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Special Education Legal Alert

Perry A. Zirkel

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This month's update identifies recent court decisions that respectively illustrate polar interpretations of various IDEA FAPE claims, including the increasing issue of student anxiety. For previous monthly updates and related publications, see perryzirkel.com.

On April 23, 2024, a federal district court issued an unofficially published decisions in *K.O. v. San Dieguito Union High School District*, addressing various IDEA issues. The defendant school district serves students in grades 7–12 from elementary feeder districts. In this case, the K.O.'s elementary district had placed her for grades 4 and 5, via the IEP process, in a small nonpublic school called Excelsior, which was about an hour from her home. Upon entering the defendant-district for grade 7 in 2021-22, she remained at Excelsior, while the new IEP team met several times to refine her IEP for her increased needs, including anxiety. Her parents proposed changing the placement to Winston, a larger nonpublic school, which was closer to their home, to foster K.O.'s growth and independence. The district representative regarded the requested school as insufficiently therapeutic but agreed to a trial week there in mid-January 2022. At the IEP team's final meeting in late January, the district representative offered placement at a different nonpublic school based on its embedded therapeutic program. The other members of the team, including the parents, opined that this school was not appropriate for K.O. because the severe acting-out behaviors of its students would exacerbate K.O.'s anxiety. In February, Excelsior rather suddenly closed. The district offered the parents a choice that effectively amounted to "take it [i.e., the district's offered placement] or leave it." The parents unilaterally placed K.O. at Winston and filed for a due process hearing to seek reimbursement. The hearing officer ruled in the parents' favor on the issue of predetermination, its prejudicial effect on the parents, and the appropriateness of Winston. The remedial order was reimbursement of not only the tuition but also the related services specified in the IEP. Finally, the hearing officer found it unnecessary to address the second issue, which was whether the 2021–22 IEP was substantively appropriate. Both parties appealed.

The district contended that (a) the offered nonpublic school did not amount to a change in placement, and, even if it did, (b) the district did not engage in predetermination.

Rejecting the district's arguments, the court concluded that (a) the differences between Excelsior and the offered nonpublic schools were significant in relation to K.O.'s needs, and (b) the facts in this case sufficiently supported the hearing officer's conclusion that the district representative's obdurate and unreasonable insistence on his proposed placement equated to a closed mind, or

	predetermination.
The parents argued that the hearing officer's failure to address the second issue was reversible error.	Rejecting this argument, the court concluded that it was within the hearing officer's discretion to address issue #2 after finding denial of FAPE based issue #1 (i.e., a procedural violation that significantly impeded the parents' right of participation).
The parents requested the additional remedy of prospective placement at, and reimbursement for, Winston.	Based on the circumstances of this case, including the closure of Excelsior, the court made the discretionary decision to order prospective placement and to extend the reimbursement award to the intervening two years of 2022–23 and 2023–24.
This decision is rather unusually parent-friendly in the finding of predetermination and in the resulting expansiveness of the remedy, but it serves as a reminder of the potential for costly consequences upon not being carefully collaborative in the placement process.	

On January 31, 2024, the federal district court in Maryland issued an unofficially published decision in *Lee v. Board of Education for Prince George’s County* that addressed various IDEA claims of the parent of a seventh grader with SLD who had attendance problems that dated back to pre-kindergarten and included these recent subtotals of absences: grade 5 - 36; gr. 6 - 29; and gr. 7 – 45. His parent reported to the IEP team that his absenteeism was due to anxiety attacks, but the school personnel did not observe any particular anxiety in the classroom or in their evaluations. His parent also reported that she had arranged for wrap-around mental health services due to his defiant and disruptive behavior at home and a psychiatric diagnosis of “other conduct disorder.” However, the school personnel reported progress in the academic areas of his IEP, including reading, math, and speech, attributing the limited exceptions primarily to absenteeism. The only notable behavioral problem at school was lack of classroom participation and work completion. Upon the parent’s request for various independent educational evaluations (IEEs), the district only agreed to fund one of them but did not file for a hearing. Instead, midway in grade 7, the parent filed for a due process hearing. She claimed denial of FAPE in grades 5–7, which included distance learning for the last part of grade 6 and all of grade 7 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and she sought compensatory education. The hearing officer ruled that the parent did not prove denial of FAPE for the 3 years at issue. The parent filed an appeal in federal court.

The parent’s first claim was that the shift to virtual instruction was a change in placement and that the resulting lack of prior written notice and an IEP meeting violated their right to meaningful participation.	Affirming the hearing officer, the court reasoned that (a) the switch to virtual learning, even with reduced goals and services, was not a change in placement based on persuasive federal guidance, and (b) even if it was a procedural violation, the child’s limited stagnation in progress started before the switch, and the special education teacher called the parent and discussed the remote learning plan without any disagreement.
The parent’s alternative pandemic-based claim was that the district failed to implement the IEP during the period of virtual learning.	Citing the mixed results and partial latitude in the pertinent pandemic case law, federal guidance, and specific facts of this case, the court concluded that the parent failed to prove the requisite material failure to implement the IEP.
The parent’s broader FAPE claim was that the 3 IEPs failed to address the child’s attendance and anxiety.	The court concluded that the parent failed to show a causal connection between the child’s attendance issues and his anxiety and that the lack of an FBA-BIP was, at most, a procedural violation without proof of the requisite resulting detriment to the child.
The parent also claimed that the district denied FAPE by failing to consider her own funded IEEs and medical diagnosis of anxiety, all of which she submitted to the guidance counselor.	The court ruled that (a) as a result of the guidance counselor’s apparent failure to share the reports, the IEP team procedurally violated the IDEA by not considering these documents, but (b) the parent did not meet her burden to prove that this violation resulted in any

	educational deficit to the child.
The parent's final claim was based on the district's refusal to fund some of her requested IEEs (e.g., speech and language).	The court concluded that the district's failure to file for an impartial hearing upon its refusal to fund some of the requested IEEs was a procedural violation that did not result in a substantive loss to the child.
This court decision is a rather extreme example of district-deferential approach to FAPE, including expanded use of the procedural two-step test without commensurate attention to the parent prong of the second step and seeming overreliance on the burden of persuasion.	

Beyond the Classroom: Nurturing Special Education Students through Community Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the methodologies and impacts of fostering community engagement in the field of special education. It emphasizes the necessity of collaboration between schools, families, and community resources to enhance educational outcomes and social inclusion for students with special needs. Experience provides unique educational opportunities for students. It contributes to their holistic development. Community-based instruction (CBI) is an important approach in special education that provides real-life learning experiences within the community. The main goal of this method is to enhance the skills of the students and promote how they integrate themselves into society. Through this approach, the students become more self-reliant and optimistic. This study aims to prove the importance of integrating students into the community as they navigate through education in their lives.

Keywords: Special Education. Students. Real-life. Community-based instruction (CBI).

INTRODUCTION

Special education is a field that requires collaboration and support from various stakeholders in the community. Through active involvement with the community, educators and parents have the ability to establish a more comprehensive and encouraging atmosphere for students with special needs. In this article, we will explore the importance of community engagement in nurturing special education and discuss practical strategies for building strong partnerships between schools and the community.

It is essential to recognize that community engagement goes beyond simply seeking support for special education programs. When educators, parents, and community members come together, they have the opportunity to build a network of support that extends beyond the walls of the school. This network can provide students with diverse opportunities for learning, socialization, and skill development. By involving community members in the education process, we can tap into a wealth of knowledge, resources, and experiences that can greatly benefit students with

special needs. Family, school, community engagement, and partnerships are areas of continued inquiry and growth (Molina, 2013).

In 2006, the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasized the importance of countries enabling individuals with disabilities to fully participate and be included in communities worldwide. The community undeniably fulfills an essential function in the comprehensive preparation and well-being of students with disabilities and their families (Aceves, 2016).

As a special education (Sped) teacher, I believe in the power of practical experiences to enhance learning. Community-based instruction (CBI) allows students to apply what they have learned in school to real-life situations. I frequently accompany my students on a bi-monthly basis for a CBI exercise. I desire for my kids to have direct contact with the community. Proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics is essential for navigating through life. I desire for them to recognize that in any endeavor they do, it will invariably encompass those functional capabilities.

Each time I propose a CBI activity, I consistently examine the pedagogical worth of the activity. The content should be suitable for the students. I outlined the intricacies of the logistics and provided guidance on ensuring the field trip is secure and well-coordinated. I ensure that the activity incorporates oversight from competent staff members, arrangements for transportation, and precautions to guarantee the student's safety and welfare throughout the duration of the activity. Furthermore, it is imperative that CBI activities are in accordance with the curriculum. It should have the capability to offer a significant and captivating method to establish a connection with the subject matter. This also presents an occasion to enhance social skills, encourage community involvement, and offer pupils a remarkable and pleasurable learning encounter. The process of enhancing the quality of education requires the utilization of several factors. Community engagement is a significant aspect (Shah, 2010).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This engagement hopes to shed light and give confidence to the parents, teachers, and care-givers of the students in the special education program.

1. This study will explore and establish the significance of community engagement practices in enhancing the educational experience and outcomes for students. Specifically, the study seeks to:
2. Identify the benefits of community engagement for students with special needs, focusing on academic, social, and vocational outcomes.
3. Investigate the types of community partnerships that are most effective in supporting inclusive special education.
4. Determine the impact of such engagement on the broader community, including increased awareness and inclusion.

5. Provide practical strategies for schools, educators, and community members to implement in order to foster a supportive environment for children with special needs.
6. Assess the long-term effects of community engagement on post-secondary opportunities and quality of life for individuals with special needs.

Through this multi-faceted analysis, the study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and offer actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers within the sphere of special education.

METHODOLOGY

Nurturing special education through community engagement can be effectively approached by implementing the following methodology:

1. **Assessment of Needs:** Begin by assessing the individual needs of students with special needs and the resources available within the community. This includes understanding the educational goals, social skill development, and extracurricular interests of the students.
2. **Build Partnerships:** Establish partnerships with local businesses, non-profit organizations, and community groups that share an interest in supporting special education. These entities can provide resources, expertise, and opportunities.
3. **Professional Involvement:** Involve professionals from various fields in mentorship programs. These mentors can offer guidance, support, and real-life experience that is invaluable for the personal and professional development of students with special needs.
4. **Community Awareness:** Organize community events and workshops aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of special needs. Activities could include sensitivity training, informational sessions, and collaborative projects with students.
5. **Cultural Responsiveness:** Ensure that teacher training programs incorporate culturally responsive frameworks to prepare educators for engaging effectively with a diverse student population.
6. **Inclusive Curriculum:** Work with educational institutions to develop a curriculum that integrates community engagement and reflects the cultural and social diversity of the student body.
7. **Engagement in IEP Development:** Involve community members and professionals in the development of individualized education plans to ensure that the educational strategies are relevant and meaningful.
8. **Collaborative Acts:** Shift the focus from individual teacher practices to collective actions that involve families, educators, and community members. This could include joint projects, community service activities, and shared decision making educational planning.

9. **Patience and persistence:** Recognize that building strong community relationships takes time. Be patient in developing these connections and persistent in fostering their growth.
10. **Evaluate and Adapt:** Regularly evaluate the impact of community engagement on the educational outcomes and well-being of students with special needs. Use feedback to refine and adapt the strategies for continued improvement.

This methodology will lead to a more inclusive and supportive environment for special education, contributing to the overall development and integration of the students into their communities.

RELATED LITERATURE

In the realm of nurturing special education through community engagement, there are several related bodies of literature that provide valuable insights.

1. Molina, S. C., in her article on developing school, family, and community partnerships, emphasizes the importance of these collaborations. She suggests that strong partnerships enhance student learning, and her research calls for a shift from a deficit model to a resource-rich model, recognizing the diversity and potential within communities.
2. Farah, I., highlights the significance of school-community relations in her study of literacy in a girls' primary school in rural Pakistan. Farah's work explores the goals of the community for girls' education, shedding light on the potential impact of community engagement on specific student populations.
3. García, E., & Weiss, E. Discuss the challenges in the teacher labor market and the implications for schools with high concentrations of students with special needs or English language learners. Their research underscores the need for partnerships addressing educational inequities in their report, "The Perfect Storm in the Teacher Labor Market."

There is a prevailing consensus among parents, community members, teachers, and students that the school is effectively achieving its established objectives, mostly as a result of community engagement. The findings also indicate that community members contribute to school improvement efforts through many means (Shah, 2010).

The process by which families become active participants in their children's education and become more autonomous as consumers of services for their children with special needs is complex. To reach the goal of educating their children, families must have a reciprocal relationship of support and cooperation from the school (Prater, 2010).

Educators can be a vehicle for empowering parents when they understand the system within which these families exist and function. When a family is deeply and actively involved in the educational process, and when educators and service providers facilitate that involvement, the

child ultimately benefits (Prater, 2010). The absence of substantial engagement between those with and without disabilities fosters bias and sustains obstacles to community integration. The present investigation examined a collaboration between a university and a community agency with the aim of dismantling obstacles to community integration through fostering interaction between college students and persons with developmental impairments (Jones et al., 2016).

The aim of this phenomenological study was to investigate and articulate the firsthand experience of undergraduate university students who participated in a service-learning project that involved visiting the homes of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving state services in the community. The university faculty and community agencies are focused on fostering cultural competence and eliminating obstacles to community involvement (Jones et al., 2016).

These scholarly works collectively advocate for increased community involvement and partnerships in the realm of special education, providing a foundation for further study and implementation of community engagement strategies.

The community undoubtedly plays an essential role in both the overall preparedness and the quality of life of students with disabilities and their families.

The involvement of community groups in promoting parental advocacy for inclusive programming is essential. This is particularly important when considering the contributions of two specific community agencies (Aceves 2016).

Efforts that involve low-income parents as communities of practice show great potential for overcoming obstacles to children's learning. This is particularly effective when school leaders, community based organizations, and social researchers utilize their resources and expertise to support parents' efforts, insights, and aspirations (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Indeed, CBI is an essential component of special education. It offers numerous benefits for students with disabilities. It was a transformative experience that empowered them to become more independent and confident citizens beyond the classroom.

By embracing the strengths and resources of local businesses, organizations, and community members, and fostering an inclusive and culturally responsive approach, educators and parents can build a robust network of support.

This network not only enhances the educational experience but also promotes social inclusion and acceptance, preparing students with special needs for a fulfilling life within their communities. It is through these collective efforts that we can achieve a deeper understanding, ensure meaningful participation, and champion the successes of every student.

Engagement with the community is not just a supplementary aspect of education—it is a cornerstone for empowering students with special needs to maximize their potential and pursue a promising future.

In conclusion, community engagement enriches the learning experiences and social integration of students with special needs, providing them opportunities to thrive within their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In my experience as a Sped teacher, I have observed the pupils' high level of enthusiasm, particularly when we actively involve them in community-based activities. They exude a vibrant vitality, and their smiles radiate brightly.

These are a few of the CBI activities that have been proven to be beneficial for children with specific educational needs.

Community Walk

This represents the most fundamental manifestation of CBI engagement. In my opinion, it is imperative to prioritize the implementation of this initiative with the Sped kids in order to facilitate their integration into the community.

This activity involves strolling within the vicinity of one's residential area. Through the implementation of appropriate safety protocols, pupils have the opportunity to observe their immediate environment in its true form. They have the ability to value and recognize the closest playground, grocery store, pet shop, bus stop, clinic, office, and other areas in their vicinity. Observing their local community will instill a sense of security and familiarity in the students.

Clean-up Drive

An effective method for instructing pupils on community service is to organize a clean-up campaign. Simply acquire a garbage bag and protective gloves, then proceed to collect the litter within the designated area under your care. The pupils experience a sense of empowerment and usefulness in their efforts to maintain cleanliness in the community. One optimal location to engage in this activity is at the playground, park, or beach.

Recycle

Students may be instructed to gather papers, cans, and bottles from their residences. Once the items have been organized, they can transport them to a recycling facility and receive funds for the classroom. This practice improves the pupils' sorting skills and mathematical aptitude.

Coin laundry

Who is exempt from the task of laundering their garments? Engaging in coin laundry is an excellent method to instruct kids in the art of categorizing, cleansing, and neatly arranging garments. Furthermore, students can also enhance their financial acumen as they make payments for washing services. During the period of waiting for the laundry, teachers have the option to distribute worksheets to the pupils. This doubles the enjoyment of everything!

Movie Watching

Scientific evidence has demonstrated that engaging in this activity is beneficial for one's mental well-being. Visiting the cinema is consistently a thrilling and enjoyable method to impart important life teachings to students. This activity provides an excellent opportunity for students to alleviate tension, unwind, and revitalize themselves. The students are inspired by movies that possess a strong musicality and convey age appropriate life lessons. It instills motivation in them and provides them with role models to emulate in overcoming life's problems. Engaging in a question and answer review session after watching a movie improves the pupils' memory retention.

Bowling

It is consistently advisable to educate pupils on the significance of sportsmanship. Diversity consistently stimulates students. Providing children with advice while allowing them the autonomy to select the color and weight of the ball is a thrilling experience for them. Prior to commencing the game, we guide the children in performing stretching exercises to limber up their muscles and joints. As the children engage in the game and successfully knock down the pins, their feeling of achievement is intensified. Witnessing a bowling alley brimming with victorious children with special educational needs is indeed an exceptional encounter.

Post Office

This practice aims to cultivate kids' appreciation for writing and the act of exchanging letters with their friends and family. We arranged pencils and cards for them and instructed them to compose a message addressed to one individual. The individuals have the option to select their parent, classmate, schoolmate, or neighbor as the intended receiver of their letter. We acquaint students with the procedure of the post office, elucidating how they gather, categorize, and dispatch mail to the intended recipient. This provides students with the chance to regulate their sense of anticipation while awaiting the answer and reaction of the recipient of their letters.

Eating at restaurants or fast food

Taking the pupils to dine at a restaurant or fast food establishment creates a memorable experience for them throughout mealtime. They get a sense of being honored and recognized. Throughout this activity, we instruct the children on the process of selecting items from the menu, making healthy food choices, settling the bill, and employing proper table etiquette. It is consistently advisable to form a strong connection through the consumption of high-quality cuisine and the presence of enjoyable companionship.

Grocery shopping

Engaging in this activity with my students is one of my preferred pastimes. Typically, we provide them with a list of items to search for and purchase at the grocery store. By providing a fixed budget, this incentivizes individuals to apply their mathematics abilities in a practical manner. As students stroll through the aisles, they display great enthusiasm while meticulously choosing products from their shopping list. Upon effectively choosing, allocating funds for, and completing the payment for the things, the unmistakable delight on their countenances is evident. This empowers them to feel more competent in assisting their parents or guardians on their actual food shopping trip.

Playground

Engaging in physical activity is crucial as well. Participating in a group outing to the playground helps students understand the significance of engaging in outside activities. Interacting with their classmates fosters the development of collaboration and communication skills.

Volunteering

Engaging in volunteer work at a nearby charity or organization is a significant undertaking for students with special education needs. This enables them to contribute to the community. By exposing individuals to various social concerns, their capacity for empathy and understanding towards others is enhanced. By gaining knowledge about orphans, starvation, and homelessness, the students develop compassion and a sense of responsibility. This instills a sense of competence in the students, enabling them to provide assistance. Instilling a deep feeling of motivation in a learner is an immensely influential concept.

These various CBI activities enable students to develop a more profound comprehension of how to properly navigate and operate within their community. Furthermore, it offers educators the chance to evaluate pupils' development with greater precision. Through the process of monitoring pupils in real-life scenarios, teachers can discern certain areas that may require supplementary assistance.

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U. S. Department of Education Announces New Actions to Increase Access to School-Based Mental Health Services

During Mental Health Awareness Month, the Biden-Harris Administration is announcing new actions to increase access to school-based mental health services, including: (1) nearly doubling investments in the U.S. Department of Education's (Department's) School-Based Mental Health Services (SBMH) and Mental Health Service Professionals (MHSP) grant programs in the current Fiscal Year; (2) making additional investments through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students and educators; and (3) offering new mental health and wellbeing trainings and resources for schools and educators.

"Today's announcements affirm the Biden-Harris Administration's continued commitment to tackling our youth mental health crisis," said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. "We know students are more likely to access mental health support if it's offered in schools. By nearly doubling funds this year for school-based mental health professionals, releasing additional funds to help advance a variety of mental health strategies, and providing additional training and resources, we are raising the bar for student wellbeing across the country."

To read more, click here:

<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/during-mental-health-awareness-month-u-s-department-education-announces-new-actions-increase-access-school-based-mental-health-services>

Unraveling the Critical Shortage of Special Education Teachers (SETs) in the USA

By Audrey Ann Bayogos

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ABSTRACT

Special education is a very important system that provides support and resources to students with varying disabilities. This is to ensure that all students, despite their condition, have access to quality education. Some of the students' disabilities are autism spectrum disorder (ASD), mild intellectual disability (MID), moderate to severe intellectual disability (MSID), multiple disabilities (MD), and sensory impairment. Special education teachers (SETs) play a very important role for students with disabilities. However, in recent years, there has been a shortage of SETs in the United States of America. This study aims to unravel the key factors contributing to this crisis. Addressing this insufficiency is crucial to ensure that students with special needs receive the support and instruction they require to thrive academically and socially.

Keywords: SETs (Special Education Teachers). Critical Shortage. United States of America.

INTRODUCTION

There is a critical shortage of special education teachers (SETs) in the USA. The situation is deteriorating further. This has led to increased workloads for existing teachers, larger class sizes, and a lack of individualized attention for students with special needs. This crisis exists in every geographic region of the nation (McLeskey et al., 2004).

This setback has been described as severe, chronic, and pervasive. This leads to inequities and broadens the achievement gap. It also threatens the quality of educational services that students with disabilities receive. (Bilingsley & McLeskey, 2004).

As educators and policymakers continue to tussle with the critical shortage of SETs in the USA, it is essential to identify the implications of this issue for the educational system.

This shortage directly impacts the quality of education the students with disabilities receive. It also hinders their ability to live independently, engage in post-high school learning opportunities, and secure employment (Brownell et al., 2017).

According to the research from the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), enrollees with disabilities steadily grow in number. This directly increases the demand for more SETs. The number of students increased by 13% from 11.7% of the population in 2014–2015 and 2018–2019, respectively (Ondrasek et al., 2020).

There is a rapid growth in teacher demand for students with disabilities from ages 3 to 5 years old (Boe, 2006).

The shortage of fully certified teachers for students with disabilities from ages 6 to 21 years of age has been chronic since 1987 to 1988. It has increased annually, from 7.4% in 1993/1994 to 13.4% in 2002/2003. There is a shortage of approximately 54,000 SETs. This number includes the estimated vacant positions (Boe, 2006).

In California, the worsening shortage of SETs is a 'five-alarm fire,' with two of every three new recruits entering without having completed preparation programs (Ondrasek et al., 2020).

Despite the increase in students, there is a decrease in the number of qualified SETs. According to the California Department of Education (CDE), there is a significant decline in the number of individuals pursuing special education teaching credentials.

The growing number of students emphasizes the need for qualified SETs. This also has an impact on the workload and stress levels of existing SETs.

Without an adequate number of SETs, students with special needs may not receive the individualized support and instruction they require to thrive academically and socially (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999).

Insufficient numbers of properly trained SETs contribute to increased caseloads and reduced one-on-one attention for students, exacerbating the challenges faced. This shortage is a consequence of various factors, such as difficulties in recruitment and retention, inadequate professional development opportunities, and insufficient support systems for special education teachers (Mason-Williams et al., 2019).

Highly demanding occupations warrant proportional remuneration. Nevertheless, in comparison to professionals with equal training and education in different professions, teachers receive significantly lower salaries. The disparity in wages has significantly increased during the past two decades (Dsals, 2021).

According to the Learning Policy Institute, novice educators earn approximately 20 % less than their peers who have recently entered other professions after graduating from college. At the midpoint of their careers, teachers' incomes lag those of similarly trained professions by 30 % (Dsals, 2021).

The inadequate compensation not only leads to a sense of underappreciation among instructors but also aggravates their struggle to repay the substantial student loan debts, which have significantly increased in recent years due to the rising cost of higher education (Dsals, 2021).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

In this study, the primary aim is to examine the multifaceted aspects of the critical shortage of SETs in the USA. We will delve into the key factors contributing to the shortage, including recruitment, retention, professional development, and support systems.

By gaining a deeper understanding of these factors, we aim to shed light on the root causes of the shortage and its far-reaching implications for the education system.

We will also explore potential solutions to address this pressing issue. By understanding the complexities of this shortage and identifying viable strategies for improvement, we can work towards ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, have access to the high-quality education they deserve.

METHODOLOGY

To address the critical shortage of SETs in the USA, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive analysis and utilise a methodological approach that encompasses various aspects. The methodology for addressing this issue will involve the following key elements:

Data Collection: Gathering quantitative and qualitative data related to the shortage of special education teachers, including information on recruitment, retention rates, professional development programs, and support systems in place for special education teachers. This data will help in understanding the current state of affairs and identifying areas that require immediate attention.

Literature Review: Conducting an extensive review of existing literature, research studies, and best practices in special education teacher recruitment, training, and support. This will offer vital perspectives on successful tactics and programs that have efficiently tackled teacher shortages in different places.

Policy Analysis: Evaluating current policies and regulations related to special education teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development. Identifying gaps and inconsistencies in policies will be essential for recommending legislative changes and improvements.

Personal experience of the author: Adding personal experience to an academic article serves illustration and clarity. It illustrates key points and makes complex ideas more concrete and relatable for the reader.

By employing this methodology, a comprehensive understanding of the critical shortage of special education teachers can be achieved, leading to the development of informed and targeted interventions to address this pressing issue.

RELATED LITERATURE

Exploring the literature on professional development and support systems for SETs can uncover evidence-based practices and innovative approaches that promote teacher well-being and ultimately benefit students with special needs. Studies that analyze the consequences of the scarcity of special education teachers on the academic and social well-being of pupils might present convincing proof of the pressing necessity to tackle this problem.

The following statistics provided by the School of Education, American University in Washington, DC, on January 2021 showed an overview of the current SETs shortage.

- Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia have an insufficient number of SETs.
- Special education instructors have an attrition rate that is about twice as high as that of general education teachers.
- Over 50% of school districts face challenges in recruiting highly qualified special education instructors.
- Ninety percent of school districts with high poverty rates face challenges in recruiting highly qualified special education instructors.
- Attrition accounts for up to 29% of vacant special education teaching vacancies (Special Education Teacher Shortage: Driving Factors, 2021).

To fully understand the crisis, it is important to consider the key factors contributing to the critical shortage of SETs in the USA. These are qualification, recruitment, retention, professional development, and support systems. (Maag et al., 2018).

Qualification

To be considered part of a qualified workforce, individuals must have the necessary knowledge and skills acquired through initial training, introduction, and ongoing professional development (Carlson & Billingsley, 2010).

The conditions of service, which encompass the work environment and remuneration, have a crucial impact on upholding the quality of the staff, their performance, and mitigating unforeseen employee turnover (Carlson & Billingsley, 2010).

According to the California Department of Education (CDE), there is a significant decline in the number of individuals pursuing special education teaching credentials. Therefore, there is a shortage of qualified individuals in the field.

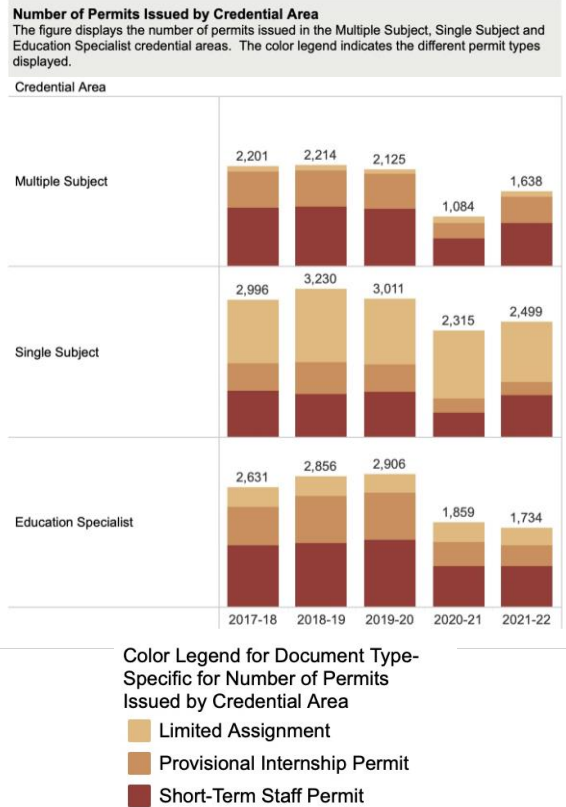
Indeed, a significant number of first-year special education teachers nationwide have not fulfilled the requirements of special education preparatory programs. In California, out of the total 8,470 newly employed special education instructors in the academic year 2017-18, only 3,274 possessed complete credentials (Special Education Teacher Shortage: Driving Factors, 2021).

The graph displays the number of new teaching intern credentials, including the subject area, in the last five years (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, CCTC, August 9, 2022).

This shows that the majority of the education specialists pursuing credentials are holders of short-term staff permits. There is also a remarkable decline in the number of candidates obtaining credentials.

An empty position can indicate either the unavailability of a teacher or the temporary assumption of teaching responsibilities by a long-term replacement for a class of children. The majority of children with impairments are assigned a teacher; however, a significant number of these teachers lack proper certification (McLeskey et al., 2004).

Those who are uncertified lack a great range of qualifications, such as: some have no degrees; some have college degrees in other concentrations (e.g., mathematics, home economics); and others have degrees in special education but are certified to teach children with another type of disability. All these teachers are deemed unqualified (McLeskey et al., 2004)



Recruitment & Retention

Recruiting and retaining qualified SETs has been a persistent challenge. This contributes significantly to the shortage. The cultural exchange program supplies the need for SETs. But this is for a limited amount of time only. After the validity of the J1 visa, they either have to go back to their home country or try to apply for a better visa. This does not meet the demand for SETs in the long run. Therefore, the cycle of scarcity continues.

Professional Development & Support System

The primary themes identified in the data encompassed job satisfaction, administrative assistance, induction programs, and mentoring (Vittekk, 2015).

Another cause of the shortage is the lack of incentives and support provided for the SETs. Teaching in special education requires regular training and resources to give them the knowledge and skills to cater to students with different needs. Teachers are also facing heavy workloads at school and inadequate funding. This limits their professional development opportunities.

The teachers' training must be enhanced. This will cater to the need for teachers to be regularly updated with the knowledge and skills that they need to address the needs of their students.

Professional development opportunities tailored to the unique needs of special education teachers, as well as robust support systems within schools and districts, can contribute to job satisfaction and overall retention.

The implementation of continuous professional development and support mechanisms is crucial for the retention of special education instructors.

The literature indicates a distinct requirement for extensive administrative assistance to enhance job satisfaction and increase the probability of a special educator's employment retention (Vittekk, 2015).

Work conditions and compensation are crucial factors in ensuring the quality of the staff, their performance, and minimizing unexpected turnover (Carlson & Billingsley, 2010).

There should also be an attractive incentive for special education careers. In this way, this will inspire candidates to passionately drive themselves towards this noble profession.

Lastly, one of the best tools to alleviate isolation among SETs is to give them better platforms for collaboration and support networks. This can help them get the best sharing experience of the best practices, resources, and strategies in the field.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the shortage of SETs requires a comprehensive and collaborative effort from educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders. By prioritizing recruitment, retention, professional development, and support systems, we can work towards ensuring that all students with special needs receive the individualized support and instruction they require to thrive and succeed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we consider potential solutions to address the critical shortage of SETs in the USA, it is crucial to prioritize the well-being and success of students with special needs.

One recommendation is to implement targeted recruitment strategies to attract individuals with a passion for supporting students with diverse learning needs. These strategies could involve reaching out to college students pursuing degrees in education and offering specialized scholarships or incentives for those interested in specializing in special education.

Additionally, it is essential to focus on retention by providing ongoing professional development opportunities and support systems for special education teachers. This could include mentorship programs, collaboration with other educators, and access to resources that promote their professional growth and well-being in the classroom.

Furthermore, recognizing the policy implications and conducting further research is vital in guiding the development of effective solutions for this critical issue in special education. It is

crucial to evaluate how current policies affect the recruitment and retention of special education instructors and pinpoint areas where policy modifications could enhance the availability and quality of these teachers.

To effectively tackle the severe lack of special education teachers, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive strategy that includes regulatory reforms, collaborative initiatives, and ongoing research aimed at creating long-lasting solutions.

Prioritizing the recruitment, retention, professional development, and support of special education teachers is crucial for ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students. Addressing the scarcity of special education teachers is crucial for guaranteeing the academic and social welfare of students with exceptional needs, as well as fostering.

Factors such as competitive salaries, career advancement opportunities, and working conditions play a crucial role in attracting and retaining educators in the special education field. Addressing these factors through improved compensation packages, mentoring programs, and career advancement opportunities can help mitigate the shortage and ensure a stable and dedicated workforce.

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Promoting Inclusivity and Acceptance: Celebrating the Uniqueness and Abilities of Special Education Students

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been significant progress in fostering inclusivity and acceptance within our communities. However, despite these advancements, misconceptions and stigmas surrounding students with special education needs (SEN) persist, hindering their integration and development. It is imperative to shift the narrative to one that recognizes the strengths and potential of special education (Sped) students, rather than focusing solely on their limitations. This article explores the importance of celebrating the uniqueness and abilities of Sped students, highlighting the remarkable resilience, determination, and creativity they possess. Drawing inspiration from individuals like Stephen Hawking, Nick Vujicic, Helen Keller, and Stella Young, who have overcome significant challenges to achieve success. We underscore the transformative power of mindset, resilience, and perseverance. By providing platforms for Sped students to showcase their talents and achievements, we can create an environment that promotes inclusivity, acceptance, and appreciation for diversity.

Keywords: Inclusivity, Students, Uniqueness, Abilities, Special Education Needs (SEN).

INTRODUCTION

In today's society, the values of inclusivity and acceptance are widely championed. Yet, despite strides made in breaking down barriers for marginalized groups, students with special education needs (SEN) continue to face stigma and misconceptions. This perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and hampers their full integration into the community. As stipulated by law, all students should be educated in the least restrictive environment with their typically developing peers (Spoede et al., 2016). It is crucial to shift the narrative surrounding special education (Sped) students from one of deficit to one of celebration, recognizing and honoring their unique abilities and talents.

Recognizing the Strengths of Sped Students:

Special education (Sped) students possess a diverse range of talents and abilities that deserve recognition and celebration. Rather than focusing solely on their challenges and limitations, it is essential to highlight their strengths and potential. They demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination in the face of adversity, serving as inspirations to others. Their ability to persevere

and overcome obstacles underscores the importance of providing them with the support and encouragement they need to succeed.

Celebrating Diversity through Talent Showcase:

One of the most effective ways to celebrate the uniqueness and abilities of Sped students is by providing platforms for them to showcase their talents. Whether it be through art exhibitions, musical performances, athletic events, or technological showcases. These opportunities allow Sped students to shine and build confidence in their abilities. By celebrating their achievements, we promote a culture of inclusivity and acceptance, where all individuals are valued for their contributions.

Drawing Inspiration from Role Models:

The stories of individuals like Stephen Hawking, Nick Vujicic, Helen Keller, and Stella Young serve as powerful reminders of the resilience and potential of individuals with disabilities. Despite facing significant challenges, these individuals have achieved remarkable success through their determination, perseverance, and unwavering belief in their abilities. Their stories inspire Sped students to pursue their dreams and overcome obstacles, challenging societal stigmas and misconceptions along the way. Furthermore, involving parents and guardians in the support process can enhance the overall experience for Sped students. Open communication and collaboration with families can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the student's needs, and can also reinforce a sense of community and support both at home and in the classroom (Bandura, 1997).

‘Action points’ for local authorities must be given, and learning support must reach beyond the simple confines of school placement and deep into the community (Johnstone & Warwick, 1999). Ordinary classrooms in mainstream schools contain an ever-widening diversity of students. Inclusive education poses a challenge for teachers in terms of ensuring high-quality learning and the active involvement of all students involved (Nind & Wearmouth, 2006).

Inclusive schools are defined as educational institutions that implement significant modifications to their structure and procedures in order to accommodate their varied student populations. An essential component of adaptation is the manner in which educators impart knowledge. In order to cultivate an inclusive pedagogy, instructors require access to high-quality material (Nind & Wearmouth, 2006).

The success of teachers is greatly impacted by their acknowledgment of their responsibilities towards all learners and the importance of social interaction in the learning process, as well as their collective awareness of the qualities, abilities, and information related to a particular subject (Rix et al., 2009).

The capacity to organize and motivate individuals to engage in a collaborative learning process by utilizing adaptable groupings and roles, providing diverse chances to engage with concepts and approaches through personally relevant actions, has a substantial influence on it as well. Effective techniques extend beyond the individual teacher and are based on the collective group of learners, which includes other professionals with whom they collaborate (Rix et al., 2009).

AIMS OF STUDY

Everyone has unique talents and abilities. It is important to celebrate the different abilities of all individuals. Sped students have their own set of distinctive qualities. The community needs to bring their special gifts into perspective. By celebrating them, we promote inclusivity and acceptance. We also provide them with the support and encouragement they need to succeed. Together, we can create an environment that appreciates and values diversity, cultivating a sense of belonging for all students. In order to promote the advancement of inclusive practices, it is necessary to disrupt conventional thinking and stimulate an examination of ignored opportunities (Ainscow, 2005). The aim of this study is to create an inclusive environment that provides equal opportunities and support for all students.

METHODOLOGY

The study drew on the author's personal experiences and was analytical. It draws most of its arguments from a critical evaluation of the research literature. It also includes the following elements:

Research Approach: A qualitative study exploring experiences and perceptions related to inclusivity in education.

Data Collection: Utilization of search engines and available resources.

Analysis: Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes to identify key patterns and themes related to celebrating students' abilities.

Ethical Considerations: Ensured that the person has given approval for the dissemination of the shared information. Prioritizing privacy is of utmost importance while writing about individuals.

RELATED LITERATURE

One of the most important aspects of celebrating the uniqueness and abilities of Sped students is recognizing and showcasing their talents. Many Sped students possess exceptional skills in areas such as art, writing, music, sports, or technology. By providing a platform for these students to showcase their talents, we allow them to develop a sense of confidence. Art shows, spoken poetry, concerts, or athletic events designed for Sped students can be organized. The world has been blessed to see actual people who rose from their situation and became successful. These are the people with disabilities; instead of feeling discouraged, they strived hard to reach their full potential.

Stephen Hawking

Hawking was born on January 8, 1942. He was diagnosed with an early-onset, progressing form of motor neuron disease in 1963 at the age of 21. Over decades, this disease paralyzed him. After losing his capacity to talk, he communicated through a speech-generating device. He was the Lucasian professor of mathematics at Cambridge between 1979 and 2009. It was one of the most

prestigious academic posts in the world. His book, *A Brief History of Time*, is a bestseller. It appeared on the Sunday Times list for a record of 237 weeks. He is a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and of so many other prestigious recognitions. He was an English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author. He was also the director of research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology.

Nick Vujicic

Vujicic was born in 1982 without limbs. He has tetra-amelia syndrome, a disorder characterized by the absence of arms and legs. Doctors could not find any medical conclusion as to why he was born this way. But despite his physical limitations, he has become one of the most famous motivational speakers in the world to date. His resilience to face life courageously echoes in his life's adventures. He was just 17 years old when he started giving inspirational talks at school and church events. He is an international bestselling author, entrepreneur, investor, producer, and actor. He is now married, and he has two sons and two daughters. In 2022, he launched an initiative called "Champions for the Brokenhearted." The goal of this project is to support particular groups in need.

Helen Keller

Keller was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama. At 19 months old, she contracted an unknown illness that left her both deaf and blind. She used home signs to communicate. At the age of seven, she met her first teacher, Anne Sullivan. She taught Helen Keller language, reading, and writing. Keller was the first deaf and blind person in the United States to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. She has written 14 books, hundreds of speeches, and essays. Her birthplace was preserved as a National Historic Landmark. She was inducted into the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame and was inaugurated into the Alabama Hall of Fame on June 8, 2015. She was an American author, disability rights advocate, political activist, and lecturer.

Stella Young

Young was born in 1982 in Stawell, Victoria. She was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or the "brittle bone disease." This caused her to use a wheelchair for most of her life. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Public Relations from Delkin University and a Graduate Diploma in Education from the University of Melbourne. She served as the editor for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's online magazine, Ramp Up. She is a comedian, a journalist, and a disability rights activist. She was a member of the boards of the Ministerial Advisory Council for the Department of Victorian Communities, the Victorian Disability Advisory Council, the Youth Disability Advocacy Service, and Women with Disabilities Victoria.

Stephen Hawking, Nick Vujicic, Helen Keller, and Stella Young have varying disabilities. But they have one thing in common: they decided what they wanted to achieve in life and worked hard to achieve it. They are a testament to the fact that even though a disability can be very challenging and life-altering, there is always light if you pursue it. With the right mindset, resilience, and perseverance, everything is possible. Inspiration is a vital aspect of Sped students' journey. Introducing different people to them who have conquered their disabilities sheds light on the societal stigma. Sped students have the ability to fulfil their dreams and achieve their

goals. Celebrating the uniqueness and abilities of Sped students creates a change from stigma to acceptance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, celebrating the uniqueness and abilities of special education students is essential for promoting inclusivity and acceptance within our communities. By shifting the narrative surrounding Sped students from one of stigma to one of celebration, we can create an environment that fosters their overall development and success. Drawing inspiration from role models who have overcome adversity, we can empower Sped students to pursue their dreams with confidence and resilience.

Together, let us embrace and celebrate the diversity of all individuals, creating a more inclusive and accepting society for generations to come.

This article has investigated the considerable benefits of fostering an inclusive environment in mainstream schools that recognizes and celebrates the uniqueness and abilities of special education students.

Our exploration has underscored the critical importance of such initiatives not only for the well-being and development of students with special educational needs but also for the enrichment of the entire school community.

Through deliberate policy efforts, comprehensive teacher training, and committed school leadership, we have seen that barriers to inclusivity can be dismantled, allowing all students to flourish.

The success of inclusion policies is evident in improved academic and social outcomes, greater acceptance and understanding among peers, and a more cohesive and diverse educational environment.

However, the journey towards full inclusivity is ongoing. Continuous assessment and improvement and a commitment to embracing the distinct contributions of each student remain imperative. Schools must lead the charge in fostering a culture that values and harnesses the strengths inherent in diversity.

As we look forward, celebrating the uniqueness and abilities of special education students should not be seen merely as a statutory obligation but as a moral imperative that enriches our schools and society. We must continue to build on the progress made, ensuring that inclusivity in education is not merely an aspirational goal but a lived reality for every student.

Through concerted efforts across all levels of the educational system, we can pave the way toward a future where every student is valued for their individuality and supported in reaching their full potential. The time for comprehensive, evidence-based inclusion is now, promising a brighter, more diverse future for our educational institutions and the students they serve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to promote inclusivity and acceptance by celebrating the uniqueness and abilities of special education students within mainstream schools, the recommendations were as follows:

1. **Inclusive Curriculum Development:** Develop and implement a curriculum that recognizes and reflects the diversity of student experiences and abilities, integrating special education needs into the general education framework.
2. **Recognition Programs:** Establish school-wide recognition programs that celebrate the milestones and achievements of special education students, acknowledging progress and effort as well as traditional academic success.
3. **Peer Support and Buddy Systems:** Encourage peer support programs that pair special education students with general education peers to foster understanding, empathy, and mutual learning opportunities.
4. **Specialized Training in Diversity:** Provide educators with specialized training that enhances their cultural and linguistic competency, as well as their ability to differentiate instruction based on individual student strengths.
5. **Collaborative Learning Projects:** Facilitate collaborative projects that allow all students to contribute according to their skills and interests, thereby showcasing the unique abilities of each child.
6. **Accessibility Enhancements:** Recommend upgrades to school facilities and learning materials to ensure they are accessible to students with a variety of disabilities and learning styles.
7. **Community Engagement:** Create opportunities for special education students to participate in community events or service projects, allowing them to demonstrate their abilities and engage with a wider audience.
8. **Extra-curricular Activities:** Encourage inclusive extra-curricular activities and clubs that allow for expression and talent development in various fields, such as arts, sports, and technology.
9. **Professional Learning Communities:** Promote the formation of professional learning communities among teachers to share best practices and strategies for enhancing student uniqueness and abilities.
10. **Parent and Family Resources:** Provide resources and support for families of special education students, helping them to celebrate and nurture their child's unique talents at home and in the community.

These recommendations aim to foster an inclusive school culture that appreciates and uplifts the capabilities of all students, empowering them to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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Book Review: Culture, Class and Race

By Michelle Norman

Abstract

These authors are experts in research and equitable practices. This book, *Culture, Class, and Race* gives a guideline about meaningful ways to have critical conversations. They provide important information about the types of conversations and behaviors that can help with cultural identity. This book helps educators grow professionally by using the power of conversation. I feel strongly about recommending this book for educators to learn how to better communicate.

Purpose and Thesis

The main purpose of this book is to give educators a guideline for constructive conversations that unite and energize a school. Our society has difficulty when discussing issues of equity and inequity. From the author's research experience, there needs to be academic training in all schools to demystify and “demythify” certain topics. They feel that every educator can gain valuable professional knowledge that will benefit all students academically and socially. The thesis of this book is conversations do matter.

Scientists, Margaret Wheatley (2009), stated that systems must be nurtured and energized for growth. They depend on growth processes and energy exchanges and interactions. These interactions lead to connections and relationships. The authors (Campbell, B., Campbell, F., and Keeny) empathize the importance of trust among members of schools. “Without trust, the organization loses energy, lacks nurturing, and suffers from loss.”

Engaging in Conversation

Few people feel freely about having conversations about racial affiliation, gender affiliation, social stratification and ethnicity. These are complex topics. With free-flowing purposeful conversation, interconnected relationships are possible. We often associate ourselves with our sociocultural identities, including race, religion, and occupation. Best explained by Lisa Delpit (1995), “Listening requires not only open eyes and ears, but hearts and minds.”

Essential Terminology

Engaging with others on an even platform using clear and appropriate terminology is essential. This ensures an equal voice. For conversations to be successful, a shared vocabulary is also important. How we perceive and experience life affects how we enter authentic conversations in cross-cultural spaces. As we listen to others speak we need to listen and not dent the validity of that experience. Waiting for the other person to finish without interruption. Paraphrasing what you understand is a good way to have open lines of communication and reiterate that you indeed were listening. Difficult conversations are critical for improving and fortifying relationships.

Triangular vs Circular Environment

Most schools still operate as a hierarchical, top-down environment known as triangular. A triangular environment uses language that reinforces structure and helps to maintain the dominance of the people and positions at the top of the triangle. A circular environment is innovative and driven by curiosity. A circular environment uses words such as team, inclusion, colleague, collaboration. It aims more towards an equitable education. Huge societal changes take time, yet small changes over time can influence huge events. A triangular environment tends to focus on getting things done quickly yet often opportunities to build meaningful relationships using dialogic circular terms. Dialogues help build stronger and healthier relationships among people. It also fosters deeper levels of trust.

We get comfortable with those we communicate with all the time. Learning to be open and learn about others is the only way to reduce inequalities among ourselves with others.

Safe Spaces

When we shorten the distance between each other, we create the opportunity to see ourselves in other situations and gain a view of how things might be approached differently. It allows us to be free to discuss values and beliefs that potentially blind us to reality. Susan Scott (2004) reminds us that “the conversation is the relationship.” The most important component of any conversation are the people having that conversation, the relationship.

Power of Trust

Conscious awareness and purposeful use of the lifeworld requires us to let go of egocentric methods that are intended to strategically overpower an opponent. Lifeworld is the sum of our life experiences that operate as background. It sets our cultural patterns, rules and regulations that shape our view of the world. It establishes parameters for one’s vision and identity. Trust is the force for establishing cohesive relationships and conversations across borders of social, political, cultural, racial and power differences. Trust solidifies relationships among people in the community.

Values and Perspectives

The Ladder of Inference model created by Chris Argyris (1990) shows how our background shapes our behaviors. Making assumptions and moving up and down the Ladder of Inference is something we all do. It happens quickly as background processing. Values shape assumptions which form conclusions that formulate beliefs. The Ladder of Inference is a powerful instrument for viewing how our actions are born from beliefs. Which we construct as reality. Breaking with tradition what we believe, assume, and value is a critical step in moving conversations beyond culture, class, and race. When we are open to others, we change from an old exclusive society to a new inclusive society.

Conclusion

Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1992) offer significant insight into relationships, “There are many things to be ashamed about in the world, but ignorance is one of the worst.” Their philosophy aligns with the philosophy of this book, Culture, Class, and Race. It is through

constructive conversations that we will unite. This is true for our work place as well as for our community, for our neighbors, for our friends.

Closing the equity gap will only promote a positive sense of unity. The author's recommendations offer ways to reach equity which benefits all educators. In my field of teaching, we are faced with inequalities over different situations all the time.

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Campbell Jones, Brenda, Campbell Jones, Franklin, Keeny, Shannon, (2020). Culture, Class, and Race. *Constructive Conversations That Unite and Energize Your School and Community*.

Book Review: Having Hard Conversations

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Abstract

Education has seen many changes and advancements over the last few decades. These changes start with legislation and are passed down through the hierarchy of the educational leadership system. Along with policy and curriculum changes, educational leadership has evolved as well. Gone are the days of a principal sitting behind a desk, commanding fear and being uninvolved. Effective leadership involves building relationships with faculty, staff, students and parents. Those relationships oftentimes involve having difficult conversations at some point. Leaders struggle with wanting to be liked and needing to be respected. This book gives key pointers showing how to balance both while creating an environment where both staff and students thrive and can focus on the main goal, reaching their greatest educational potential.

Keywords: education, leadership, conversations

Introduction

Long gone are the days of “seen and not heard.” We are living in a time of reform both educationally and socially. While leadership roles are still very much needed and extremely relevant, especially in the educational world, we are no longer required to keep quiet to keep the peace or rule with an iron fist to command respect. True dynamic leadership cares about people and builds an environment where relationships make the difference (Fullan, 2020). People are the heart of any organization, and where there are people, there will be differences of opinions. Those differences will in fact lead to a hard conversation at some point. It is our job as leaders to be prepared on how to best handle those conversations in the most effective and professional manner. “When it comes to risky, controversial, and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information out in the open” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 23).

Why Do We Hesitate Having Hard Conversations?

As educators, our nature is to encourage and nurture. Most of our whys involve empowering and uplifting those around us. Hard conversations do not come easy for most leaders in education. Hesitations and questions abound as we search for ways to evade impending uncomfortable conversations. Reasons ranging from personal comfort, desire to please people, inability to find the perfect time to talk, to more complex reasons stemming from lack of urgency to feeling of no authority to do so. Abrams makes an empowering statement regarding these reasons. “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you” (Abrams, 2009, p.18).

One of the most understandable, yet strangling reasons listed, was fear of kicking someone while they are already down. Teaching is hard. Being a teacher is a lot mentally, physically, and emotionally. It is evident when a teacher is crumbling under the weight of it all, no one wants to be the one that sends them to the bottom. However, when that reason wins out, most often it's the students who lose. Student growth is the goal, the larger picture, that must take precedence over feelings. Sometimes a hard conversation is the most effective way to express concerns for the betterment of our school and students.

What's the Real Problem? Finding the Professional Language to Name It

When attempting to nail down the real problem, it is important to ask yourself some questions to determine if the problem is more about you and your opinion or whether it is about the other person? The easiest way to answer this question is by comparing the problem to the job description. This allows the leader to look at the problem more objectively, taking the personal aspect out and allowing the conversation to be strictly professional. Teaching is a craft that is learned and developed over time, a true science. Effective educators' welcome feedback and use it for growth and development of their craft when it is phrased and approached in a professional manner.

Making a Plan. Abrams states before initiating a hard conversation, "you must be able to articulate the professional behavior that is lacking and be able to explain the gap between what someone was asked to do professionally and what is currently happening" (Abrams, 2009, p.45). She suggests developing an outcome map for two reasons. The first is to lay out the steps that will help the professional reach the desired outcome. The second is to develop a plan used to support them in their development. As an effective leader, it's not enough just to point out shortcomings and initiate a hard conversation, we must also prepare ways to develop teachers and close the gap between expectations and fulfillment. After all when teachers are successful, so are students, the school and even the community. Fullan echoes this sentiment stating, "leaders in all organizations, whether they know it or not, contribute for better or for worse to moral purpose in their own organizations and in society as a whole." (Fullan, 2020, p. 21)

Scripting Your Initial Comments. While these hard conversations can be unnerving, they are imperative for growth as we focus on the bigger picture, what is best for our students and our schools. Abrams suggests five steps to prepare for the hard conversation. Setting the tone and purpose of the conversation, this is accomplished in the first few sentences. You must be very insightful and thoughtful about how you wish to come across. Second, make sure to get to the point and keep it professional. It is best to leave feelings out and be matter of fact. Third, provide them with specific examples. Focus on the most important and not overwhelm them with too much at one time. Next, specifically describe how this affects others, namely the students and school or colleagues. Lastly, state your desire to resolve the issue and open the space for discussion. Your script should be an outline to guide the conversation, not an absolute formula.

The Whats, Wheres, and Whens of Having a Hard Conversation. Multiple logistical components are necessary when planning for a hard conversation all of which center around the tone you are trying to convey to the listener. Abrams offers a variety of suggestions depending on the tone and message you are attempting to establish. Closing the door to your office and sitting across the desk conveys a sense of power for you the leader and a sense of vulnerability for the listener, whereas sitting next to them conveys a meaning of equality. Body language,

such as tone of voice, credible vs authoritative; hand placement, palms down expresses that you mean business, whereas palms up shows you are open to discussion; eye contact is the most important nonverbal communication, looking away lends to hesitation, opposed to staring directly which can be construed as imposing. Timing must also be a consideration when planning for the hard conversation. Allotting enough time for the conversation itself, time to process, and time to recover should be part of the process. Abrams also reminds us that even though we plan and anticipate that we have every scenario covered, rarely do moments of raw human emotion coupled with anxiety turn out perfect in real life (Abrams, 2009).

Conclusion

In a perfect world, there would never be reason for a confrontation. However, as long as there are people walking the earth, there will be problems. The root cause of man—if not most—human problems lies in how people behave when others disagree with them about high-stakes, emotional issues” (Patterson et al., 2012). As future leaders and responsible members of society, we are smart to be prepared in effectively handling a hard conversation. Knowing how to remove personal opinions and bias, speaking confidently yet respectfully, and expressing a genuine desire for betterment for all involved in the situation gives us the foundation needed to succeed in a difficult situation. Abrams reminds us that “If your intentions are good and thought out, committed to dialogue, open to alternative solutions, honor and respect the other person as a professional, your conversation will be authentic and successful start to dialogue” (Abrams, 2009, p.76).

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