



BUILDING THE BACKBONE TO STUDENT SUCCESS



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Building the Backbone to Student Success

A classroom is full of diverse learners. Each student brings their own background experiences including culture, socioeconomic status, and intelligence into the learning community. In this community, it is the teacher's job to help the individual grow. Because each student has a different way of making connections to build their knowledge base, the teacher has a difficult job. The job title requires that all students meet a certain amount of learning goals in one year. Teachers plan their day filled with learning activities that will help students meet these yearly goals. Students spend their day learning and then go home to their life of play. Sometimes, there is a disconnect between these worlds.

The disconnect between school and home creates a powerful divide of expectations. At school students are expected to respect each other, complete learning tasks, and participate in social interactions. At home the expectations can be very different. Parents are not always aware of daily events in the classroom and what is expected of their students or their students' teachers. Conflict can easily arise in these situations. Parents may not agree that students in fourth grade should have homework. Instead, they may expect students to help around the house and spend time with family when they get home from school. In this situation, students could be receiving bad grades because they never return completed homework. Consequently, the student is the person most affected by these conflicts.

Parents are not the only venue that lacks communication. There are many other professionals at school that have a responsibility towards meeting learning goals. These professionals include special educators, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, paraprofessionals, etc. We can call these therapists and professionals service professionals because they provide services to the students. Each of the roles between parents, teachers, and service professionals are so different and unique. They all have different goals to help the student become the best they can be, but there is only so much time in a day. We all know how valuable time is for families and professionals. Communication between each of these worlds isn't something we always value as an effective way of meeting students' goals.

I believe that simple communication to form a sense of understanding for each perspective can solve these conflicts. Communication between parents, educators, and service professionals extends the time we have in a day by having similar expectations for students. This essay seeks to investigate the impact of communication, or lack of communication, between parents and professionals in relation to student success. First, three influences that students have during their development to adulthood will be introduced. Then, perceptions of students based on assessment will be explored. Next, the placement of students in each foundation will be explained. Finally, communication roles between the foundations will be examined.

Background

Introducing a child into the world is an amazing event. There are millions of things that need to happen to give birth to a perfectly healthy baby. Take into consideration prenatal care, development of the organs, and healthiness of the mother. It takes nine months of love, care, and preparation. This is why having a baby is such a miracle. It's a miracle because there are so many things that can change in a short period of time. If things do not go according to plan, babies may have lasting effects such as learning disabilities, developmental delays, or physical disabilities. No matter what, each child deserves

opportunities to be happy and to grow into an individual. My first cooperating teacher opened my eyes to this perspective of children. I started to think about how lucky we are to have these new minds walk the Earth, but development doesn't stop at birth. There are a variety of people that will guide these children into adulthood. These people lift the student to meet developmental and educational goals.

Students, like buildings, are supported by a foundation. Without all the supports or pillars in the foundation, the building cannot stand as tall. The same is true for the student when interacting between the world of school and home. The three most important pillars of this education are parents, general educators, and special educators (including service professionals). These pillars are the backbone to student success and will make the most impact on how the child shapes their world.

Most development takes place during the school age years. As the first pillar of education, it is the parent's job to provide a healthy and stimulating environment for children to make their first neural connections. Infants' brain development is vulnerable to environmental factors. Almost immediately after birth, children have the senses of sight, smell, taste, and touch. Babies experience the world through these senses. If the child is in an environment where they can explore their surroundings while being supported by their parents, the experiences will create long lasting neural connections. The environment includes many things such as the type of care, what is provided to meet the child's needs, and sound and sight stimulation. The child is taking in all these factors and makes connections for brain development.

To further understand the role of parents as a foundational pillar, this section illustrates the first year of life as the "window of opportunity" for children. It is the time when the brain is most plastic. This allows the child to take in many experiences at once and build connections. Positive connections are made when the child is placed in a certain amount of "stress", and supported by a parent through the stress to create a positive experience for healthy connections. There are also negative experiences where the child is not supported through the stressful stimuli. A negative experience such as neglect when a child is hungry or tired will be remembered and the connection will grow stronger the longer neglect occurs (Siegel, 2012, p. 91). Although negative experiences are fewer, they can create lots of problems in later life for the child. Researchers have found that these types of negative stressors increase the chances of behavioral and educational problems because the stress becomes built into the brain (Siegel, 2012, p.111). When the unrelieved stressor occurs again, the child will not be able to regulate their emotions during the stimulation because they didn't learn to cope with the stress when the first neural connection was made (Siegel, 2012, 150). Every time the child revisits this connection, emotional stress will occur. This proves that parents need to constantly support children while making neural connections.

Building on the idea of experiences, research shows that not all families are equally able to provide a healthy start in life. Global factors that affect student achievement are socioeconomic status and child to parent relationship. Students from families with a high socioeconomic background have been known to achieve more in school because parents are more able to be involved (Ibabe, 2016, p.2). Usually these parents are more educated themselves and can problem solve better to meet family needs. Parents that have positive relationships with their children are able to discipline and set expectations for their children. In each case, the balancing act between parental responsibilities and their child's needs is being prioritized. There are some programs (e.g. Title I) that help children in less favorable situations because research has proven that families of low socioeconomic status do not have

as many reading opportunities as others. In all cases parents are an important factor in building their child's sense of the world. They will always be with them as a pillar of their world. As mentioned previously, one pillar will not suffice for a strong foundation.

When a child starts school their teachers are a second pillar of support for students. Teachers expand students' perspectives on the world and help them gain new knowledge. Students spend 18 years in school and each teacher gets to help students problem solve in the real world. In one year, teachers are expected to teach all students a magnitude of standards for each content area: reading, math, social studies, science, health and physical education, music, and art. While some schools are lucky to have specialist teachers, general education teachers take on these content areas by themselves. Teachers try to reach all their students' world lenses by using different teaching strategies. The most effective teachers take students' lenses into consideration.

The students' world lenses are the neural connections they have made previously. Often, this is referred to as background knowledge. The brain's process of connecting old knowledge to new knowledge unique because every student's experiences are different. When teachers understand the brain's process or the lens that student's use to learn about the world, students connect with the information being given. Then, they can apply it in their world. As stated previously, some students have intellectual, developmental, and physical disorders that cause students to struggle with learning and applying knowledge. Teachers are expected to differentiate their teaching and create small support groups to make sure students reach all of their grade level standards. What is more, students are then tested on what they know with standardized tests.

Standardized testing is used as a general form of assessment to see how well students have mastered state content standards. The standardized testing data is used to show if students, teachers, or schools are failing to meet yearly learning requirements. Under the policy "No Child Left Behind", schools are required to make yearly progress on these tests. If they do not, they are placed under the watchful eye of the government. The required actions that the schools may need to implement include curriculum changes, professional development, and in serious cases, school closings (Allington, 2012, p. 12). Many teachers feel that the support is not positive. It takes teaching out of the classroom environment and puts teachers on strict rules of what they can and cannot do. This causes teachers to value standardized testing as a valid measure on their teaching skills. They want students to reflect all that they know to the best of their ability, but research shows that there are achievement gaps between groups. Standardized achievement is less for those who are poor, male, or part of a minority. (Allington, 2012, p.10). Students with disabilities should also be taken into consideration when using standardized testing scores to prove effectiveness in school. If students have special circumstances that affect their performance at school, students should receive the supports they need. This is when the final pillar of education is introduced.

The third pillar, special education, is put in place to support students if they have exceptional learning or behavioral needs. For a long time, special education has been viewed as a label put on to students. This label has had a negative connotation as students who are less than others. This misconception of special education turns many families away from the support it has to offer. In reality, special education is individualized support that helps students with specific needs. Then, students go through several evaluation processes to help discover academic and behavioral challenges. Supports are created to help students meet academic expectations in the general education classroom based on the

evaluation results. Supports include more time to complete homework and assessments, increased time spent one-on-one with teacher, and therapy with service professionals. The supports, or services, are put in place so students can be successful in the general education classroom. The goal of special education is to help all students become independent in their learning career. However, these goals are not always reached because of the faults in the federal program. The next section provides a general discussion of the two major faults within the program.

One fault of the special education system is that many students who qualify for an individualized education plan, or IEP (Burns, 2006, p. 6), are not always receiving what they have been promised. Due to the lengthy and complicated paperwork, some professionals do not take the time to read what services the student has been legally promised. The paper work first begins in the general education classroom. Teachers are required to assess students for 12 weeks on two different teaching strategies. If the data shows little improvement, special education evaluation begins. The extensive evaluation of the student adds more paperwork to the process. After the evaluation is completed, the IEP is created. There are multiple sections to the plan such as student information, present levels of achievement, goals, services, modifications, accommodations, and progress reports. From this outline, it is obvious that many documents are used to prove that special education services will best support a student. Since the process for special education is repetitive for each student, some professionals find it easiest to copy and paste supports for multiple students. Of course, this practice does not make education plans individualized. Therefore, students fail to receive the supports they need.

The second fault of special education is lack of funding. Lack of funding in special education adds to the deficit of services that can be provided. Services such as paraprofessionals, assistive technologies, and planning of intervention curriculum are expensive. Special education teachers have the challenge of working with what they have to meet each students' individualized needs. Additionally, there are rarely enough special educators for the many students who need special services. This means that teachers are required to put more and more students on their caseload. This is challenging because special education teachers are required to meet goals and objectives stated on a student's IEP with assessment and data. Because the goals and objectives for students are individualized, one assessment tool does not work for every student. Special education teachers need to complete pages of information on evaluations, notices to parents, records of meetings, and document performance levels. This allows parents, general educators, and students to be held accountable for each of their roles in the student's educational career.

The three pillars are important to understand because they provide a background of responsibilities that each role has. Furthermore, it gives a picture of how conflict can arise without understanding each of the roles through communication. Each pillar of a student's world has its shortcomings no system is perfect. By creating a system of communication and understanding through all three of the pillars, we can find students surrounded by a community of people. People that will support and challenge them to become the best and happiest individual they can be. Through my education at the University of Minnesota Duluth, I have experienced the benefits of learning both special and general educator roles. I have used my experiences in both settings to propose solutions for the shortcomings in each pillar to help one another. With interviews with successful teachers in the state of Minnesota, I will lay out some of the misconceptions of the educational system and the importance of each pillar in the key educational areas of assessment, placement, and communication.

Assessment

There are a variety of assessment strategies that teachers use to guide their teaching and to measure how well students know content. Each of these strategies fit into two categories of classroom assessment: formative and summative. Formative assessment informs teachers what students know and what supports need to be put in place to meet state standards. Summative assessment measures the content a student has learned. Within these types of assessment, there are formal and informal ways to assess students. With informal assessment, teachers prompt students to get general idea of group knowledge. This data is used to guide teaching. Formal assessment allows teachers to look at the individual and see what they know or what they need to know.

Assessment is important to understand in a student's educational career because it gives the pillars an understanding of how well or poorly a student is achieving. If a student is not showing understanding in a certain content area or skill, supports need to be put in place by the teacher or special educator to help students meet learning goals and standards. Assessment serves as communication of student understanding or progress of educational goals to teachers and parents. Data that is communicated to teachers can include possible need of re-teaching content using a different strategy, a more focused lesson on a specific skill, or further assessment for special education. These messages must be recorded before further decisions are made to change the type of education a student receives.

Below is a chart that gives examples of these types of assessment.

	Formative	Summative
Informal	Discussion questions to guide teaching	Review game such as Jeopardy
Formal	Activity sheets	Unit test

As discussed above, assessment allows teachers to get a sense of the classroom and decide what teaching strategies would be best. One teacher's school uses ability grouping to teach fifth-grade math content (E. Lundebrek, personal communication, January 14, 2017). In this this teaching strategy, all fifth-grade students are formally assessed on skills and understanding of math content. Formal summative assessment was used to create these groups because it tests mastery of certain content topics. The students are then placed in homogenous groups and each fifth-grade teacher is assigned an ability group to teach. Generally, the idea is teachers can teach to the students' abilities without much differentiation. This teaching strategy works well for average and above average students, but for the teacher who has upwards of 20 low achieving math students, it is a struggle. Within that low ability group, there are still a variety of skills that need to be addressed (E. Lundebrek, personal communication, January 14, 2017). This makes it hard for the teacher to teach a large group lesson when each individual student needs attention. The students suffer when individual needs are not met. When teachers are using direct instruction in a large group setting, it is better to use a heterogeneous group of abilities. The higher ability students can show their way of thinking and help guide lower ability students, rather than the teacher needing to be in 15 places at once.

Likewise, some teachers use small homogeneous pull out groups to give students another chance to see the information presented or practice their skills in a different manner. This type of

grouping works better in small numbers because teachers can work more intensely with each student. Many teachers call this extra attention an academic intervention. Intervention is a scary word, but it just means that students are given an extra opportunity to learn with more guidance, time, or through a different lens. These interventions should be scientifically research based, SRBI. Each intervention that students receive should be backed by research to prove the interventions have built students' skills or understanding. The research behind the intervention tells professionals what type of students would be best helped by a specific intervention. This information includes socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and school environment. There are many resources where teachers can find SRBIs that can be used based on the student's needs.

Specifically, the first level of intervention a child receives is in small homogenous groups and lasts up to 20 minutes. During this time, the teacher uses classroom assessment to see how well the intervention is working. Building on this idea of interventions as supports, if the teacher feels that select students are still struggling and could benefit from special education, the teacher then uses another assessment called a curriculum based measure, or CBM. This type of assessment is based on the skill a student is working on and measures how much progress they have made. The teacher is required to try at least two interventions lasting for six weeks each and record progress with CBM data. This data is used to refer students for special education evaluation. Generally, these interventions hold the teacher accountable for teaching styles and stop unnecessary evaluation of students. Another angle on interventions shows the downside to this system. Some students who need special education services must wait 12 weeks before they can even be evaluated. Only the parents can request special education evaluation without the sufficient classroom data.

If the student does not show progress in the two interventions, or parents request special education evaluation, the teacher will consult with a student support group. This group of professionals is often called the referral team. Parents will be asked to meet with the team and the data that the teacher has collected from the initial interventions will be shared. Parents will state their concerns and can ask any questions during this meeting. The meeting is a chance for parents, teachers, and special educators to talk about the specific student needs and discuss what evaluations could be used to help describe the student. Because this is the first time the parents are meeting with the school to talk about their student's achievement, it can become quite emotional. Some parents have concerns about their child being labeled as a special education student. One teacher describes special education services as educational "perks" the student receives if they qualify (L. Heikkinen, personal communication, January 18, 2017). If they qualify, an IEP is created for them. The IEP sets educational goals for the student and outlines the plan to meet those goals. Students can get one-on-one help in a certain area, or test accommodations so they are able show what they know without unnecessary stressors. Parents should know that special education is a temporary label. The student is evaluated every three years and can move out of the special education system, which is the goal for all professionals.

After the referral for special education evaluation, the parents are given some time to reflect on the meeting. The referral team will send an evaluation notice in the mail. This notice will fully describe the assessments that were discussed at the referral meeting and the evaluators the student will be in contact with during the assessments. The notice will also state why the student is being evaluated and how the results will be used ("Identifying and Evaluating Students", n.d.). Parents must give written consent of the evaluation to the school. The evaluation process cannot take place unless the school has parental written consent. Parents always have the choice to refuse the evaluation or stop the evaluation

at any point. After the evaluation process, the data is used to analyze the student's strengths and weaknesses. The student's needs in physical health, behavior, and intelligence will be discussed with parents. If the data shows that special services will benefit the student the IEP team is created.

The IEP team includes the general educator, special educator, parents, and a representative of the school. Some IEP teams have more personnel depending on the student's needs. These other professionals include occupational therapists, speech therapists, and physical therapists or service professionals. Parents and general educators play an important role as pillars on the IEP team, but all people on the IEP team have a responsibility to make sure students are receiving the services they need to be successful in their educational journey. This responsibility starts when the team decides what type of services are needed to meet educational goals. Depending on those services, and the setting of the services, student placement is identified.

Placement

This section of the essay will examine the impact of student centered learning in relation to how the student is supported in education. First, academic goals will be examined, and linked to services that students are provided. Finally, placement will be linked back to assessment with an explanation of progress monitoring. As mentioned above, goals are the driving force of the IEP. Specifically, IEP goals are called Measurable Annual Goals, MAG. The goals are annual because the IEP team will meet every year to see if the student has met them. Additionally, each of the goals needs to be S.M.A.R.T. This will allow the special educator to communicate what exactly is being developed and how it should be developed. Each of the long-term goals is broken down into short-term objectives. These objectives describe how the student will meet their yearly goals. The objectives will state what skill is being worked on, how the student is working on the skill, and whom the student is working with.

After goals and objectives are created based on the students' needs, services are provided according to the narrative goals. Depending on where the services are provided, placement is decided. Not all special education students need to leave the room for large portions of the day. Placement in resource rooms should not preclude what the student can accomplish in the general education classroom. Placement is called the Least Restrictive Environment, or LRE. The LRE for every student is the general education classroom. This is where students are with their peers and receiving every opportunity to learn the state standards. One aspect that illustrates the general education classroom as the LRE is the perceptiveness of students. Students are very perceptive when it comes to events in the classroom. They have a sense of what happens when certain students are pulled out and it creates differences between students. It is important that students do not view these differences as negative because that creates a bigger divide in the classroom community. In most cases, this is when the stereotype of special education students as lesser is demonstrated. It is not necessarily appropriate to discuss why students are being pulled out of the classroom because it is a private matter, but it is important to communicate the expectation of an understanding and empathetic environment for all students to learn in.

In contrast to the general education room as the LRE, the general education room is not the LRE when the student is restricted from learning because of their disability. For students with a specific learning disability in reading or math, the general education room can become restricting during independent work time. Independent work time is also difficult for students with low motivation or minimal time spent on task. This is when students could be considered to receive services that are not in

the general education room. General educators still need to do their best to make sure that their teaching strategies meet all their students' needs. Just because a student is on an IEP, doesn't mean that they can spend most of their day in a special education classroom. All placement services need to meet the federal setting definition on the student's IEP. The federal setting is defined by how many services, or how much time, a child is out of the room. The placement of the student must be in conjunction with the services the student is provided on their IEP. Placement is not decided before services and goals are agreed upon by the IEP team.

Federal Setting	Definition
1	Students who receive the majority of their special education and related services in a regular class. Includes children and youth with disabilities, receiving special education and related services OUTSIDE THE REGULAR CLASSROOM for less than 21 percent of the school day.
2	Students who receive special education and related services in a resource room. Includes children and youth with disabilities receiving special education and related services OUTSIDE THE REGULAR CLASSROOM for 60 percent or less of the school day and at least 21 percent of the school day.
3	Students who receive special education and related services in a separate class. Includes children and youth with disabilities receiving special education and related services OUTSIDE THE REGULAR CLASSROOM for more than 60 percent of the school day. DOES NOT include pupils who received education programs in public or private separate day or residential facilities.

<https://15.spedforms.org/iiip/childcountpopup.php>

As a result of LRE for the student being in general education classroom and with other professionals, communication plays a large part on how students will receive their services. Most students stay in the general education classroom for the large group lesson. These students would have federal setting 1 or 2 on their IEP. This allows them to hear the information presented in the classroom and learn from other students at their grade level. Depending on the services described on the IEP, the student can be pulled out of the general education classroom to work on school assignments with less time restriction or more individualized help. One special education teacher states that students in the special education classroom can vary (T. Fresvik, personal communication, January 18, 2017). The students' first responsibility is to work on assignments they received in the general education classroom. These assignments are usually paired with skill building activities. These activities are also worked on in general education classroom, this makes the skill transition from special education to general education fluid. The skill building practice develops independence in areas of difficulty. The goal of special education is to develop strategies that make learning in the general education classroom possible.

In contrast, the downfall of pull out in the general education classroom is the possibility of students missing other assignments or whole class experiences. Therefore, pull out is documented by stating why the student is being pulled out and what they will miss in the general education classroom. Many general educators make modifications by not requiring students to turn in missed activities because the skill was still worked on, only in a different manner. General educators are still responsible for progress monitoring the student, so this data is necessary (L. Heikkinen, personal communication, January 18, 2017). Another difficulty is scheduling pull out services. Special educators need to be in

their classroom when students come to receive their mandated services. Special educators usually have a variety of responsibilities and students on their caseload. If there is an emergency in another classroom and the special educator is responsible for that student, they might have to leave their classroom to handle the situation. Students that would normally receive services could return to the general education room without the services they are legally provided (E. Lundebrek, personal communication, January 14, 2017). This is a problem that occurred in a fifth-grade classroom. The general educator had to accommodate the students during the independent work time and ultimately all students missed out on skill building time.

As mentioned before, while these services are taking place in each classroom, either general or special, assessment is still used to progress monitor the student. The assessments are specific to the objectives for each goal stated on the IEP. Teachers are required to show students' progress on their goals and objectives the same amount that general education students get a progress report. One example of the communication between parents and educators are report cards. Some schools send out quarter reports, while others send out semester reports. These reports communicate student data just like in the referral stage of evaluation. Because the objectives are so specific as to how skills are being built to meet the goals, student data should parallel what is stated on the IEP.

This evidence of placement highlights that the IEP is very important for all teachers to use and refer to when deciding which educational practices and assessment should occur. Too often, IEPs are created and put away until the next annual IEP meeting. The IEP is a guide to help students receive the best education they can based on their needs. This holds teachers accountable for what they are doing in their classrooms to make sure that each student is working on skills that will help meet state standards. It is also important that the IEP is transparent enough so all pillars understand what is taking place in the classroom.

Communication

In professional settings, it is best to be transparent and communicate well with others to get what you need. When children attend school, there is a lot of communication that goes on to meet the students' needs for that year: communication from the Board of Education stating what standards need to be met for each school year, communication between grade level teachers making schedules, and communication between special educators and services providers. These are all important types of communication to ensure success for each student. It is just as important to communicate with parents. Communication can be used to help build on each pillar to support the student. This portion of the essay will evaluate the different types of communication that professionals can use with each other and parents. Because parents do not spend much face-to-face time in schools, several types of communication modes will be addressed. Finally, professional communication will be discussed to help solve common issues in the school setting. I believe that open communication between the pillars can be a solution to many of the issues that parents and professionals face in education.

Communication can happen through notes, technology, or face-to-face meetings. In each of these modes, it is important to look at how you are communicating with the recipient of the message. This is because communication involves two parties. The two parties consist of the sender and the receiver. The sender communicates the message, and the receiver decodes the message. The recipient must understand the message to efficiently communicate. As the recipient, it is important not to make

assumptions because then you are putting your own perspective on a message. By using transparent communication, the pillars of education can form a platform for the student to be supported.

When working in the same building, professionals have a better understanding of what the learning environment is like. As previously mentioned, parents do not always get to have this experience, and often have not had good educational experiences. Some parents do not value education because they did not have the opportunity to succeed in school. When they notice their child struggling, it may not appear out of the ordinary to them for students to struggle. It might not be known that extra supports are available for their child. Parents are the only pillar that will be present throughout the entirety of their education. To help parents and guardians make choices for those they are responsible for, we as professionals need to communicate with them in a way that shows genuine care for each student. We can do this by providing resource guides for parents at conferences. Resource guides are a confidential step that parents can take to support their own struggles or those of their children. Teachers can also meet parents in locations other than at school or talk on the phone. The neutral place may calm parents when speaking about personal matters.

As parents, it is important to take the communication seriously. A note home about a student's difficulties in class is a way to start the process of change and support for that student. It is not something teachers write because they don't like a child and want to punish them. This is a common criticism when parents are reading notes at home, especially when they involve behavior issues. Professionals need to establish open lines of communication before a misunderstanding occurs. If a parent understands the behavior management system that the teacher uses and the event that occurred, it is more likely that the student will receive the supports needed to redirect negative behavior. The same open communication for academic challenges and interventions is needed as well. Students who are receiving consistently bad scores on spelling tests may need to practice extra at home. If the extra practice is not being completed, there will continue to be a plateau in progress. Each of these situations calls for accessible and transparent communication.

There are many ways that teachers communicate with parents. The traditional way of communicating through folders and written notes still happens often, but technology has added a new outlook on parent communication. Almost all teachers send home a weekly update of what they have completed thus far, what the class is going to accomplish, and important classroom events. There is also communication through phone calls and emails. These personal modes of communication often provide a more narrative description about what is happening in the classroom. Added to emails, technology has allowed teachers to create a private web page that parents can utilize. The webpage can communicate a variety of topics in the classroom. It can show the weekly newsletter and the specific unit topics for each content area. Student homework can also be posted on the website in case students forget the assignment. Family events and resources can also be posted for parents to research and attend to support lifelong learning. Another valuable facet of a private classroom webpage is student work samples. Often children bring home great work and it is posted on the fridge, this virtual posting is another way students can take pride in the work they have completed. With consent from parents, teachers can post art work, summative projects, and fun class experiences. Parents can step into the classroom and build connections between school and home.

The most informative way to communicate with parents is face to face. Teachers and parents can effectively communicate concerns and celebrations in the classroom and at home. Teachers can

show evidence of academic achievement and instructional strategies can be modeled. Most of the time this happens during parent-teacher conferences, but it doesn't have to be limited to that. Some teachers use narrative report cards to help strengthen the connection between school and home. Narrative report cards allow parents to see what work the student has completed or learned, the child's strengths, and some weaknesses. Traditional progress reports don't always give all the information with just a score or a grade. If a parent notices their child struggling with their reading scores, they might wonder what the teacher is doing to help their student succeed. As discussed, there are a variety of reasons why a student can struggle and it is important to keep all pillars involved when supporting a student. For this reason, it is important to communicate positivity in narrative report cards by not solely focusing on student struggles (T. Fresvik, personal communication, January 18, 2017). No person feels welcome to communicate when only negative things are spoken about themselves or their children. Sometimes, the topic of conversation is negative, but the purpose of communicating between pillars is to create a positive outcome. While some students may struggle in an academic or behavioral area, each student has unique strengths and interests. This idea should be common throughout any type of communication about a student.

In addition to parental communication, communication between professionals is important in creating a supportive school environment for students. It is important that the students are put first to create a student-centered environment. This type of environment will lead to the most success. As professionals, we are there to help students learn content. Administration, teachers, and staff members should agree on the expectations they hold students too. Students ~~th~~strive in environments when they know expectations for their behavior and academic performance are the same across all environments. performance in Art class are the same expectations in their general education classroom.

Most professionals communicate through emails and quick chats in the halls because specialist time and special education instruction is on a tight schedule servicing many students. All professionals can agree that the time they spend with students is not enough. There is always more that can be learned and practiced to help the student in future learning. When scheduling does occur, it is important to value all types of teaching and content areas. This can be done by establishing lines of communication to all professionals that serve the student. By establishing open lines of communication, students see that all specialist and content areas are valued by their teacher. They also see respect modeled between professionals. This respectful communication shows genuine care for each student throughout their whole day, in addition to core classes.

Another way that professionals can communicate on a deeper level is through grade level meetings and professional learning communities, or PLCs. In these meetings, a sense for what takes place in each classroom is understood. It allows teachers to integrate successful behavior management skills, instructional strategies, and content between classrooms. A first-grade teacher discussed special educators coming to the grade level meetings with success. She states that it is beneficial to have all the special educators at meeting so all strategies can be discussed (L. Heikkinen, personal communication, January 18, 2017). This open type of communication allows professional opinions to be valued and used to create fluidity in the school environment. Needs from the educational pillars can be discussed to reach greater efficiency of meeting the students' needs. Since the students are the foundation that puts all pillars together, they should be the center of our professional goal making.

Referring back to the ability grouped math class; it would have been beneficial for the general education teacher and special education teacher to communicate the needs during professional meetings. Both teachers had tasks to complete during the scheduled math period and neither of them were succeeding in their learning goals. The general education teacher needed more specialized support in math, and the students were not getting the services they needed. Co-teaching is one way that they could have solved this problem. In a Duluth public school, one special education teacher finds success in coteaching during math (M. Gordon, personal communication, February 3, 2017). This allows him to work with several students at a differentiated level. There are multiple strategies to co-teaching: one assist/one teach, parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching. Each of these strategies has a different purpose depending on the needs in the classroom. Station teaching allows students to move around the room and receive small group instruction in a content area. Alternative teaching allows teachers to pull out low or high achieving students for specialized instruction. Parallel and team teaching support large group instruction with more interactive strategies. Although, co-teaching requires a lot of communication depending on the strategy. Co-teaching means the teachers share the responsibility of teaching content and all bases need to be covered. By using positive communication, teachers can apply different teaching strategies to meet more students' needs.

Furthermore, putting the students first while communicating learning goals is meant to be positive, but communication between professionals can be challenging. Some special educators feel that not enough is known about the special education process (C. Rourke, personal communication, January 17, 2017). General education teachers can become intimidated by the student's needs and services that are provided to help the student. By the same token, some general educators feel that special educators are spread too thin across their caseload to give each student the attention they need. Misconceptions about another professional's job happens in all settings. When this does occur, it is important to stay transparent about the goal of the communication. Professionals can forward emails to a school administrator to make sure communication is documented (E. Kersting-Peterson, personal communication, January 23, 2017). They can also use professional opinions from student support teams and other grade level teachers to help the student in need. The most important is that the students' needs are being put first, not the difficulties of communication between professionals.

Comment [Office1]: Not needed

There are more people than just the three educational pillars to help support students. All staff in the school are helpful in running a successful day. The recess and lunch aides, office workers, paraprofessionals, and other service professionals, play an important part of the school environment by holding students to school expectations and providing services throughout the day. Paraprofessionals have the most one-on-one interaction with students by managing behavior and academic goals. Both special educators and general educators are facilitators when a paraprofessional is in the room servicing students. All educators believe that paraprofessionals are a great help in assisting the students. But there can be feelings of inefficiency depending on the role of the paraprofessional. It may be hard for paraprofessionals to pull small groups depending on the content area and some paraprofessionals are more structured than others when working with students. This can be hard for general and special educators to fully utilize the paraprofessional in the classroom with a variety of student needs. Students can also find the difference in teaching styles a difficult adjustment when working with several professionals.

A special education teacher comments that there is stress in the general education classrooms when these issues occur and there is not enough time for professional communication due to schedules

(C. Rourke, personal communication, January 17, 2017). When this stress occurs in the general education room, finding a balance between what the general educator can do and what is needed from the special educator is a way the issue can be resolved ~~says a fifth-grade teacher~~ (E. Lundebræk, personal communication, January 14, 2017). Creating routines and similar expectations in the classroom is very successful. These roles hold every student and professional in the classroom accountable while learning activities are being facilitated. Communication between support professionals, general education teachers, and special educators to create their roles is a way that all professionals can stay on the same page during the creating of the classroom environment.

Open communication between all three pillars is important to student success. Open communication can be achieved by parents creating a learning environment that transfers content learned into the classroom to daily life, teachers mediating between content and learning, and special educators planning extra supports for the students to meet yearly academic goals. The maintenance of these three roles results in students receiving every support they need during development. ~~to an individual.~~

Comment [Office2]: not needed

Conclusion

In my four years of study at the University of Minnesota Duluth I have seen many classrooms in different schools with a variety of roles that facilitated learning. I have learned something new from each setting. I have learned that behavior management is a skill that will always come in handy, time management means endless checklists and deadlines, and sincere communication makes you a hero. Each classroom that I had an opportunity to be in had a different environment, and the students filled the environment to make a community of learners. The teachers utilized this environment and its community to make learning experiences for all students with ample supports.

In my first practicum at a majority low socioeconomic school, I had high expectations for students who were only seven to eight years old. My cooperating teacher expanded my ideas about education which is not a set of standards, but lifelong learning. She taught each student skills that will not only help them in the first grade, but help them to enjoy education. Her teaching strategies made learning something that students wanted to do, not something they had to do. She helped me see students as individual beings and each of those beings had an integral part of her classroom. From this experience, I learned that the students always come first when you are teaching. We must take the general skills and abilities that students are required to learn and weave them into our students' daily life. It is our job as educators to take students previous experiences in life and expand them.

In my next practicum at a residential special education school, my cooperating teacher taught me respect for service staff. These team members helped the students come to class even on their worst days. Instead of thinking about the professionals as taking time out of the students' day, she relied on them to help make the students' day go smoother. It was amazing to see the teaching staff, residential staff, and therapists all working together to provide the services that each of the students needed. It was great for me to take a step back and see these students, with amazing potential, who live away from their parents get the services they needed. Most parents were still in their child's life to some degree, but the students and staff really made a family. From my teacher, I learned that by working together we can achieve much more than we can do alone.

In my final practicum, I learned that students, no matter how old, still need reminders on how to coexist in a diverse and challenging environment. My teacher allowed me to build a community with her that built on each students' strengths to support their weaknesses. She also taught me how to help students be responsible for their own learning. I learned that teachers cannot force students to do their homework, or take notes on an important math concept, but we can encourage students to oversee their learning by creating opportunities that each student can be proud of. These opportunities will intrinsically motivate students to become lifelong learners.

Building on the idea of my licensure both as a special educator and general educator, my practicum experiences have allowed me to put on different hats of the educational world. These hats have changed my perspective of special and general education. I have taken a step back from my ideas of each profession and put the students first. When I changed my mind set to accommodate for each person in the student's education, student progress was gained. I believe this progress was achieved because of my ability to work with parents and other professionals to provide the supports that the student needed. It was almost as if I was a private investigator of the students' mind. I found all the necessary information from many sources to help the students' minds to connect with the skills and knowledge I had to offer them. My investigations led to student centered learning supports and effective teaching.

Between all my practicums one similarity was that they provided unique teaching strategies that depended on the child. The general education teacher, alone, couldn't always provide every support the students needed. Parents and other professionals were needed to lift the student to reaching their learning goals. Each of my experiences has shed a light on education that has made me want to create something better for students, parents, and professionals. I feel the best way to do that is through communication that creates empathy and understanding for each pillar of a student's educational career. If we can work with one another and utilize each strength the pillars have, rather than focusing on the weaknesses, every student will be more successful.

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