quick fix.

From the daily data collected during the first nine-week period, each of the three students attended their inclusive setting every day in accordance to their IEPs. Their paraeducator followed the plan to take the student to the general education classroom at every opportunity. In my past experiences, this did not happen. If the material was not adapted, or an adult did not feel the class would be of value, the paraeducator and student would spend time in the sensory room without attempting to attend the class. That did not happen once during the intervention, which to me was a huge success. The plan was to set up the students to attend the class with the supports outlined in their IEPs and PBSPs. As each student had different results in each area, the expectation was to attend the class and complete the tasks they were assigned.

The survey results indicated that the comfort level with the student in the inclusive setting was a mean of 2 (in terms of strongly negative [5] to strongly positive [1]). In the open- ended survey question, "how does the new process compare with processes in the past in terms of inclusion," all of the adults acknowledged the amount of collaboration and communication that is required in order for the student to be successful in the inclusive setting.

In the focus groups and throughout informal communications, both paraeducators expressed that they would like to know in advance the tasks for each class period. They disclosed that it was difficult to adapt or modify assignments in real time because the student would engage in behavior if they had to wait to know what they had to complete while the paraeducator adapted it for them. In turn, this led to behavior before the students even started the tasks.

**5.5 How Findings Relate to Previous Research: Principles and Approaches**

Compared to previous research, similar points were present in this intervention with the principles and approaches used. Douglas et. al. (2016) found that the team relationship worked best for everyone through teamwork, mutual respect, and good communication. This was also found in the intervention. In the focus groups, when asked if the intervention was worth it, all adults said that it was worth it because the students benefitted. In the survey, the overall experience of the new processes had a mean of 1.33 (in terms of strongly negative [5]to strongly positive [1]), thus sending the message that teamwork and communication does make a difference.

Jones et. al (2012) discussed the importance of the special education teacher and paraeducator working together as partners in the classroom, appreciating the strengths and unique characteristics of each other, developing communication skills for ideas and concerns, and sharing the expectations that team member has for one another. The living electronic document served as a place for the adults to communicate about the student. The teachers in the focus group both stated that it helped them reflect on their teaching. The paraeducators in the focus group expressed that not only did it give a place to document what they were seeing, but also a place to take notes on the successes of the student that week. In the survey, the living electronic document had a mean of 2.0 (in terms of strongly negative [5] to strongly positive [1]). Furthermore, this finding was predicted in Capizzi and Da Fonte's (2012) research, which indicated that by having a structured routine of the roles and responsibilities, the special education teacher could help the members meet their expectations and be prepared for their responsibilities with students. Having these tools in place and communicated to staff before the school year brought awareness that inclusion requires additional communication and teamwork.

In addition to collaboration and teamwork being successful, accountability and structure were successful. Brock and Carter (2015) found that by holding paraeducators accountable, their work with students with disabilities improved; thus the student made progress. Capizzi and Da Fonte (2012) found success in the special education teacher creating a structured template to have staff feel appreciated for their work as valued members of the team. I found both accountability and structure to be enhanced in the intervention, evidenced by the paraeducators filling out the daily data sheet. As the daily student data sheet was designed to be a structured template to collect students' academic, behavioral, and socialization data, it served to hold staff accountable as well. I observed the paraeducators taking ownership and pride recording the data. From the student graphs, the students attended their inclusive classes every day. The paraeducators consistently recorded the time they were in the classroom, what was completed, and the DBR. This data was collected to see if students were improving, but it also served to hold staff accountable to do their jobs. Not only did they do their jobs filling this out, they took ownership in making sure it was done accurately and daily. I never had to ask or remind the paraeducators to fill out their portion of the sheet.

As not everything led to a direct success, staff did think and reflect about inclusion, which is a first step to creating an inclusive space. Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) recognized in their work that paraeducators felt uncertain and isolated in the inclusive setting. The paraeducators provided feedback on the intervention. In this intervention, the paraeducators reported throughout informal communications and the focus groups that they did not know ahead of time what the tasks in the general education classroom were going to be, and as a result were in the inclusive setting dealing with student behavior and removal of the student to address the behavior with me. Paraeducators requested that they want to be included in the grade level, with weekly team

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meetings to see the topics of lessons for the week so they can prepare adapted assignments for the students in advance. I am wondering if trying this would help with this problem.

From my intervention, there is evidence that the intervention implemented effective practices, but not a quick fix. Inclusion remains challenging. One challenge that was presented was not knowing what was going on ahead of time in the general education classroom in order to adapt and modify the assignments for the students with disabilities. From the student graphs, I wondered about the uncontrolled variables such as the skill level of the paraeducators, the skill level of the general education teacher, the motivation of the adults, the disability of the students, the ability levels of the students, the motivation of the students, and the inconsistencies of outside factors we cannot control like medications and what happens at home. I wonder for schools that do inclusion well, in addition to the effective practices, how they make inclusion a part of school culture: a place where inclusion is not a question, but something you have to do.

## 5.6 Limitations

There were multiple limitations during the study. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique time to plan and implement an intervention where not much was predictable in the world. During the intervention COVID-19 was a literal barrier. Teachers and students wore masks, spaced six feet apart, and had plexiglass between them. When designing this intervention, I did not know what the school space would be like in order to prepare the students.

After reflection, I feel like the invention happening during the COVID-19 was a good thing. For many reasons, students with disabilities can often be a population who are often the first to fall through the cracks in moments of chaos. Having this intervention at such a unique time in the

world forced the team of adults to communicate and not forget about students with disabilities. School was different than it had been in the past. As physically seeing each other in person was discouraged, the living document communication was helpful. It was an online tool that was encouraged communication. On the other hand, there were constraints. With everyone being spaced six feet apart, the general education teachers were unable to do small group leveled instruction, which discouraged leveled groups that have modified instruction. With all the new technology being introduced to teachers and students, the accommodations we know how to do on paper had to be redesigned online. The time when this intervention was implemented may not generalize to other times.

Another limitation was the small population size. With COVID-19, parents had the choice to send their students into the school building in a brick and mortar setting or have their student receive a remote education. As a result, there were three students and two paraeducators in the Life Skills and Autistic Support Classroom in the building to implement the intervention. The small sample size is a limitation that I did not have control over. Furthermore, with the small sample size, there were unique disabilities within those three students. These students' disabilities may not generalize to other disabilities or special education classrooms. Additionally, the adults all came in with different experiences and set of skills. The willingness to implement new intervention may not generalize with a different set of adults.

The intervention was for a nine-week period. As the information gained during this nine-week period was valuable, it may not have been long enough to show true patterns. Completing the intervention over a longer amount of time may show different patterns.

## 5.7 Implications for Practice

From the study, I hope that practitioners take away the importance of individual planning and time inclusion required for success. In support of Biggs, Gilson, and Carter's (2016) findings, clear and explicit communication to adults coordinating care has to happen. Sitting down with the team before school started made a difference. This provided structure in roles and expectations, and promoted our professional relationships. In addition, another benefit for practitioners is having a place for communication. The electronic living document provided an online space to document work being done with the student and a place to communicate. The data sheet that traveled with the student provided a place to hand off to one another for real time updates. Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) stressed that in order to communicate a plan effectively and efficiently, writing it down assists staff in implementing their roles. Writing what is happening in a structured way helps to identify student patterns. The patterns provide data to create goals for the students. This practice helped the team see their strengths and needs in the student to reflect on their work. It also served as a place for their parents to see exactly what is being observed at school. Parents reported that they want this information and use it.

## 5.8 Implications for Research

Considering the planning and the intervention occurred during a pandemic, it is important to investigate this intervention post-pandemic. Not only students with special needs are affected by the pandemic, but education has changed. Future research should be considered with the special education population and how education has changed since the pandemic. Because of the

pandemic, the intervention was implemented with a small population size, so future studies could include testing collaboration for school personal in a larger sample size. I had a different team of adults coordinating care this year. Further research could include pre- and post-data, follow-up data, and could consist of an entire school year. This would provide more calculations how effective the intervention was. The intervention was also done in grades 3 to 5; further research could look at kindergarten through grade 12. Furthermore, this could show how the school system trickles down to affect individual teachers. The school culture affects what works and does not work for individuals. Other studies could look into implications for systems, structures, and organizations effect teacher level interventions.

## 5.9 Conclusions

With all the demands of teaching and supporting students as a team, small changes can make a difference. The key approaches and principles play a role in creating a space where adults can communicate in order to provide learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2016; Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012; Douglas et. al., 2016; Douglas, McNaughton, & Light; Mason et. al., 2019; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl 2001). In the ever-changing school system, there is never a quick solution because we are working with unique individuals. Working with adults in order to provide the best care for students requires communication and teamwork in a structured way to hold people accountable. Paper documentation is important for creating a record to reflect to make future improvements. The intervention was a success because making people aware of a problem is the first step to know that there is a problem to fix. I wonder

for schools that do inclusion well, in addition to the effective practices, how they make inclusion a part of school culture – a place where inclusion is not a question, but something you have to do.

The results demonstrate that there is a correlation between communication between the adults and meeting the student needs in the classroom. From the data that was collected, there is evidence that the intervention increased engagement in the inclusive setting, but there is still more work to be done. In conclusion, this change implementation increased collaboration. I received data that the students received more learning opportunities. This is a good first step in improving students learning opportunities when the students with disabilities are in the general education classroom setting.

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