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Special Education Legal Alert

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This month's update identifies recent court decisions that illustrate issues arising from teacher advocacy and focusing on student FAPE, respectively. For related publications and earlier monthly updates, see perryzirkel.com.

On September 25, 2023, a federal district court in Pennsylvania issued an unofficially published decision in *Morrow v. South Side Area School District* that addressed the school district's motion to dismiss a special education teacher's lawsuit. Because the decision is at this preliminary pretrial stage, it is based on the plaintiff-teacher's allegations. Specifically, she alleged that the district had taken various discriminatory actions during 2019–2021, including frequently changing her duties, denying her the support of a paraprofessional, and denying her accommodations provided to other similarly situated employees, that led to her forced retirement. She claimed that these employment actions constituted (a) retaliation based on her First Amendment freedom of association based on her role as teacher union president; (b) retaliation under the IDEA and Section 504/ADA for her complaints to the superintendent and the board about the district's noncompliance with the IDEA and Section 504 rights of eligible students; and (c) direct discrimination under Section 504/ADA based on her diagnoses of ADHD and anxiety. To decide whether to dismiss these claims, it is well established that the court must interpret the plaintiff-teacher's allegations in the light most favorable to her so that she has a fair opportunity to move to the next step in the litigation process.

For the First Amendment retaliation claim, the threshold elements for a triable case are (a) protected conduct, (b) adverse employment action, and (c) a causal link between "a" and "b."

The court dismissed this claim, reasoning that even if one assumed for the sake of argument that her union activities were protected under the First Amendment and the alleged employment actions were sufficient to deter such protected conduct, the allegations do not demonstrate the requisite causal connection. Her union presidency ended in 2015, but her noncompliance complaints and the adverse actions did not respectively start until 2019.

For the Section 504/ADA retaliation claim, the same three threshold elements apply, with protected conduct here being advocacy specific to students with disabilities.	The court denied dismissal of this claim, concluding the teacher sufficiently showed that she met with the new superintendent in 2019 and then the principal and board members to raise concerns with de-prioritization of the special education students' federally mandated rights and that the adverse actions were contextually and temporally the result of those concerns.
For the IDEA retaliation claim, an even more threshold prerequisite is "standing" as a party in the case.	The court rather easily dismissed this claim, because the exclusive parties under the IDEA are students with disabilities and their parents on one side and public education agencies on the other side, not teachers or other employees.
For the Section 504/ADA direct discrimination claim, the plaintiff must meet the three-part definition of individual with a disability.	The court also dismissed this claim, observing that the diagnoses of ADHD and anxiety, even upon being accepted as accurate at this preliminary stage, only established the first part, which is a physical or mental impairment, but the plaintiff had not established the other two required parts—major life activity and the connecting substantial limitation.
Although limited to the first stage in litigation, this case illustrates the threshold hurdles for special education teachers and other individuals who assert retaliation or direct discrimination under Section 504/ADA or other federal laws. A wider review of the pertinent case law reveals that the subsequent steps for such claims clearly amount to a very steep slope against the plaintiff obtaining a definitively favorable final decision, although information about the specific extent and nature of settlements remains largely out of sight.	

On November 3, 2023, the federal district court in Rhode Island issued an unofficially published decision in *ABL v. Providence Public Schools* addressing the FAPE claims of a student with orthopedic impairment as a result of an in-utero stroke and resulting left-hemiplegic cerebral palsy. For kindergarten through grade 3, he attended a private school, with the parents paying the tuition and the school district providing IEP services. These services included, for example, adaptive physical education (APE) and occupational therapy (OT). In grade 3 (2019–2020), the district did not add math to the IEP despite identifying this need, and for the last three months the child received almost no services upon the COVID-19 shift to distance learning. At the IEP meeting in June 2020, the parents decided to homeschool their child in grade 4, with "walk-in" special education from the school district. Also in June 2020, the parents' private evaluator diagnosed the child as having dyscalculia. However, during the first few months of grade 4, the district did not add math to the IEP or provide any special education services to the child, attributing these failures to "COVID-19 restrictions and Internet access problems."

Beginning on December 7, 2020, the district started providing math and writing instruction via Google classroom, but not APE or OT. At a series of IEP meetings in January 2021, the resulting IEP included math instruction, offered compensatory services, and proposed placement in one of the district's elementary schools. The parents disagreed, issuing written notice of their intent to place the child in private school for at public expense for grade 5. In April and May 2021, the parents' specialist conducted another evaluation of the child, diagnosing him with left hemiplegia, dyscalculia, ADHD, and developmental coordination disorder (including dysgraphia). After the district did not revise the IEP further, the parents placed the child in the identified private school for grade 5 (2021–2022). In January 2022, they filed for a due process hearing, seeking tuition reimbursement and, for the prior year, compensatory education. In the following September, the hearing officer issued his decision, concluding that the parents had not met their burden to prove denial of FAPE and reasoning that their failure to allow the child to attend the district's schools precluded the district's provision of FAPE. The parents filed an appeal with the federal district court.	
For January 2020 to January 2021, the first year that the parties agreed to be at issue, the parents claimed that the lack of specialized instruction in math was a denial of FAPE under <i>Endrew F.</i>	The court agreed, concluding that hearing officer's reasoning was not entitled to deference and that the district had ample reason to know that the child needed specialized instruction in math based on its own progress data, not just the private expert's evaluations.
For this same year, the parents also claimed that the limited distance learning during the pandemic also constituted a denial of FAPE.	The court readily agreed without specific analysis because the district implicitly admitted the FAPE denial in the subsequent IEP's offer of compensatory services.
For the second year at issue, which was January 2021 to January 2022, the parents challenged the appropriateness of the proposed placement (as the first FAPE step for tuition reimbursement).	Relying on the testimony of the witnesses, who were almost entirely on the district side, the court rather cursorily concluded that the parents "have not shown, by a preponderance of evidence, that the [proposed] placement constituted a FAPE denial."
For the first of the two years, the parents' sought compensatory education for the math-instruction and COVID-19 denial of FAPE.	The court agreed with the entitlement to compensatory education but deferred the calculation of the amount for the parties to resolve or, in the absence of agreement, for determination by the hearing officer.
Based on the rather flagrant facts of this case, the court's analysis was rather disappointing. Perhaps the parties' previous agreements about the district's provision of services during private schooling and homeschooling and the application of the IDEA's statute of limitations contributed to the perfunctory legal conclusions and compensatory relief.	

U.S. Education Department's Office for Civil Rights Releases New Civil Rights Data on Students' Access to Educational Opportunities During the Pandemic

The U.S. Department of Education's (Department) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) today released new civil rights data from the 2020–21 school year, offering critical insight regarding civil rights indicators during that coronavirus pandemic year. OCR also released seven data reports and snapshots, including *A First Look: Students' Access to Educational Opportunities in the Nation's Public Schools*, which provides an overview of these data and information.

“In America, talent and creativity can come from anywhere, but only if we provide equitable educational opportunities to students everywhere,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. “We cannot be complacent when the data repeatedly tells us that the race, sex, or disability of students continue to dramatically impact everything from access to advanced placement courses to the availability of school counselors to the use of exclusionary and traumatic disciplinary practices. The Biden-Harris Administration has prioritized equity for underserved students throughout our historic investments in education, and we will continue to partner with states, districts, and schools to [Raise the Bar](#) and provide all students with access to an academically rigorous education in safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.”

OCR's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) is a mandatory survey of public schools serving students from preschool to grade 12. The purpose of the CRDC is to provide the federal government and members of the public with vital data about the extent to which students have equal educational opportunities required by federal civil rights laws. While OCR generally collects the CRDC biennially, the 2020-21 CRDC is the first published since the 2017-18 collection (which was released in 2020), because OCR paused the collection due to the pandemic. OCR's 2020-21 CRDC contains information collected from over 17,000 school districts and over 97,000 schools. These data include student enrollment; access to courses, teachers, other school staff, and the Internet and devices; and school climate factors, such as student discipline, harassment or bullying, and school offenses.

To read more, click here:

<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-education-departments-office-civil-rights-releases-new-civil-rights-data-students%E2%80%99-access-educational-opportunities-during-pandemic>

The Use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Among Students with Disabilities in the School, Home, and Community

By Florencia Pecorari

Abstract

This publication investigates the pivotal role of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools for students with disabilities in home, school, and community settings. Studies highlight the effectiveness of interventions, such as low-tech AAC using triadic gaze, underscoring the importance of early communication training for children with severe disabilities. In school settings, challenges in communication support and limited peer interaction necessitate inclusive practices and systematic approaches. Strategies like Least-to-Most prompting and video modeling prove effective in enhancing communication skills, emphasizing the need for integration into daily routines. High-tech AAC solutions, preferred by individuals with ASD, showcase performance improvements, advocating for their incorporation in education. Collaboration gaps between educators and speech-language pathologists underscore the necessity for systematic training. This paper advocates for comprehensive efforts, inclusive practices, and a commitment to enabling effective communication for all individuals with language impairments.

Introduction

As per the Assistive Technology Industry Association (nd), assistive technology (AT) encompasses a wide range of tools and equipment, both low-tech and high-tech, designed to enhance the capabilities of individuals with disabilities. This includes communication boards, special-purpose computers, hardware like prosthetics, and computer accessories such as special switches and keyboards. AT also includes software like screen readers and specialized learning programs. It extends to various aids like wheelchairs, walkers, and educational materials. Ultimately, AT assists people with various disabilities in tasks like speaking, writing, seeing, learning, and more, tailored to their specific needs.

The historical perspective of AT in education begins with the development of Braille's reading and writing system for the visually impaired in the early 1800s. As explained by Rick Hoel (2021) in his publication "Examining the Past, Present, and Future of Assistive Technology," this is considered the true starting point of assistive technology. The electronic hearing aid, a significant advancement, followed, greatly improving on the earlier ear trumpet. Alexander Graham Bell's technology in the late 1800s made this possible, leading to pocket-sized hearing aids before the turn of the century.

Entering the modern era, technological advancements have been truly remarkable, granting us unparalleled access to knowledge. This literature and research delve into the utilization of AT as a communication tool for individuals with language impairments. In some cases, such as after a

cerebrovascular accident, AT serves as a temporary aid for communication during treatment. For others, it becomes a lifelong means of communication. This highlights the significance of various Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools in facilitating communication of needs, emotions, and educational progress within the familiar environments of home, school, and the community. However, despite the global connectivity through communication, it's hard to believe that we still encounter barriers in this area. Yet, when observing the reality of a centralized school for students with intellectual disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), it's easy to see that these barriers are tied to financial resources, technology training, accessibility for those in poverty, and cultural and linguistic biases and misunderstandings that can impede its acceptance and use.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication for Students with Disabilities

The current status and trends in AAC usage are centered on recognizing communication as a fundamental human right (Florida, n.d.). For nonverbal students, expressing themselves poses a significant challenge. A study conducted by Holyfield et al. (2023) on the effectiveness of a low-tech AAC intervention, specifically focusing on the use of triadic gaze as an alternative access method for school-age children with multiple disabilities, examines the impact of a low-tech AAC intervention on intentional triadic gaze as an alternative means of communication for school-age children with multiple disabilities. The research emphasizes the importance of effective communication for these students in both academic and social contexts. The study found that instructional protocols were successful in teaching triadic gaze as a method of accessing low-tech AAC, showing promise for enhancing communication for this demographic. The study's purpose was to assess the effectiveness of AAC intervention in teaching triadic gaze (TG) for accessing low-tech AAC through color photos attached to an eye gaze board. This underscores the crucial role of assistive communication devices in enabling participation and engagement. These devices envelop a wide range, from basic picture boards that could be low tech to advanced speech-generating devices (SGDs), all designed to empower individuals with speech and language impairments. This is particularly significant considering that a substantial portion of the population, around 3% to 4%, experiences Nonverbal Learning Disability, amounting to millions of children and adolescents in the US (Margolis et al., 2020).

Participants attended one to three sessions per week for eight weeks, primarily in the afternoon, based on their availability. Each session included presenting two AAC concepts on the eye gaze board in random order, asking the participant to use their eyes to select a specific word, and waiting for a response. These probes were designed to engage participants by focusing on their favorite people, characters, or animals. This approach minimizes other demands in the communication task, which is crucial for children with multiple disabilities due to their limited cognitive resources (Holyfield et al., 2023).

During this single case study, in the baseline phase, the participants did not consistently use triadic gaze as a form of access to low-tech AAC. During baseline, the performance improved significantly, reaching 100% accuracy after six to seven sessions. The overall accuracy during treatment was 66%, a substantial increase from baseline. One notable observation that greatly influences communication in the classroom, at home, and in the community is the realization that communication with AAC encompasses various components. These involved expectant delay, most-to-least prompting (utilizing visual and auditory cues, visual-only, and no prompt hierarchy), contingent responsivity, reward, and integrating engaging contexts. These

components have proven to be effective in AAC interventions for individuals with developmental disabilities, including autism (Holyfield et al., 2023).

Young children who have severe physical disabilities are more likely to experience delays in the development of early communication signals. Complex developmental profiles can significantly impede the ability to engage in conventional gaze, gestures, and vocalizations during social interactions (Olswang et al., 2014). It is crucial for children with disabilities to start communication training at an earlier age than when they begin school. Finding that TG behavior and training is fundamental and proven to be effective among school-age students is important to emphasize that this should mark the outset of the AAC communication journey, starting before school age. This will facilitate an increase in connections to pictures and cause-and-effect, eventually leading to the adoption of high-tech AAC, enabling these young children to explore and expand their knowledge and express themselves more effectively.

AAC in School Settings

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in students with both Intellectual Disabilities (IND) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in self-contained classrooms. This shift has impacted the dynamics and routines of the classrooms. Research shows that in 2020, one in 36 eight-year-olds was diagnosed with Autism (Maenner et al., 2023). Many of these students, including those with severe disabilities, face communication challenges and require the use of AAC systems to assist in communication.

AAC systems play a crucial role in supporting individuals, leading to improvements in communication and behavior. As discussed in the Communication Matrix by Elizabeth Bates and her colleagues, behavior is a way of communication (ResearchBasis - Communication Matrix, n.d.). Walker and Chung (2022) conducted a case study focusing on how AAC systems are implemented in an elementary school setting for students with severe disabilities who rely on AAC due to complex communication needs. The goal was to understand the practical application of AAC systems in natural environments like schools, providing valuable insights for improving communication support in educational settings.

The case study centered on a self-contained classroom with five students with severe disabilities. It included five elementary students, four with autism and one with an intellectual disability, who used AAC to support their communication. The two adult participants were the special education teacher (ESE) and speech-language pathologist (SLP) involved in the students' special education teams. Both adults had experience in AAC. The study was conducted in a public elementary school in a southeastern metropolitan city in the United States.

The study used a descriptive case study approach to explore real-life situations using various data sources, enhancing data credibility and allowing for multiple interpretations. The findings reveal that students may not be receiving sufficient support to communicate effectively across different functions, with both adults and peers, and in various school settings and activities.

The study investigated into how AAC systems were used in a self-contained classroom for students with severe disabilities, and the findings were that when students used AAC systems, adults promptly responded, especially when students used SGDs to greet specific adults. However, if a student repeated the same greeting after already receiving a response, it was often

ignored. In the study, it was also found that in contrast to other forms of initiation, adults typically didn't provide students with an AAC system to understand the reasons behind the behavior. Sometimes, a student's AAC device was removed in response to challenging behavior; it also showed that the students primarily used AAC systems during academic tasks, limiting their communicative opportunities in other daily routines. This may be due to the team's focus on promoting AAC use during lessons. Related to the functionality of the AAC device, the researcher found that contrary to common belief, the most common communicative functions observed were information transfer and social etiquette, rather than just fulfilling wants and needs. In addition, the study found that there was limited peer interaction; AAC use was primarily focused on interactions between students and adults, with very few opportunities for peer interaction. No explicit instruction or facilitation was observed to promote peer interaction. Another important finding was that AAC devices were often not accessible or not in proximity during observations, especially in inclusive settings. This emphasizes the need to understand the factors influencing AAC access in school settings Walker and Chung (2022).

Concluding with the reflection that understanding that students with severe disabilities should have equal communicative opportunities as peers without disabilities. Inclusive environments with a wide range of students and adults as communication partners can be beneficial.

While this study underscores the complexities surrounding AAC use in self-contained classrooms, it also emphasizes the importance of fostering more inclusive practices and gaining a deeper understanding of AAC implementation. To address these challenges, there is a pressing need to establish a systematic approach for teaching communication strategies. Additionally, fostering stronger collaboration between ESE teachers, SLPs, parents, and the community in the classroom environment is crucial. Finally, providing future teachers with instruction in assistive technology is essential for enhancing AAC implementation in classrooms. This way, educators can be better equipped to support students with diverse communication needs effectively.

Strategies to Use AAC All Day Everywhere

It is imperative for not only teachers and speech pathologists, but also parents, to teach their own children how to use a communication device. To effectively communicate and model communication, parents need to be informed by their physicians, and later by speech therapists and teachers, about the methods that best help their children improve communication strategies and independence.

To enhance and support these communication methods, and to create a safe and engaging learning environment within a classroom, it is crucial to consider and integrate the research conducted by Finke et al. (2017). This study examined the effectiveness of a Least-to-Most (LTM) prompting method in enhancing the use of multisymbol messages in school-age children with ASD who rely on AAC during storybook reading.

The researchers worked with six children, aged 8 to 12, diagnosed with ASD, all of whom used AAC systems. These communication methods included high-tech AAC (such as iPads), low-tech AAC (like communication books), sign language, gestures, vocalizations, and some speech. The preferred AAC systems were made available throughout the study. Four participants had prior experience with a specific AAC app on an iPad. Data collection took place in the comfort of the students' classrooms, except for one student whose parents requested a separate room.

The study implemented a prompting procedure that included verbal cues, questions, and modeling. The study was divided into three phases: (a) Baseline: Each child selected their preferred storybook. After reviewing the vocabulary on the AAC display for that storybook, the child and the first author read the storybook together. Following each two-page spread, the child had a 2-second pause to communicate about the story. If the child didn't communicate, the first author provided opportunities for them to do so. This phase ensured stable performance and accounted for any familiarity-related changes. (b) Intervention: Researchers employed a systematic approach called Least-to-Most (LTM) prompting to instruct children with ASD in producing multisymbol messages related to storybooks. This involved a series of prompts, starting from simple cues to more explicit guidance. Each child had access to their AAC systems during these sessions. The phase continued until the child demonstrated a significant improvement in producing multisymbol messages. (c) Maintenance: Conducted at least 4 weeks after the baseline phase, this phase assessed whether the children retained the ability to use multisymbol messages over an extended period. The procedures mirrored those used in the intervention phase. This phase provided support and instruction if the students encountered difficulty using the target skill. It ensured that the effects of the intervention were maintained, at least in the short term. The intervention notably increased the production of multisymbol messages for all participants, demonstrating an effect size between 82% and 100%. This underscores the effectiveness of the LTM prompting procedures in teaching them to produce two-symbol messages (Finke et al., 2017).

By integrating the Least-to-Most approach, teachers and parents assist children in becoming more independent and aware of their environment. It's important to understand that this should be the preferred method of teaching students and children, rather than simply providing for them. It is also important to reflect that this method should be a habit not only in the family or school of the individual with a disability, but also in the community. The system of LTM prompting should be considered and practiced all day, everywhere. This promotes an inclusive environment and allows for a more comprehensive learning experience.

Videos: A Way to Model Communication

As students with limited expressive language skills progress through their school years, their need to communicate and express themselves in both school and community settings becomes increasingly evident. Especially during their high school years, students often find themselves needing to engage more with peers and the wider community, which can introduce new challenges. Thirumanickam et al. (2018) emphasize in their study that individuals with ASD face common challenges in social communication, regardless of age or cognitive ability. Unlike neurotypical individuals, those with ASD often require explicit instruction to develop these skills. This study focuses on interventions utilizing video modeling, a technique rooted in Social Learning Theory, where individuals watch target behaviors in video clips to aid in learning and reproducing those behaviors. The results demonstrated that, when combined with systematic instruction, video-based modeling significantly enhanced conversation skills in this group. It was noted that without systematic instruction, the effects were less pronounced (Thirumanickam et al., 2018).

This study, conducted in a special school in South Australia, included ages between 11 and 18, a diagnosis of ASD, limited communication abilities in certain contexts, an interest in watching videos, and attendance at special schools due to intellectual disabilities. The intervention

implemented a six-tier prompting system following a least-to-most hierarchy to elicit the target behavior. The first review, involving participants aged 4 to 11, indicated that video-based interventions were somewhat effective in developing conversation behaviors. The second review, which focused on 24 participants aged 6 to 26, found that video modeling was moderately effective in developing conversational turn-taking (Thirumanickam et al., 2018).

To sum up, this research underlines the effectiveness of video-based interventions, particularly when combined with systematic instruction, in enhancing conversation skills for individuals with ASD. More now than ever, it is normal to see people learning how to do things through videos, so why not use Video Modeling to improve and raise awareness in society of high-tech AAC? To foster inclusivity and understanding, it is essential for communities to recognize and embrace these innovative approaches to communication enhancement.

High-Tech AAC: A Decision that Needs to be Made

As per this writing, there is research evidence that AAC can help individuals with disabilities who struggle with verbal communication. While AAC for communication can range from a simple picture card, known as low-tech AAC, to a sophisticated device with computerized software for hand pointing, a switch, or eye gaze, referred to as high-tech AAC by the Assistive Technology Industry Association, it is important to recognize the most appropriate and suitable AAC for everyone.

In a study by Lorah et al. (2021), a review of nine single case studies involving 36 participants with ASD, aged 3 to 13, was conducted. The results showed that most participants preferred using mobile technology-based SGDs over other methods like picture exchange and manual signs, and they performed better with SGDs.

The study gives us remarkable values on the preference of the use of high tech over low tech. Participants using high-tech SGDs had an average baseline performance of 11.4%, with a wide range from 0% to 100%. For low-tech picture exchange, the average baseline performance was 0.8%, ranging from 0% to 30%. When using no-tech manual sign, participants had an average baseline performance of 2.8%, with a range from 0% to 100%. Demonstrating that after intervention participants using high-tech SGDs achieved an average intervention performance of 63.8%, with a range from 0% to 100%. For low-tech picture exchange, the average intervention performance was 53.1%, ranging from 0% to 100%. When using no-tech manual sign, participants had an average intervention performance of 22.9%, with a range from 0% to 100%.

Thirty-one out of 35 preferred using a high-tech SGD for interaction. Only four participants preferred low-tech picture exchange, and none preferred using no-tech manual sign. This suggests that using SGDs, especially those based on mobile technology, can be effective in promoting verbal communication for children with ASD (Lorah et al., 2021).

Based on this study, it is evident that educators teaching students with disabilities need to focus on and incorporate communication strategies using high-tech AAC into the curriculum to achieve accurate outcomes and enhance the students' quality of life. Just as we order food or make selections on interactive boards all around the world, we can use high-tech communication devices to interact with those who do not have a voice, but undoubtedly have something to say.

Collaboration Between Home and School: The Role of the Educator

Knowing the importance of communication skills for our students and the value it represents for any person to have a voice to express themselves, it is important for educators to not only teach students how to use SGDs but also to encourage them to share and serve as role models in the community for their use. This can help them act as ambassadors and advocate for their own right to be heard. The survey by Andzik et al. (2017) investigated how students with complex communication needs are supported in the classroom and how well-prepared special educators are in providing this support.

The results of the online survey completed by ESE in the United States regarding their students with communication needs. The survey included responses from 4,031 teachers who reported on a total of 15,643 students. The teachers worked in various settings and had students with a range of primary disabilities. They also received different levels of training to support their students' communication needs. First, the study found that about 40% of teachers reported working with elementary school students with communication needs. Across all school levels, teachers reported supporting an average of 3.8 students with communication needs. Two-thirds of the students had disabilities like autism spectrum disorder, multiple disabilities, and intellectual disabilities. Many also had mild disabilities, such as learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. Second, the study found that a remarkably large portion of students using AAC were not communicating proficiently. Even among those using natural vocal speech, 42% were non-proficient communicators. Third, the study found the impact on independence and transition. Without effective communication tools like AAC, students' ability to communicate with others, transition to adulthood, and seek independence can be negatively affected. While other findings were related to students displaying challenging behaviors, which can be a result of their difficulty in communicating effectively. Functional communication training was recommended as an evidence-based solution to address these behavior issues. Lastly, while a majority of teachers reported receiving training from SLPs, only half of them reported collaborating with SLPs to provide support in the classroom. Additionally, a significant portion of teachers reported receiving no training from SLPs or AAC specialists, which is concerning given the evolving technology used to support students with communication needs (Andzik et al., 2017).

These findings highlight the ongoing need for intervention and support for students with communication needs and emphasize the reality of today's classes, showing the lack of training and collaboration between special education teachers and SLPs. It also points out potential gaps in practice that may be hindering effective support for these students.

This indicates that there is a need for systematic and consistent training for both new and experienced teachers on how to teach and model the use of communication, emphasizing its importance in the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, AAC is pivotal in empowering individuals with language impairments. This challenge requires a comprehensive effort from education, community services, law enforcement, and healthcare. Despite technological advancements, barriers persist. Educational institutions must integrate AAC courses, preparing professionals for service-oriented careers. Addressing limited training is crucial.

Research highlights the efficacy of AAC interventions, High-tech AAC solutions show remarkable promise. Inclusive practices and deeper AAC understanding are essential in school settings. Collaboration among stakeholders is key.

AAC's transformative potential advocates for systematic training, emphasizing communication skills as a fundamental right. By embracing AAC, we bridge gaps, enrich lives, and foster inclusivity. This collective effort reflects a commitment to enabling effective communication for all.

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Exploration of how COVID-19 has Affected Education

By Lindsay N. Palavecino

Abstract

There is no surprise that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that began in the spring of 2021 has affected the education system in more ways than one. Within the education system, there are many factors that need to be considered in relation to how education was impacted by COVID-19. The articles used includes: *The impact of COVID-19 on education: A meta-narrative review*, *The effect of COVID-19 on education*, *Teachers survive together: Teacher collegial relationships and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic* and *Reduced in-person learning in COVID-19 widens student achievement gaps in schools*. All 4 articles were found using APA PsycNet and the National Library of Medicine. Each article that will be reviewed focuses on how COVID-19 has affected both the student and the teacher. The articles focus on both the teachers and students' mental health, how the delivery of instruction shifted drastically from in-person to virtual learning, and how student achievement has been majorly affected during the closures of schools during the pandemic. The paper will be outlined using common themes that were addressed and researched in each article. This is an important topic to review because each year after schools reopened, it has been increasingly noticeable that students are underperforming in the classroom. Not only are they underperforming in academics, but they struggle tremendously with social skills and being around peers in the classroom.

Mental Health in Teachers

As shown by research from Blair et al. (2023), teachers were under immense stress during the transition from in-person instruction to virtual instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the qualitative research, which included surveys of 187 teachers and in-depth interviews with 27 teachers, that was conducted, teachers expressed there was a huge need to collaborate with colleagues, more so than before the pandemic. The research was relatively positive, and teachers conveyed how teacher-teacher relationships had a significant positive affect on how teachers had to deal with such a drastic change in education. According to Bozkurt et al. (2022), not only did teachers need to collaborate amongst each other in order to deal with the stress of their work, teachers needed to collaborate to come up with new ways of engaging the students through a virtual platform. Due to the virtual platform, there were some teachers who were not adept to using technology every day, so collaboration and support was key among educators.

On the other hand, there were some teachers who didn't know how to deal with the stress and fear that was brought upon by COVID-19. Teachers were driven by fear, and it affected their professionalism at times (Blair et al., 2023). In the study conducted by Bozkurt et al. (2022), not only do the student's mental health need to be addressed, but the teacher's also went through

significant mental health battles throughout the course of the pandemic and the time thereafter. This addresses the need of more supportive teaching environments on a more consistent basis, not only when tragedy happens.

Well-Being of Students

In addition to teachers experiencing mental health battles, students dealt with extreme pressure, frustration, and anxiety due to virtual learning (Bozkurt et al., 2022). Students conveyed anxiety in having to complete online assignments and adapting to the sole method of instruction being online through online learning platforms. Many students were not used to classwork being so technology heavy, however, once the pandemic hit, technology was the new normal and continues to be so, but not to the extent that it was during home learning. The study conducted by Bozkurt et al. (2022) addresses the issue of how COVID-19 increased the awareness and depth of the inconsistencies of equality among different social classes among the educational system. Students were required to be online during the pandemic, which required the use of a computer or device, however, certain students did not have the luxury of at home technology, therefore, they were left out of the education during the pandemic.

Students' mental well-being was not the only part that they suffered from during the pandemic. The research conducted by Hoofman and Secord (2021), showed students suffered in many ways, not just mental health. Children's physical health was affected due to the loss of comfort in the school breakfasts, lunches, and physical education and movement that was always guaranteed in the in-person school setting. Students began consuming more unhealthy food, sitting for 8 hours a day with no physical movement, and increased their screen time with social media. According to Hoofman and Secord (2021), all of these factors combined at associated with "poor sleep, sedentary habits, mental health problems, and physical health issues." Not only was their physical health affected, but their social skills were also affected. The student's ability to socialize was tarnished due to the isolation they experienced by not interacting with their peers. Social connections were not made for the period of the school closures which affected their ability to collaborate and make connections when back in school after the pandemic cooled down (Hoofman& Secord 2021).

Shift in Instructional Delivery

The COVID-19 pandemic required a major shift in instructional delivery that was provided to students by teachers. This shift affected both teachers and students in terms of mental and physical health, as well as academic achievement. Teachers and students were not used to technology being a major part of their education, however, they had to adapt and be flexible and accommodate the ongoing changes that were occurring in the educational system (Blair et al., 2023).

However, Hoofman and Secord (2021) also pointed out how grade schools were not the only ones affected by this shift in instructional delivery. Medical students' education was vital to their success in the medical field; however, it was taken away from them due to the pandemic. They were unable to experience proper clinical experiences that was required in the medical school completion. This was a huge shift in instructional and hands-on activities that were a normal

procedure for them to experience. This is where “Telemedicine” came into play and changed the world of health care. This gave medical students a chance to experience the Telemedicine world and interact with it in ways never done before. The study done by Hoofman and Secord (2021) was clear to point out that instructional delivery was affected across the board and not only in school-grade education. Instruction went from strictly in person with occasional use of technology to full blown use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Hangouts or prerecorded lectures as the primary means of instruction. This has a huge impact on the students health in one way or another.

Student Achievement Gaps

With teachers’ and students’ mental and physical health being affected and the instructional delivery shift, student achievement is impacted. Research done by Hoofman and Secord (2021) shows that “the average student had lost one-third of a year to a full year’s work of learning in reading, and about three-quarters of a year to more than 1 year in math since schools closed in March 2020” (p. 1072). This shows that math is more impacted by school closure than reading is, however, students learning is still at risk either way. The student achievement gaps have become more noticeable in rural areas, since these were the demographics that already experienced an achievement gap prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Shin et al., 2022). Students were unable to access their education at the rate and consistency as required and the more vulnerable groups were affected the most. These students do not have as much support at home than city families may have. This affects the students ability to be self-driven learners without as much support from the teacher than they would have in the classroom. If these students are not following through with their assignments and studying, their learning will decrease, therefore increasing the achievement gap. This only added onto the teacher stress they were experiencing because administrators were putting pressure on these teachers to close the gap and increase student scores. (Blair et al., 2023). However, with the method of instructional delivery, it was very difficult for teachers to follow through with certain assignments and learning due to the technology gap.

Conclusion

Each of these articles focuses directly on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected all aspects of education. This pandemic has had significant impact on the teachers and students. Teachers had to learn new skills relating to technology, student engagement, and classroom management while dealing with increased pressure from administrators and colleagues. Students had to learn how to deal with increased stress and anxiety, decreased social engagement, and achievement gaps they may face. Both teachers and students had to learn how to manage the shift in instructional delivery. All findings came to the same conclusion of needing to be better prepared and prepare teachers and students on how to deal with situations like this. School districts need to come up with a better solution of how to move forward with the educational gaps and the potential of another tragedy happening that will result in distance learning. All in all, we need to come up with solutions to the numerous issues that have risen due to the pandemic so that we can move forward with the students education and well-being being the main focus.

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Visual Schedules for Students with Disabilities in Collaboration with Parents: A Literature Review

By Lournellie Vega Rullán

Abstract

Often, children with disabilities struggle with the routine at home, such as brushing their teeth, going to bed, dressing up, etc. Students often become resistant to the process, making it even more challenging to gain advanced skills in independence. Visual schedules are an essential intervention to help in getting independence skills for students with disabilities. A visual schedule communicates upcoming activities or events using objects, photographs, icons, words, or tangible supports. (Hume, n.d.). According to Rutherford et al. (2023), families often report limited access to visual support and a lack of information for their use at home. This literature review aims to give information and guidance to parents of disabled students using visual schedules to help with at-home skills.

Visual Schedules

Students with disabilities commonly use visual supports, and they are typically integrated into a range of interventions at home or in schools. A study made by Rutherford et al. (2023) showed an evaluation of the feasibility and effectiveness of a home-based visual support intervention. This study took place in Scotland with 29 children and their families. The participants were children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or with suspected ASD between the ages 0-12 years old. The researcher developed a home visual schedule based on a literature review and consultation with parents. The study was completed between three to five visits to the family home. During the first visit, all the parents received a questionnaire and assessment to identify priorities relevant to the child's stage and family targets. On the second visit, the researcher provided visual support according to children's priorities and stages as guidance on how to use it. During the visits, 3-5 parents used visual support and provided feedback. After the final visit, parents were given the post-questionnaires and assessments. As a result, parents reported that visual support at home was helpful in planning routines at home and increased their knowledge and confidence in using it. It is essential to inform parents of all the interventions they can use at home to make their lives smoother. Sometimes student's struggles at home make them regress, even in school activities. Working as a team with parents is a must to reach their goals.

Another study made by Hart et al. (2022) showed a positive effect in an increase in bedtime routine compliance using a visual schedule. Often, children with disabilities struggle with sleeping problems, exhibiting more behaviors and anxiety during the day. In this study, the researchers used a visual schedule to help a five-year-old boy with ASD during his bedtime routine. The visual schedule was used with pictures and simple text with a practical step-by-step guide, increasing his understanding and compliance during his bedtime routine. The study was carried out in the child's home. The mother was given a printed explanation of the intervention procedure and routine-specific steps. The visual schedule consisted of a vertical one-page

laminated schedule with the header “To Do” and “All Done” on the right. Every time the child completed a step, the picture with the name was moved to the right. Intervention data was collected for five weeks using the ABAB reversal design. The mother was trained to demonstrate to the child how to use the visual schedule. Each step was scored as complete or incomplete. As a result, the children's no compliance decreased while using the visual schedule. This study demonstrated that using visual schedules for bedtime routine was a successful intervention.

Helping Parents with Technology

Training parents can be a challenge due to time and resources. Most of the parents lack information on how to help their children, especially in moments of crisis. COVID-19 was a difficult time for everyone, and technology was a solution in many cases. The problem with technology was that many parents needed the information or resources to use it. Training parents on how to use it is an essential task in many situations. After COVID-19, technology became a solution and an easier way to help with many activities. Using portable technology is advantageous for families, especially in crises where people must stay home. Adjusting interventions in the use of technology is an idea that helped many families. Technology-based activity schedules is another way to create independence with at-home task. Many children prefer technology to learn and play.

A study made by Reinert et al. (2020) showed the effectiveness of digital activity schedules using Google Slides and provided suggestions to train parents to use the technology with their children. Using portable technology is an advantage for families, especially in crises where people must stay at home, for example, COVID-19. In those times, the use of technology was necessary to communicate. Adjusting interventions in the use of technology is an idea that helped many families. In this study, the researchers create a presentation guiding the parents using the visual schedule with Google Slides. In the presentation, they add step-by-step instructions on how to use it and add pictures for the children's routine. In the instructions, they also explain how to fade the dependence on the parents, making the children complete the task by themselves. As a result, the researcher demonstrated the effectiveness of independence using a technology-based visual schedule.

Another study made by Gerencser et al. (2017) also showed the effectiveness of training parents with the use of technology in implementing an activity schedule. The participants in this study were three parents and children. The parents did not have previous knowledge of activity schedules. As a baseline, parents complete an interview about their children's routines and preferences. The training for parents on how to use activity schedules was made on a PowerPoint. The first data was collected depending on the components implemented correctly by the parents during each session. The second one was collected following the scheduled activity components independently by the parent's child. After the intervention, parents received a questionnaire to perceive how practical the training was. As a result, all parents improved using an activity schedule with their children. Sometimes, we forget that parents need help to implement interventions at home, and digital training is a fantastic idea to improve their skills.

Reducing stress at home

Emotional and behavioral problems frequently exist in children with disabilities, making it more difficult for parents to achieve goals with their children. According to Palmer et al. (2021),

parenting intervention reduces children's emotional and behavioral problems. Parents often report that they need support on how to help their children. A study made by Palmer et al. (2021) developed a measure of child and parenting behavior with 83 participants. In the study, the researchers helped the parents develop a task schedule to modify everyday challenges and observe parent-child interaction. The study showed that the measure has sufficient convergent validity. Another study made by McKay et al. (2020) investigated individual differences in preschooler visual working memory (VWM) processing by examining the association between behaviors, brain function, and parent reports. The participants were seventy-four 4.5-year-old children and one of the parents of each child. Data was collected at the participant's home. The participants were told to play a game with color first with flashcards and then on the computer. Parents had to fill out a strengths and difficulties questionnaire about their children; also, there was a stress index in a parent-child relationship. They found that the relationship between the frequency of stress and poor behavioral performance in the children's VWM was mediated by activation in the left parietal cortex. Life stress was measured as a more significant number of stressful life events. Often, parents of students with disabilities struggle with more stress. Finding a way to help and support them is a way to achieve the students' goals.

The literature review supports the guidance and information on visual schedules and related tasks at home. Visual schedules are a simple intervention to practice at home. Most of the parent's goal for their children is independence, and this is one way to get there. It is essential to help parents and make them feel supported. The key to success with students is giving everyone around them the tools to help.

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Book Review: *Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World*

By Carolyn M. Sweeney

Abstract

In a volatile and changing world, how can leaders use *Deliberate Calm* to effectively lead? This scholarly book review examines the practice of *Deliberate Calm* through Brassey, De Smet, and Kruyt's book *Deliberate calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World*. While written for the corporate setting, the themes and pillars of practice are easily transferred to the field of education as the focus to reflect, engage, and build relationships allows leaders to successfully navigate the changing world.

Brassey, J., De Smet, A., & Kruyt, M. *Deliberate calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2022. 318 pp. \$29.99.

A Review of *Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World*

In a volatile and changing world, how can leaders use *Deliberate Calm* to effectively lead? Brassey et al. (2022) claim that through awareness and intention or *Deliberate Calm*, leaders can adapt to the ever-changing landscape of leadership and emerge successful. Jacqueline Brassey, PhD, a chief scientist and director of research science for People and Organizational Performance at McKinsey, with Aaron De Smet a leader and researcher in behavioral health and organizational psychology, and Michiel Kruyt the CEO of Imagine.one a champion for transformational leadership in promoting sustainable and equitable businesses examine several of the underlying reasons leadership fails when facing new and unexpected challenges. While Brassey et al. (2022) do not specifically write about the topic of leadership in educational settings, the principles brought forth are easily transferred to any occupation and level of leadership.

Brassey et al. (2022) purpose for writing *Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World* is based on cited research that states that adaptability is the most important skill needed to lead effectively. Brassey et al. (2022) state the goal of *Deliberate Calm* is "learning to identify when we enter the *Adaptive Zone* and how to best navigate it so we can choose the most effective response instead of reverting to old patterns or getting swept away by our emotions" (Brassey et al., 2022, p. 26). Brassey et al. (2022) explain that effective leadership is crucial due to the "disproportionate influence that leaders can have on the lives of the people and communities they lead" (Brassey et al., 2022, p. xiv). Through *Deliberate Calm*, Brassey et al. (2022) claim that leaders have the ability to increase awareness, avoid reactivity, and adapt and change to meet the needs of specific situations. The authors continue to state four skills needed for effective leadership, which are the foundation for *Deliberate Calm* (a) adaptability (b) learning agility (c) awareness (d) and emotional self-regulation (Brassey et al., 2022). While Brassey et al. (2022) focus on traditional corporate leadership, readers are able to make the connection between the

relatable anecdotes in each chapter and their own personal experiences. These anecdotes, from various levels of leadership, business models, and facets of business demonstrate that effective leadership, in all professions, is important to the success of the organization as well as the overall health, happiness, and sense of fulfillment of those who work within them.

Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World has four sections, the first consists of “The Deliberate Calm Practice,” in this section Brassey et al. (2022) outline the importance of the practice, Brassey et al. (2022) argue that *Deliberate Calm* and supporting skills give leaders “the ability and tools to thoughtfully address the situation and select the behavior that is best suited to our particular challenge or opportunity” (Brassey et al., 2022, p. x). Readers might note the similarities between Brassey et al. (2022) and Fullan’s (2020) *Leading in a Culture of Change* as they both convey the importance of situational context when leading from a place of change and nuance.

Within this first section of the book, readers are presented the four zones within the *Deliberate Calm* framework, displayed in four quadrants (a) high stakes and familiar (b) low stakes and familiar (c) high stakes and adaptive zone (d) low stakes and adaptive zone. Brassey et al. (2022) explain that in most cases, situations or challenges that occur within the high stakes and familiar or low stakes and familiar zones are easily navigated through leaders’ routine daily actions and behaviors, while situations within the high stakes and adaptive zone or the low stakes and adaptive zone may require individuals to step back and examine if their current strategies are working within this new context. This section also introduces the authors’ use of the personal iceberg, throughout the book Brassey et al. (2022) refer back to this concept and claim it represents individual patterns and beliefs that drive leaders. The tip of the iceberg represents what actions and behaviors are visible to the world, while what lies under the surface are the “thoughts, feelings, beliefs, mindsets, and core identities, which are comprised of our values, needs (both met and unmet), hopes, dreams, fears, and life purpose” that drive leaders’ visible actions and behaviors (Brassey et al., 2022, p. 5).

Finally, this section discusses the connection between the brain and body or the physical and health repercussions that may result from challenging situations. While Brassey et al. (2022) focus on traditional corporate leadership, physical manifestations of stress and burnout are evident in many occupations, including education. In particular, teacher stress has been linked to detrimental effects like depression, burnout, physical sickness, low life quality, and higher employee turnover (Ouellette et al., 2018). The mental and physical health implications related to stress are conveyed in the majority of the anecdotes presented within each chapter, Brassey et al. (2022) seem to focus on this as a way to prove that the importance and benefits of the *Deliberate Calm* practice are widespread. This not only benefits the leader within their occupational role, but personally as well.

The second section of the book, “The Deliberate Calm Way,” Brassey et al. (2022) consider the effect mindset and beliefs have on leadership and how leaders respond to unique and challenging situations. Brassey et al. (2022) outline seven separate mindsets and provide readers with reflective questions that aim to guide them through or even out of specific ineffective mindsets. Mindset has been found to impact leadership effectiveness and abilities from corporate business to educational settings and is a key pillar in Brassey et al. (2022) *Deliberate Calm* practice (Handoyo & Hidayat, 2021; Kouzes & Posner, 2019; Lin et al., 2022). Brassey et al. (2022) continue this section of the book by providing an anecdote in which the leader is faced with a

challenge he continues to fail at, only after examining his underlying predispositions, or what lied under the waterline of his iceberg, does he realize that this novel challenge cannot be solved using the actions and behaviors he typically relies on. The individual in the anecdote is successful “once he embraced the idea that he did not need to know the answer to be a good leader but rather needed to rally the team to collaborate on a journey of discovery” (Brassey et al., 2022, p. 99). This concept is supported by the continuous repetition in Fullan’s (2020) *Leading in a Culture of Change*, as he outlines the importance of learning as a team, collaboration, and relying on the individuals of your team to provide insight and suggestions.

This section of the book also highlights the importance of resilience and feedback in the chapters “Recover Like an Athlete” and “Developing Dual Awareness.” Research conducted by Gu (2014) and (Taylor, n.d.) state that despite the ever-growing demands placed on teachers, their ability to be resilient allows many to continue remaining in the field. The study conducted by Gu (2014) also determined that resilience was not necessarily an innate quality, but one driven by their commitment to education, as well as the health and support of the overall environment. While Brassey et al. (2022) do not specifically explain the effectiveness and importance of the *Deliberate Calm* practice and resilience within the realm of education, readers are able to make connections between the application within the business world to the field of education (Taylor, n.d.; Wassink et al., 2022). Although Brassey et al. (2022) highlight the importance of feedback in the chapter “Developing Dual Awareness,” their anecdote and supporting writing falls flat. Brassey et al. (2022) state that objective feedback is not entirely possible, as each individual is working with their own underlying perceptions and feelings. Continuing, they state that feedback is like a gift, and that one does not need to accept or act on it. While in the corporate business world, feedback may work like this, often within education it does not. Perhaps within business, formal observations and conferences on performance are not held in the regard they are in education. Hill and Grossman (2013) outline the challenges faced within providing feedback in education they state in order to help teachers improve their instructional practices, teacher observation instruments need to be subject-specific, involve content experts in the observation process, and give teachers accurate and practical information. While Brassey et al. (2022) may not view feedback the same way, they do ultimately state that feedback, however incorrect or inaccurate, can be helpful.

The third section of *Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World* highlights the importance of relationships and working in teams as it relates to the *Deliberate Calm* practice and is perhaps the most important as it relates to educational leadership. Collaboration and teamwork are vital elements when leading effective teams, in fact the importance of working within a collaborative team is also seen in Fullan’s (2020) chapter “Relationships, Relationships, Relationships.” Educators see teamwork in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), collaborating with support professionals such as Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs), Occupational Therapists (OTs), Special Education Teachers, and paraprofessionals. Research conducted by Tam (2014) found that effective and meaningful PLCs were crucial to teacher development in the areas of instruction, curriculum, and working collaboratively. Brassey et al. (2022) call attention to several key factors to effective teams, one being psychological safety which is also mentioned in Fullan’s (2020) *Leading in a Culture of Change* as he outlines five team qualities that Google has associated with success. Fullan states “*psychological safety*. Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other” (Fullan, 2020, p. 34). Brassey et al. (2022) states that when team members feel safe to ask questions, make

suggestions, or resist the current strategy collaborative teams change and adapt to the unique situation faster and with fewer challenges. This section of the book is more anecdotal than other sections, perhaps to emphasize the human and personal aspects of working within a team.

The fourth and final section of *Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World* is a four-week plan to implement the *Deliberate Calm* practice within the reader's own leadership role(s). It consists of reflective questions, writing prompts, and daily practices. The final section provides readers with the opportunity to reflect and become aware of their own underlying "thoughts, feelings, beliefs, mindsets, and core identities, which are comprised of our values, needs (both met and unmet), hopes, dreams, fears, and life purpose" (Brassey et al., 2022, p. 5). The authors conclude by restating their overall goal that the *Deliberate Calm* practice will help readers examine their own limiting beliefs and actions through reflection, awareness and intention in order to meet the challenges that the future brings.

While Brassey et al. (2022) *Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World* does not specifically address leadership within education, it is the reader's belief that the many of the principals and strategies outlined in the *Deliberate Calm* practice can be applied to any role of leadership, at any level, including education. The foundational skills and use of intention and reflection are not limited to the corporate business world, in fact Brassey et al. (2022) themselves state that the role of leadership is not solely for the CEOs, department heads, or Chief Financial Officers, but in fact for everyone within an organization. The use of anecdotes to outline specific skills or situations made the book easy to read and understand. Brassey et al. (2022) use of real-life examples gave the reader the opportunity to see how real-life situations can be affected by this practice. This book would be suitable for educational professionals and leaders who find their current strategies for problem solving are less effective, whether dealing with students, parents, co-workers, or leadership. The reader suggests educational and business leaders consider reading Brassey et al. (2022) *Deliberate Calm: How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World* when their goal is to create lasting, compassionate, and effective change within their organization.

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Book Review: Eight Paths to Leadership: A Guide for Special Educators

By Melanie Tempest

Abstract

This review examines strategies and themes in Belva C. Collins's book *Eight Paths to Leadership: A Guide for Special Educators*. Collins writes about eight practical strategies special education teachers can utilize to take on leadership roles. The paths include data-based decision-making, effect school-wide change, mentoring others, professional development, working with families, student transitions, advocacy, and joining disability-related organizations. Two main themes are highlighted: mentoring and advocacy, and comparisons are made to Fullan's *Leading in a Culture of Change*.

Eight Paths to Leadership: A Guide for Special Educators

In Eight Paths to Leadership: A Guide for Special Educators, Belva C. Collins presents eight areas where special education teachers can take on leadership roles that can impact their classroom, school, community, and beyond. Collins's background as a special education professor and former special education teacher enables her to weave practical strategies with a special education teacher's expertise to demonstrate avenues to leadership. She espouses that special education teachers are uniquely qualified to participate in leadership roles since many of their responsibilities cultivate leadership qualities such as managing behavior, implementing evidence-based practices, adapting curriculum, and advocating for students. These are some of the areas she focuses on for special educators to take on the role of leader.

Collins aims to show teachers how they can use their existing knowledge and skills within their current positions to become leaders in their schools and communities. When special education teachers use these skills to lead, they can significantly impact the students and families they serve.

Main Themes

A major theme in *In Eight Paths to Leadership, A Guide for Special Educators* is that special education teachers can demonstrate leadership roles through mentoring. Collins (2018) emphasizes the need for mentoring in special education for various reasons. One reason Collins gives is the rate of attrition for special education teachers, stating, "The rate of special education teachers who leave the classroom during the first three years of teaching can be as high as 40%" (Collins, 2018, p.40). She explains that mentoring can significantly impact retaining new teachers through preparation during preservice teaching and support during the initial years in the classroom (Collins, 2018). Taking on a leadership role through mentoring does not have to be limited to mentoring new teachers; special education teachers can also mentor general education colleagues and paraprofessionals. Seasoned special educators have a wealth of knowledge to

share that can benefit their colleagues tremendously. Collins (2018) states that no training or education program alone can adequately prepare teachers for all they will encounter and that the support and expertise of experienced teachers can be invaluable. Mentoring can also include families and students; one-way teachers can accomplish this is by training parents as interventionists. Collins (2018) asserts that training parents as interventionists has many positive outcomes, reducing parent stress and increasing maintenance and generalization of skills.

Advocacy is another theme Collins (2018) emphasizes throughout the book: advocacy for students, families, and teachers. She writes “Advocacy for the rights of students with disabilities is the foundation of the field of special education (Collins, 2018, p.114)” In the book, she describes many ways teachers can be advocates for their students. For example, during IEP and transition meetings, teachers can advocate for individual students' needs, and teachers can advocate for more opportunities for all students in the areas of inclusion and post-secondary opportunities. Collins (2018) also highlights the need for special education teachers to advocate for themselves. She suggests joining professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (Collins, 2018).

Key Quotes

“In reality, teacher preparation programs in special education attempt to provide aspiring teachers with a strong foundation on which to build skills, but these programs cannot cover every conceivable behavioral learning challenge you may confront once in the classroom.” (Collins, 2018, pg. 5) Collins stresses the importance of continuing to learn through research and sharing that research with other educators to advance the profession. Students with disabilities have unique needs that may encompass everything from learning academics to daily living skills, and strategies that work with some students may not work with others. For these reasons, teachers need to mentor and coach their colleagues for the benefit of their students.

“A special education teacher who has researched the effectiveness and efficiency of a procedure to meet the needs of students with disabilities and has confidence in the results can exercise leadership by sharing his or her research with others, even if the data only can support the procedure as a promising practice.” (Collins, 2018, p. 16) Making data-based decisions is the pathway to leadership discussed in Chapter One. In this chapter, Collins illustrates how you can be a leader by using research, best practices, and knowledge to train your colleagues with the information you acquired through the research.

Collins (2018) demonstrates in Chapter 4 that special education teachers can lead by creating professional development pertinent to the needs of students with disabilities and the teachers who serve them. An example she uses as an important topic that affects special education disproportionately is the high rate of incarceration for people with disabilities. She writes, *“In addition, a larger percentage of students who are incarcerated have disabilities (most often emotional and behavioral disorders or learning disabilities) than the percentage found in the typical school population, thus making this a special education issue”* (Houchins & Shippen, 2012 as cited in Collins, 2018 p. 59)

In Chapter 6, Collins discusses supporting students during transitions as a pathway to leadership for special educators. She states, *“To become a special education leader in the area of transitions, it is first important to recognize that transition is a lifelong process.”* (Collins, 2018,

p. 92). She discusses how transitions are a process that continues throughout the student's life and how teachers from Pre-K through high school impact the success of that process.

“If you do not speak out on behalf of your students, literally or figuratively representing them at the table where decisions are made, their needs are likely to be overlooked or subsumed by the needs of other groups. (Collins, 2018, p. 117) Collins stresses that advocacy for students with disabilities is an essential responsibility for special educators. Special education teachers may be uniquely qualified to advocate for their students. Their knowledge of their students, practices, and systems that serve the students puts them in a position to effect meaningful and positive change.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Collins's book is constructed from a course she developed as a professor called Special Education Teacher Leadership, and she was formerly a special education teacher. This background enables her to give insightful advice on leveraging special education teachers' skills and applying them to leadership roles. Since the eight pathways are activities special education teachers already engage in during their job, they are all very achievable. For instance, the pathway suggested in Chapter 6 supporting students during transitions is something special education teachers automatically do during their job duties. Collins suggests expanding this into leadership by forming family partnerships and fostering students' self-determination. Collins suggests teachers expand their knowledge by finding and sharing support and options to help students during transitions and after school.

Each chapter gives practical suggestions on implementing the strategies that Collins discusses. She gives educators suggestions on how to expand upon their knowledge and utilize it to achieve their goals. Each pathway suggests resources where teachers can find more information and how to find colleagues who can help them develop their expertise. All the suggestions are actionable and beneficial for leadership roles and would also be helpful in the educator role.

Another strength of the book is that it encompasses strategies that can benefit all stakeholders: students, families, and schools. Each of the eight paths has benefits for a variety of stakeholders. Students will benefit directly from data-based decisions, support during transitions, and advocacy. The paths of working with families, advocacy, and transitions will help families. Schools will benefit from multiple paths, such as the effect of school-wide change, mentoring, and professional development.

There are limitations to the paths that Collins suggests. Some paths, like mentoring and professional development, may have limitations in smaller schools and districts. Some teachers may be the only special education teacher in their school, and this can limit mentoring and leading professional development opportunities. In addition, implementing many of the ideas will take the support of other stakeholders like administration, families, and colleagues. If the teacher does not have their buy-in, the success of the strategies will be limited.

Comparison to Fullan

Collins's *Eight Paths to Leadership* focuses solely on the leadership strategies for special education teachers; in comparison, Fullan's *Leading in a Culture of Change* outlines the best practices for leaders in education administration and business. While there are distinct

differences between the two books, two common themes emerge from both: knowledge sharing and relationships. Relationships and knowledge sharing are the basic building blocks for all organizations, teams, schools, and classrooms; therefore, it makes sense that leaders need to prioritize them.

Collins (2018) emphasizes the importance of relationships when she addresses the significance of inclusion for students with disabilities. She states that although many studies attribute the successful inclusion of students with disabilities to the leadership of the principal, the principal cannot do it alone, "...teachers must be willing to work with the principal and have a similar philosophy to create a truly inclusive school culture." (Collins, 2018, p. 27). Similarly, Fullan stresses the importance of relationships throughout *Leading in a Culture of Change*." He states, "If you ask someone in a successful enterprise what caused the success, the answer almost always is 'It's the people.' But that's only partially true: It is actually the relationships that make the difference" (Fullan, 2020, p.63). Both illustrate that for change to happen, people must work together, which can only happen when positive relationships are fostered.

Knowledge sharing is foundational in organizations and schools; without it, both would cease to exist. Collins highlights knowledge sharing when she writes about mentoring and coaching. Collins (2018) observes, "Even though most new teachers can search the internet for basic information, you can share information and guide new special education teachers to additional resources you have found helpful in your experience." (Collins, 2018, pp. 48-49) Fullan states that information and knowledge must be shared and used and only becomes valuable in a social context. (Fullan, 2020, p. 92) Together, the two authors demonstrate that shared knowledge is most valuable.

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