

Accommodating Exceptional Students:

The State of the WELS

by

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Abstract

In Matthew 19:14 Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (New International Version). The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) schools have been tasked with bringing little children to the Lord Jesus. What happens when we cannot complete this task? What happens when the lack of resources and teacher training hinders children from hearing the Word of God? This is a problem that WELS schools face when it comes to providing for students with special needs. Many schools are losing opportunities for evangelism. Parents are making the difficult choice to pull them from our schools because we do not have the resources to effectively educate their children. This study aims to analyze the state of the WELS regarding special education. Questions posed in this research include the percentage of special needs students in WELS schools, techniques used to accommodate these students, options for professional development, and reasons that schools are not able to provide for special needs students. In the final section of this study, I will be giving some recommendations on how the WELS can better support its schools based on my research and currently available resources.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Ever since the “Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” and the “No Child Left Behind Act” were put in place in the early 2000’s, having students with disabilities in the classroom has become a requirement and not an exception. By law, students with exceptionalities need to achieve certain standards and are often held to the same standards as “normal” students (Barfield, Hannigan-Downs, Lieberman, 1998). In recent years, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has seen an influx of students with disabilities enrolled in our primary and secondary schools. This has presented our synod with a unique challenge. Some of our schools have risen to meet this challenge, but many do not know how to begin helping these students reach their full potential.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of children that receive special needs services rose from 4.7 million to 6.7 million from 1990 to 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This statistic does not include children who have not been identified as having a special need. There are no known causes for this increase in children with exceptionalities. Some researchers say that learning disabilities are genetic, others say it is because of diet, and still others attribute disabilities with chemicals with which the public surrounds itself.

Despite the unknowns, educators everywhere are being asked to accommodate exceptional students and, unfortunately, because of finances and inadequate teacher training, many of these students are falling through the cracks. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) perform 1.2 to 2 grade levels behind their peers in elementary school, and this increases to 3.5 grade levels in high school (Ryan, Reid,

Epstein, 2004) if they do not receive any form of intervention. Children with autism struggle to make and grow relationships with peers because of poor language and communication difficulties (Alshurman, Alsreaa, 2015).

Teachers all over the country are finding themselves in an extremely diverse setting with requirements of increased expectancy for inclusion without the proper training and resources (Miller, 2005). This begs the question, what are WELS schools doing to meet the needs of these exceptional students? There are many research-based practices that have been found to be effective in the classroom. What methods are most effective in WELS classrooms? What kind of training are teachers receiving to aid these students at school? What improvements can be made to the curriculum to help these students reach their full potential?

Significance of the Proposed Study

WELS schools often report being unable to serve these students because they do not have the resources or the man-power to help these students be the best they can be. Because of that, the synod is losing evangelism opportunities. In order to begin this change, it is important to first understand what is currently being done for these students in the WELS. There is no organization within the WELS that oversees the different special education programs the schools have. Because each school is independent, they are responsible for creating a special needs curriculum that fits their needs, but they are not required to share their curriculum with anyone else. This study will seek to research

and classify the programs that are being used in the WELS for special education students.

The results may be useful for identifying different models of special education, evaluating what method would be best for their situation and, in conjunction, improve special needs services as a synod.

Research Questions

1. How many of our schools are offering special education services?
2. What methods are being used in our synod's schools to aid students with special needs?
3. What specialized training are our teachers receiving for special education?
4. Of the schools that do not have a special education program, what is keeping them from having one?
5. What improvements can be made to better support our synodical schools regarding special education?

Assumptions and Limitations of this Study

- It is assumed that the responses given by administrators and teachers in the surveys will be honest and truthful about their school's situation regarding special education methods and programs.
- A limitation of this research is the amount of surveys completed and submitted.

The accuracy of my research is dependant upon the number of surveys submitted,

the more surveys received the better the overall picture of synodical efforts towards special education will be.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

For this research study, the literature review categorizes the different instructional methods used in special education to compare the number of educators used to help a student in the method. For example, in direct instruction, there is learning happening between one teacher and one student. The focus is directly on the curriculum or task to be taught and the steps needed to learn that task. This method can be used in a mainstream classroom or in one-on-one tutoring situations. Co-teaching involves a general education teacher and a specialized teacher, such as a paraprofessional. Cooperative learning is a method that involves communication between students to achieve a goal. This is demonstrated in peer tutoring situations and small group work. Lastly, self-monitoring is a method teachers use to guide a student to check his or her own behavior through goal charts, checklists, and the like (Lerner & Johns, 2015).

Direct Instruction

Direct instruction is an instructional method used for the teaching of academic skills in a structured and controlled manner. In direct instruction, the skills the student is to learn are first analyzed, then carefully sequenced. The teacher then teaches each step in the sequence. The student practices and repeats each step in the sequence until the skill is mastered (Lerner & Johns, 2015). This method was initially used to teach young, at-risk

students in Project Follow Through, one of the country's largest educational studies (Kinder, Kubina, & Marchand-Martella, 2005).

Since then Direct Instruction has proven to be a very effective method for teaching students with special needs. In one study, 25 investigations where Direct Instruction was compared to another treatment were analyzed. Of the 25 studies analyzed, not one favored the comparison group to Direct Instruction. 53% of the studies significantly favored Direct Instruction with an average effect size of .84 (White, 1988). Direct instruction programs have been shown to be effective with a wide range of children with high and low-incidence disabilities from preschool to high school (Kinder, Kubina, & Marchand-Martella, 2005).

Co-Teaching

Co-teaching has been defined as “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single physical space” (Murawski, & Swanson, 2001). Implemented to provide support for increasing the inclusion of students with disabilities, co-teaching usually consists of one general education teacher and one special education teacher in a mainstream classroom (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Mcduffie, 2007). There are many different ways that two or more teachers can work together to accommodate students with disabilities. One teaching and one assisting, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching are all examples of ways teachers can cooperate in the classroom.

Many benefits have been shown to come from co-teaching both on the instructor side and student side. In interviews, general education teachers have discussed their growth in classroom management and curriculum adaptation when working with special education teachers. In turn, special education teachers cited an increased content knowledge. Students were able to receive additional attention in the classroom with subjects they were struggling with when more than one educator was present (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Mcduffie, 2007). Many studies, however, found it difficult to get accurate results on the effects of co-teaching. In one meta-analysis, the overall mean effect size was 0.40, meaning that co-teaching is moderately effective. The study went on to discuss the complications of getting results from a co-teaching situation. No co-teacher relationship is completely synchronized. Teachers have different philosophies and ways of doing things in the classroom. This complicates studies to the point where there are very few research journals out there that provide any worthwhile research (Murawski, & Swanson, 2001).

Cooperative Learning

In the past few years, Cooperative learning has grown into a massive field of strategies and programs to aid students in the classroom. Cooperative learning happens when groups of students work together to achieve common goals (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000). According to a meta-analysis, cooperative learning has proven effective for students in preschool all the way up to students in graduate programs, in all subjects

(Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000). Despite the small number of textbooks adapted for cooperative learning in the classroom, educators have developed a variety of ways to use cooperative learning with their students. Some modern methods of cooperative learning include Complex Instruction, Constructive Controversy, Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, Cooperative Structures, Group Investigation, Jigsaw, Learning Together, Student Teams Achievement Divisions, Teams-Games-Tournaments, and Team Assisted Individualization (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000).

There are hundreds of research studies that demonstrate that cooperative learning results in higher academic achievement than do competitive or individualistic efforts. Cooperative learning has also shown to be an effective strategy for promoting positive social behaviors, especially in special needs students. One study compared the social interactions between one unstructured group of students and one structured group. Results showed that the students in the structured group gave significantly more directions or help to other students than students in the unstructured group (Gilles & Ashman, 2000).

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring procedures in the classroom have been shown to improve student academic performance and is a crucial skill to develop as a child grows. The technique involves collaborating with the student to define the behavior to address, choose an intervention or system by which the student can keep track of their own behavior and

progress toward the behavioral goal, then implement it (PBIS, 2017). Many of the studies that have been conducted focus specifically on how self-monitoring aids with behavioral progress in students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Alsalamah, 2107).

One such study compared how self-monitoring of attention and self-monitoring of performance affected the academic achievement in a student with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Both self-monitoring of attention and self-monitoring of performance resulted in meaningful increases in academic achievement over baseline performance, these students demonstrated a higher level of practice in the self-monitoring of attention condition as compared to the self-monitoring of performance condition (Harris, Freidlander, Saddler, Frizzelle, & Graham, 2005). In another systematic review that analyzed nine different studies, results showed that with self-monitoring procedures in place students' engagement increased, on-task behavior increased in multiple subjects, and disruptive behavior decreased (Alsalamah, 2107).

Most Effective Method?

Over the past few centuries, many have debated what method is the best for special education. In 1819, in court case *McCulloch vs. Maryland*, "it was determined that the government's purpose should be served with as little imposition on the individual as possible" (Zigmond, 2003, pg 193). This was later interpreted to mean that children with special needs should be in as mainstream a setting as possible. This stance was supported into the 1970's. It then became the norm in schools to have students participate

in the classroom for part of the day and then spend the rest of the day with a special education teacher, or the “pull-out” method. In the 1980’s it became apparent that the “pull-out” method was failing and so the focus was shifted back to full inclusion in the classroom. There was extra pressure on the schools to have full inclusion because of the standardized tests and the requirement that students with disabilities must participate in testing. Research at the time showed that students with special needs do better on standardized tests when in a full inclusion classroom than students in traditional schools using the “pull-out” method (Zigmond, 2003).

Researchers in recent years have come to the conclusion that, “research evidence on the relative efficacy of one special education service delivery model over another is scarce, methodologically flawed, and inconclusive” (Zigmond, 2003, pg 194). Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. It is up to the student’s teacher and/or Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to determine which method is best for the child. This is what makes special education significant, that services are catered to the individual needs of each child.

Christian Educators for Special Education (CESE)

CESE is an organization within the WELS whose mission is to “open the door to learning for every child, especially children with special academic needs. Therefore, CESE provides Christ-centered educational support to WELS teachers and parents in an effort to help meet these needs.” CESE strives to support educators all over our synod by

providing information in digital format and in the meeting of educators during their annual convention. In the fall, CESE hosts a day-long educational conference that addresses topics designed to help teachers meet the needs of all their students. This past year, for example, their conference focused on childhood and adolescent depression and anxiety. This organization is the primary resource for WELS teachers who have students with special educational needs (www.cesewels.org).

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

The literature review covered the different methods that are currently being used in the education of exceptional students as well as what the synod has to offer as support for schools. In order to determine what methods are being used throughout the WELS, it was necessary to attempt to contact all the teachers, early childhood directors, and principals. An empirical study was performed in the form of surveys. This survey was sent out to 306 principals, 167 early childhood directors, and 2,043 teachers in order to gather both qualitative data and quantitative data. The following details characterize the empirical study.

Research Question(s)

1. How many of our schools are offering special education services?
2. What methods are being used to in our synodical schools to aid students with special needs?
3. What specialized training are teachers receiving for special education?

4. Of the schools that do not have a special education program, what is keeping them from having one?
5. What improvements can be made to better support our synodical schools regarding special education?

Research Design and Procedures

This descriptive study was developed to answer these research questions with both qualitative and quantitative data. A survey was developed to send out to the principals, early childhood directors, and teachers of the WELS. Each participant could only complete the survey once. While many questions on the survey were similar the principal and early childhood director survey and the teacher survey were different from each other. The principal/early childhood director survey focused on their special education program as a whole, while the teacher survey was specific to their classroom (see appendices A and B).

An electronic survey was chosen for its ease of use and cost efficiency. All of the participants teach at different grade levels and geographic areas across the United States. The electronic survey provided a way to reach as many educators as possible. All of the principals, early childhood directors, and teachers in the WELS were emailed the survey and given the opportunity to participate. The participants had the option of remaining anonymous or could include their name within their survey response.

A link to the survey was sent to its respective groups, one for principals and early childhood directors and one for teachers. The surveys were sent out at the end of November with an explanation of the purpose of the survey, why their response was

being sought, the date the survey was to be completed, as well as who to contact if the participants had questions. The survey responses were collected until January 31, 2018.

Population and Sample

Population.

The principal/early childhood director survey was sent to 306 principals and 167 early childhood directors in the Martin Luther College (MLC) database. These participants were identified by MLC's Network Services as belonging to the audience of elementary and high school principals, and early childhood directors in the WELS. The teacher survey was sent to 2,043 teachers in the MLC database. These participants were also identified by MLC's network services and belong to the audience of elementary and high school teachers.

Sample.

The sample information is summarized as follows:

Table 1

Summary of Survey Respondents

Total count:	2,516
Total Responses:	400
Principal count:	306
Principal responses:	86
Early Childhood Director count:	167
Early Childhood Director responses:	32
Teacher count:	2,043
Teacher responses:	282
Undeliverable emails:	368

Nonresponses:	2,116
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Of the 473 surveys sent out to principals and early childhood educators, 118 responded (24.95%). Of that 118, 32 (27.97%) surveys were from early childhood educators and 86 (72.88%) were from principals. Of the 2,043 surveys sent out to teachers, 282 (13.80%) responded. A response rate this small is not ideal for a descriptive study that wishes to evaluate the entire Synod. The following table compares the respondents across the synod by district. The total number of schools in the first column is the combination of early childhood centers, elementary schools and high schools according to the 2017-2018 Commission on Lutheran Education stats report.

Table 2

Comparison of Survey Respondents Across the WELS Districts

<i>District (Total # of Schools)</i>	Principals	Early Childhood Directors	Teachers	Schools Represented
<i>Arizona-California (43)</i>	10	2	15	15
<i>Dakota-Montana (16)</i>	3	1	8	6
<i>Michigan (78)</i>	7	4	24	25
<i>Minnesota (93)</i>	9	3	30	32
<i>Nebraska (46)</i>	4	0	12	11
<i>North Atlantic (7)</i>	0	0	1	1
<i>Northern Wisconsin (102)</i>	10	4	35	33

<i>Pacific Northwest (26)</i>	3	0	0	3
<i>South Atlantic (45)</i>	6	3	13	13
<i>South Central (14)</i>	0	0	2	2
<i>Southeastern Wisconsin (140)</i>	20	2	61	50
<i>Western Wisconsin (100)</i>	9	2	30	24
<i>Unidentified</i>	5	11	51	-
<i>Totals (475)</i>	86	32	282	215

While Table 1 shows a limited response number according to participants, Table 2 shows that 45.26% of all schools in the WELS are represented in this study. Some districts are better represented than others.

Instrumentation

The survey was created through Google Docs and a link to it was emailed to all of the participants. There were two variations written due to the two different groups that would be taking the survey (i.e. principals and early childhood directors, and teachers).

Principal/early childhood director survey (appendix A).

This survey included eleven multiple choice and short answer questions. The answers to these questions gathered both quantitative data and qualitative data about the participants' school or early childhood center as a whole regarding special education. The quantitative data dealt with the percentage of special needs students in each school and which schools were providing services to these students. The qualitative data helped to identify the different special education methods that are used throughout the school and,

if they were not providing services, what is keeping the school from doing so. The qualitative questions also gave participants the opportunity to talk about the blessings and challenges of educating those with special needs. These lists of blessings and challenges will help inform recommendations made later in the study.

Teacher survey (appendix B).

The teacher survey also contained eleven multiple choice and short answer questions that gathered data about each teacher's classroom and the methods they personally use to educate students with special needs. The quantitative data gathered information on the percentage of students with special needs in a teacher's classroom and the number of teachers that have received specialized training in the last five years for special education whether it was through a graduate course, conference, etc. The qualitative data helped gather research on what methods are being used to aid students with special needs, if their students receive aid from outside sources, and, if the teachers are not using specialized methods in the classroom, why not. The survey also gave the teachers the opportunity to share the blessings and challenges of teaching students with special needs. These lists of blessings and challenges will help inform recommendations made later in the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

The final submissions were gathered at the end of January 2018. The responses for the principal/early childhood director survey was first divided by occupation, then by the synodical district each of the participants' schools were established, and lastly by the percentage of special needs students under the school's care. The teachers' responses were also divided by synodical district and then by percentage of special needs students

in their classroom. Quantitative data was organized into figures to be analyzed and qualitative data was coded depending on the responses given to each question on the survey. This allowed themes to emerge so the researcher could analyze, theorize and come to a conclusion about each research question in this study.

Limitations

The research for this study is dependent on the number of surveys that are received to gather information. The more surveys that are received the more accurate the results are. Of the 473 surveys sent out to principals and early childhood educators, 118 responded (24.95%). Of that 118, 32 (27.97%) surveys were from early childhood educators and 86 (72.88%) were from principals. Of the 2,043 surveys sent out to teachers, 282 (13.80%) responded.

Survey responses are not only dependent on participants taking the time to complete the survey, but also on the participants receiving the email with the link to the survey. After the initial e-mails were sent out, 368 of them were sent back due to a failure in the system. This could have been because the email address did not exist or that the email was not typed correctly. Other reasons for participants not receiving emails could be that the email was sent to junk mail, blocked, or deleted among other reasons.

Summary

An electronic survey was sent out via email to all principals, early childhood educators and teachers in the WELS synod. Of the 2,516 participants emailed, 400 responded with information for this study. While the limited number of responses made the data easy to organize and analyze a larger number of responses would have been appreciated for a better evaluation of the synods efforts regarding special education.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

According to the latest Commission on Lutheran Education report, there are 3,385 students who have been identified as special needs being served in WELS schools. These students are being served through the public school system, private organizations, instruction modification and for physical disabilities. The breakdown of these services is shown in Figure one.

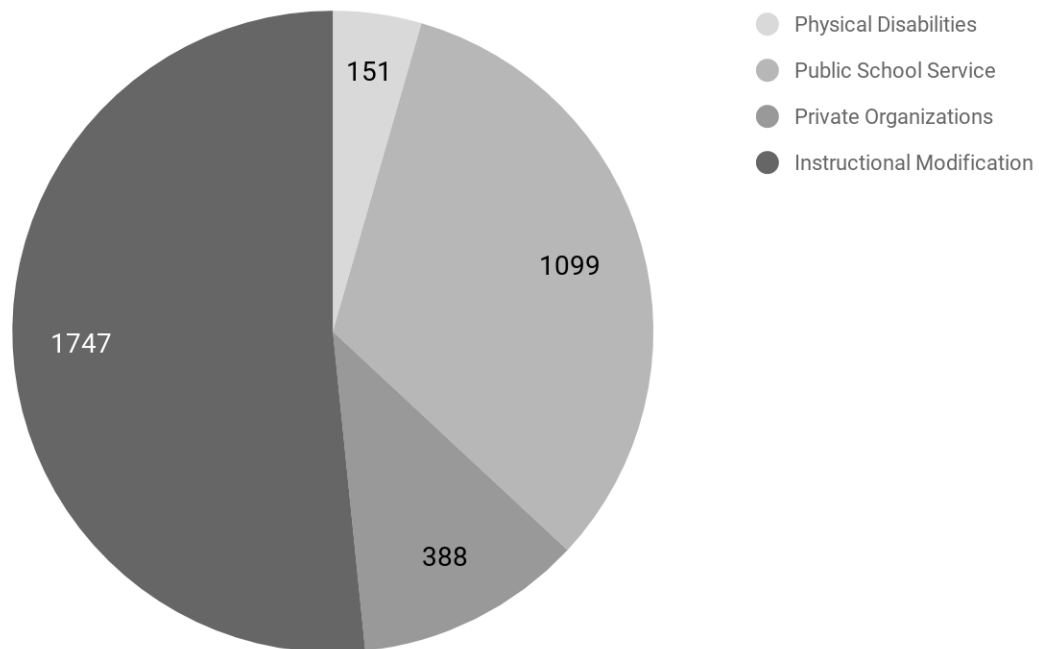


Figure 1: Number of students in special needs services. Number of special needs students in the WELS who are being treated for physical disabilities, being treated by public schools, private organizations, or instructional modification.

The data analysis for the results of the survey will be broken down by the two different surveys that were distributed. In each section the percentage of students being served in each school/classroom will be identified. Descriptive research on the benefits and challenges of serving students with special needs is also addressed as well as what the

schools are doing to help prepare its teachers for educating students with special needs. Unique stats will be highlighted and the district identified.

Data Analysis

Overall results of the principal/early childhood director survey.

There were 118 surveys collected from principals and early childhood directors around the synod. Figure two below gives the percentages of the 118 responses that reported having 0%, 1-2%, 3-4%, 5-6% or more than 6% of their student body identified as special needs. The largest percentage reported having only 1-2% of their schools' population being students with special needs. Figure three will show what each of these schools are doing to serve students with special needs.

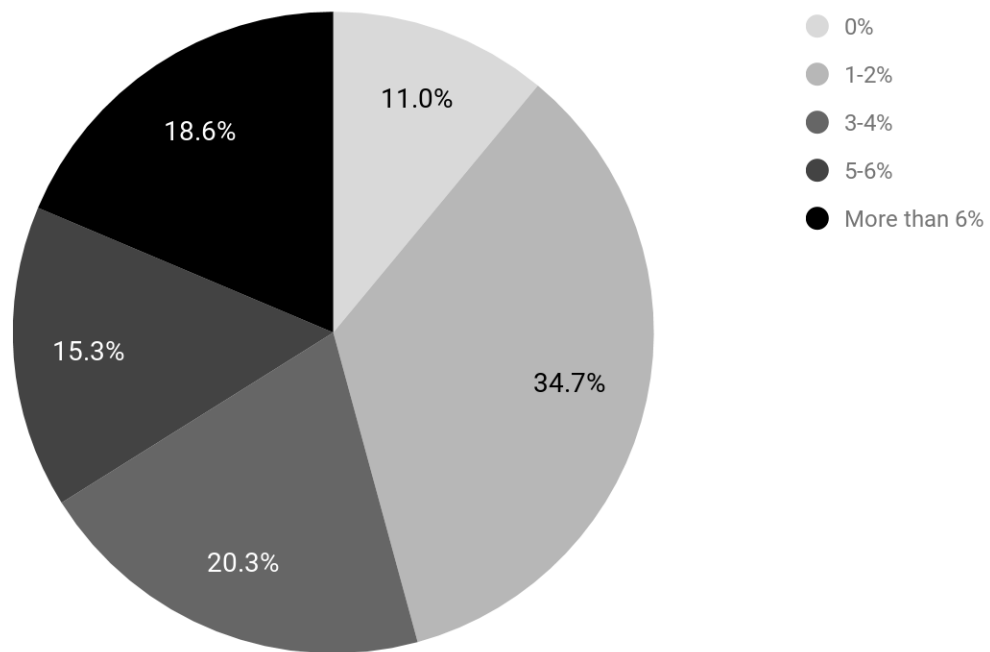


Figure 2: Percentage of school population identified as special needs. The figure shows what percentage of participants reported having 0%, 1-2%, 3-4%, 5-6% or more than 6% of students identified as special needs in the schools' total population.

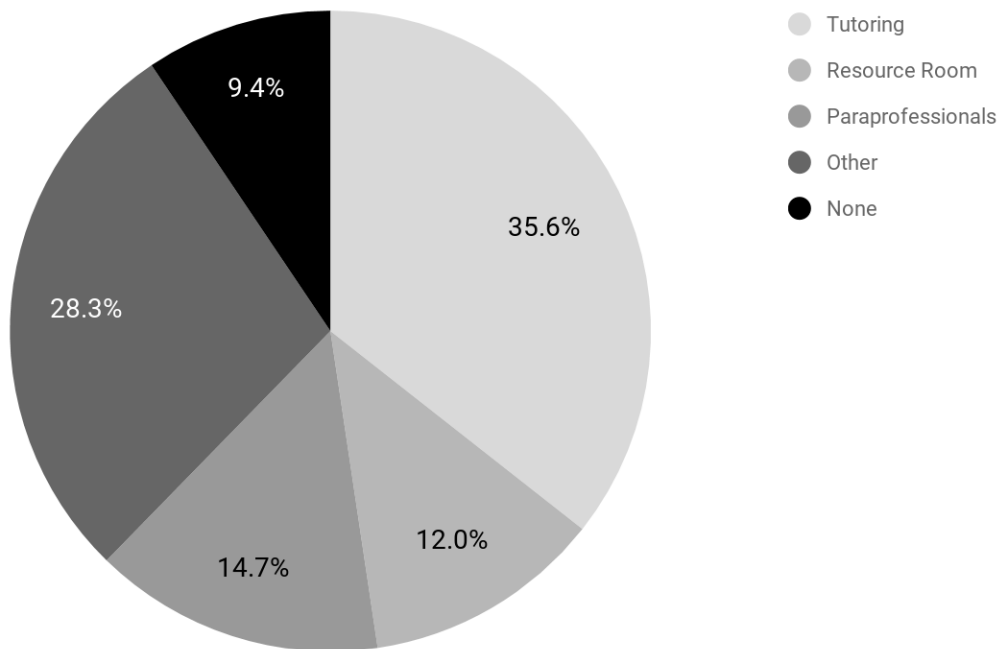


Figure 3: Percentage of services used for special needs students. The figure shows what services are being used and the percentage of participants using these services in their schools.

A majority of the participants reported using some form of tutoring to help their students with special needs. These tutors can be paid or volunteer. Fifty of the participants reported using two or more of the services in figure three. The participants that reported “Other” shared alternative methods that they use for their students. These alternative methods ranged from using public school services, direct instruction or modified assignments, specific programs offered in the community (Help Me Grow, YoungStar, etc.), and some schools are able to provide a trained special education teacher.

Participants that reported they don’t use any services for students with special needs totaled 9.4% of the survey results. Ten of the participants that reported this did so because their school population does not have any special needs students. The

participants that reported using no services but had students with special needs stated that their special needs students are served outside of school hours at the local public school.

Because of the services schools have been able to provide the principals and early childhood directors have seen many benefits both academically and socially. Of the participants reported 50% saw an increase on an academic level for their students. Reading and math were the two subjects where the participants saw the most growth. A principal from the Arizona-California district stated, "Students have continued to climb on grade level, in standardized tests, by 1.5 grade levels on average." This shows that special education students benefit from services not only in classroom learning, but can succeed on standardized tests as well.

Participants also saw social benefits of special needs services. Students were more accepted by their peers. Because special needs students did better academically, they had more confidence in themselves. Many students were able to function in the mainstream classroom because of the services being provided. A principal from the Dakota-Montana district reported, "Their accommodations and extra tutoring have allowed them to adequately function with the class as a whole, which we value."

A school's special education support influences parent decisions about enrollment. One parent who is a teacher at one of the WELS schools and has a child with Down Syndrome commented,

"...she is unable to attend our WELS elementary school because we currently have no special needs program in place at all. The overall feel of the administration and board here is that we can't afford to bring someone on staff to administer to students with special needs. I don't think they realize that we

actually have quite a few students with special needs in our schools already, and these students are struggling. My daughter currently attends the local public school. She is in a fully inclusive first grade classroom, and she has a full time aid to help her throughout the day. My husband and I are happy with her schooling at this time, but we would love, love, love for her to be able to go to our Lutheran elementary school.”

This sentiment is shared by many parents across the synod who cannot send their children to the local WELS school, but wish they could.

Unfortunately, enrolling a student with special needs is easier said than done. There are many challenges that come with providing special needs services. Of the participants from the principal/early childhood education survey, 49.15% reported that their teachers lack the knowledge to effectively help students with special needs or that there is simply a lack of teachers who are trained in special education. 43.22% stated that financial challenges make it difficult to have special education programs in their school. Time constraints were a challenge for 21.19% of the participants’ schools. Either teachers could not take the time out of the regular class day to give extra aid or the teachers did not have time in their schedule to acquire the knowledge to help these students. Lack of knowledge, lack of teachers trained in special education, financial challenges, and time seem to be the biggest roadblocks for WELS schools when it comes to serving students with special needs.

In order to combat these challenges, the participants were asked how they help teachers prepare themselves for teaching special needs children. Providing funds for furthering education was the top response at 51.69%. The range of financial aid offered to

teachers across the synod was anywhere from \$300 per year per teacher up to 100% of continuing education costs covered. Of survey participants, 5.08% specifically reported receiving Title I funds, Title II funds, or funds from the public school in order to encourage educators to further their education.

Of the participants, 29.66% reported attending conferences or workshops to further the education of their teachers. Of these responses, 37.14% specifically reported attending the Christian Educators for Special Education conference or other special education workshops. This shows that, while there is a strong support for the general continuing of education, only 11% of the participants reported furthering their knowledge specifically in the field of special education in the last five years. Many teachers take the opportunity to further their knowledge in other educational fields.

Overall results of the teacher survey.

There were 282 teacher surveys collected from teachers around the synod for this study. Figure four shows the percentage of teachers that reported having 0%, 1-2%, 3-4%, 5-6% or more than 6% of students identified as special needs in their classroom. The largest percentage was 1-2%, followed by 0%, and more than 6% closely behind. Figure five shows what method(s) each teacher is using in their classroom to help special needs students.

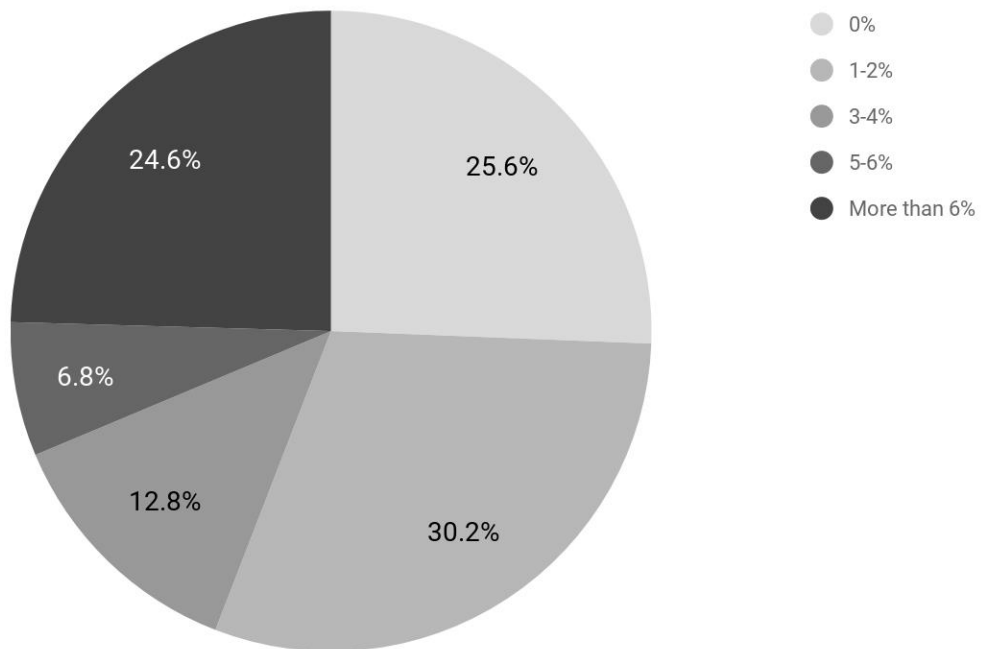


Figure 4: Percentage of classroom population identified as special needs. The figure shows what percentage of participants reported having 0%, 1-2%, 3-4%, 5-6% or more than 6% of students identified as special needs in their classrooms' total population.

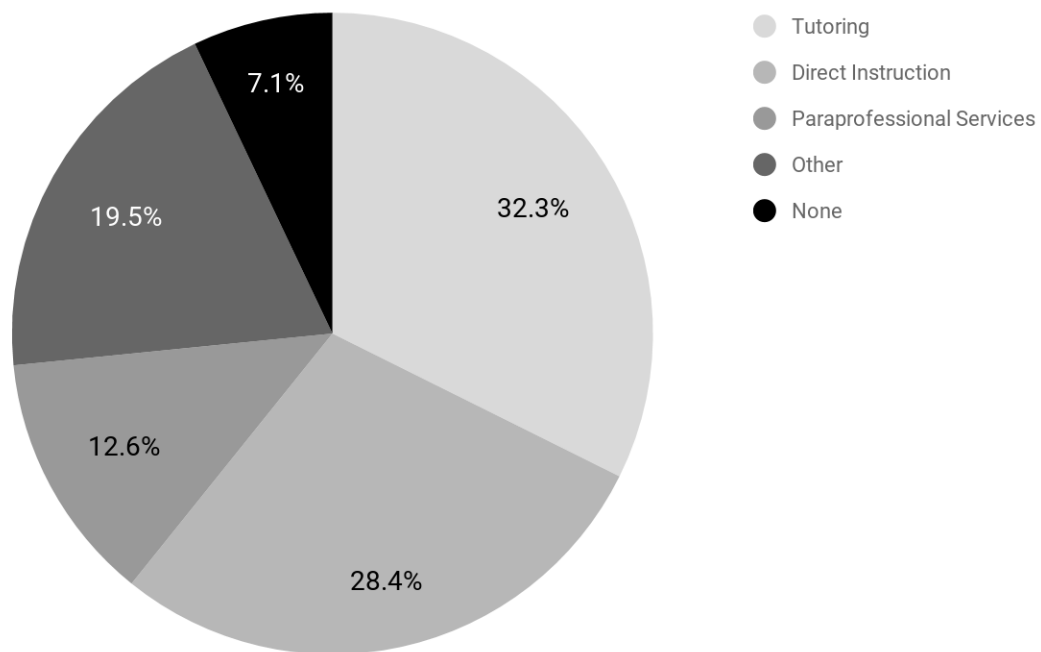


Figure 5: Percentage of services used for special needs students in the classroom. The figure shows what services are being used and the percentage of participants using these services in their classrooms.

The most popular method that was used by the participants was tutoring followed by direct instruction. 59.92% of participants reported using two or more of these methods in their classroom. “Other” was reported by 19.5% of the participants. Other methods that were mentioned by these teachers included assignment modification, reading directions orally, remedial classes with a special education teacher, using manipulatives during the lessons, and technology designed to help students function in the classroom (i.e. Google Voice Typing and iPad Apps for reading or speaking).

The majority of teachers who responded to the survey reported that the best methods included one-on-one interaction with special needs students. This can be done either with the student’s teacher or with a tutor. Small group work was also found to be very effective. Other successful methods have included manipulatives or assignment modifications.

Of the participants, 7.1% reported that they were not using any special education methods in their classroom. 78.94% of the 7.1% reported that they have no special needs students in their classrooms. Of the teachers that did have special needs students in their classrooms, the reasons that they did not use special education methods were lack of funds, lack of time, and lack of knowledge.

Participants who have used the methods have seen their students grow academically and socially. 42.55% of participants saw their special needs students progress academically. Some specific improvements that were listed were improvements on standardized test scores, being able to mainstream the students, improvements in the subjects of math and reading, and the special needs students becoming more independent. Social improvements were reported by 15.24% of the participants. Because they were

able to function in the classroom, special needs students were able to spend more time with their peers, and, therefore, build stronger relationships. Teachers also saw the students' peers behave in a more empathetic manner towards the student.

One surprising response that came from the surveys was the teacher's growth in understanding of students with special needs. One teacher from the Minnesota district stated,

...it [working with special needs students in the classroom] has opened my eyes to who really qualifies for special education. It has also helped me understand how to better meet the needs of a diversified group of students. It's given me a better understanding of assessment and how it works so I am more patient with the process. I am better equipped to help students.

Another teacher from the Northern Wisconsin district said,

My patience and understanding for these students has greatly increased and therefore my classroom environment is a lot less threatening to them and if they feel comfortable and can take away the anxiety card, much more can be learned and accomplished.

8.87% of the participants shared these sentiments towards their growth in accommodating special needs students in the classroom.

Teachers also saw improvement among the other students in the classroom. 9.57% saw academic improvement from the other students. Reasons for this were that students were able to have extra practice because of the needs of the student who was struggling and some teachers ended up using methods that would normally be used for a special needs child as a regular classroom method. This gave students the opportunity to

view a problem a different way, giving them more options for successfully solving the problem.

Just as many of the teachers shared the benefits of helping students with special needs, they also shared the challenges. The highest reported challenge was lack of time. Of the participants, 25.89% indicated that they did not have enough time in the day to help children with special needs. Many of the teachers indicated that they had too many students to focus on just one, or they taught in multi-grade classrooms. Lack of knowledge and resources was the next challenge with 21.63% of the teachers reporting they have this issue. Of the participants, 42.2% stated that they had not attended a special education workshop, class, seminar, or conference in the last five years. Knowledge about the special education field is constantly changing. It is very important to stay up to date on the latest methods in order to help students with special needs succeed. Lack of support from parents, teacher peers, and administration was the third highest recorded challenge at 13.83%. Several of the participants reported a combination of the challenges above that they face in the classroom.

25.89% of the teachers that took the survey noted many aspects of special education teaching that were just generally frustrating. These frustrations ranged from student motivation, teacher patience, balancing “normal” students with special needs students, and dealing with students who have emotional or behavioral disorders. One teacher stated, “It feels like they are not able to learn many days, and that I am doing more harm than help. The bad days seem to far outweigh the good ones. Immaturity is very challenging with my age group and many of the problems I see is with self-control and behavioral management.”

Another teacher voiced this concern,

They require so much more attention during class that it takes away from the other students in the class. Yes, that one student needs time and attention in different ways, but it makes me very conflicted knowing that I am then taking time and attention away from 15+ other students who also need those things. I am responsible for every student in my classroom so I cannot spend all of my time focusing only on the special needs students. It's not that I don't want to, but it feels impossible to balance the needs of all my students, especially when the majority of them fall into the "traditional average/high average learner" category.

Because of challenges like these, schools are unable to enroll students with special needs even though these Christian schools offer the most important lesson, God's love for us.

General Consensus

The greatest area of agreement between the principal/early childhood survey and the teacher survey is that synod teachers lack the knowledge and resources to appropriately educate students with special needs. Only 13 participants of the principal/early childhood survey indicated that members of their faculty had taken a special education course in the last five years. While the teacher survey revealed that 119 teachers had furthered their knowledge in special education, almost 50% is too great a percentage for the number of special education students enrolled in WELS schools. Recommendations for this challenge as well as lack of time will be given later in this thesis.

Research Questions

1. How many of our schools are offering special education services?

According to the principal/early childhood director survey, 90.6% of the 118 participants reported offering special education services in their schools. Of the teacher survey, 92.9% of the 282 participants offered special education services in their classrooms. These teachers represent over 200 synodical schools across the country.

2. What methods are being used to in our synodical schools to aid students with special needs?

Methods used in WELS schools range from direct instruction, tutoring, paraprofessional services and/or services from the local public district.

3. What specialized training are teachers receiving for special education?

Teachers are encouraged to continue their education through courses, conferences, workshops, etc. However, they are not required to enroll in continuing education programs that are specifically focused in special education. While there are opportunities, teachers are choosing to better themselves in other areas of education.

4. Of the schools that do not have a special education program, what is keeping them from having one?

Some schools do not need to have a special education program because they do not have special needs students currently enrolled in their school. Of the schools that do have special need students, the top two reasons they do not currently have a special needs program is lack of manpower and funds.

5. What improvements can be made to better support our synodical schools regarding special education?

Some of the best improvements that can be made in the schools are giving the teachers more time to prepare course work and aid students with special needs as well as strongly encouraging teachers to gain knowledge in the field of special education by enrolling in courses that focus in this area.

Summary

Of all of the participants in both surveys, time and lack of knowledge seem to be challenges that are felt both at the administrative and educator levels. And while many teachers are taking the opportunity to educate themselves to better help special needs students, many are choosing to better themselves in other areas. Despite the challenges, the participants of the surveys also indicated that they saw progress in both academic and social areas for all of their students.

Chapter V: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

So far the purpose of the study, the literature behind special education methods, the methodology of the study, and the results of the surveys have been discussed. In this last chapter, conclusions will be made about the state of the WELS regarding special education. Recommendations will also be made as to how the synod can improve to better accommodate students with special needs.

Summary of Results

It is clear that the majority of WELS schools are struggling to help students with special needs. According to the surveys that were administered, the two major culprits of this struggle are lack of time and lack of knowledge. If the synodical schools were to address these two issues, special education in the WELS would vastly improve.

Lack of time.

As previously stated, 25.89% of participants indicated that they did not have enough time in the day to help children with special needs. Many of the teachers indicated that they had too many students to focus on one or they taught in multi-grade classrooms. There was one comment in particular about teachers' involvement in extracurricular activities that raised some questions, "Time is the biggest obstacle. We have so many curricular and extracurricular duties that we are pinched for time. With a heart of service, you'd like to be able to give each struggling student all of the time that they need, but the reality is that there are competing commitments." There were a few other participants that shared this sentiment.

Looking at the mission statements of the schools these participants came from, the statements all focused on creating a Christ-centered education for all students. Many synodical schools have similar mission statements that are centered around this idea. When it comes to a Christ-centered education, how should a school prioritize the way it uses its teachers' time? Certainly, a child's spiritual well-being is number one on the list. What comes after that should be the child's academic education and then development in extra-curricular activities. If teachers are finding that they do not have enough time to help students with special needs because of extracurricular activities, isn't that going against the schools mission statement?

One other element that eats up a teacher's time is the number of students in the classroom. Going back to a school's mission statement, many synodical schools emphasize having a Christ-centered education for all students. While it is the wish of all Christians to bring as many people to know God's love, when operating a school it is impossible to effectively care for a child's spiritual and academic needs when there are too many students in the classroom. Here is where a school's administration needs to draw the line. What can our teachers handle in order to effectively preach and teach as many students as they can? What needs to be regulated?

The most important thing a teacher should be focusing their time on in a Christian school is their student's spiritual growth and then their academic growth. For some students this will mean using extra time to prepare for their needs. This extra time may need to come from cutting back on extra-curriculars or capping classroom numbers. Several recommendations will be given later for WELS schools to consider when addressing these matters.

Lack of knowledge.

Lack of knowledge and resources was another primary challenge in the WELS schools with 21.63% of the teachers reporting they have this issue. Even though this is one of the main challenges our WELS schools are facing, 42.2% of the participants stated that they had not attended a special education workshop, class, seminar, or conference in the last five years. Of the 21.63% of teachers that reported having lack of knowledge and resources, 55.73% of them reported not taking any courses, workshops, or seminars to further their special education growth in the last five years.

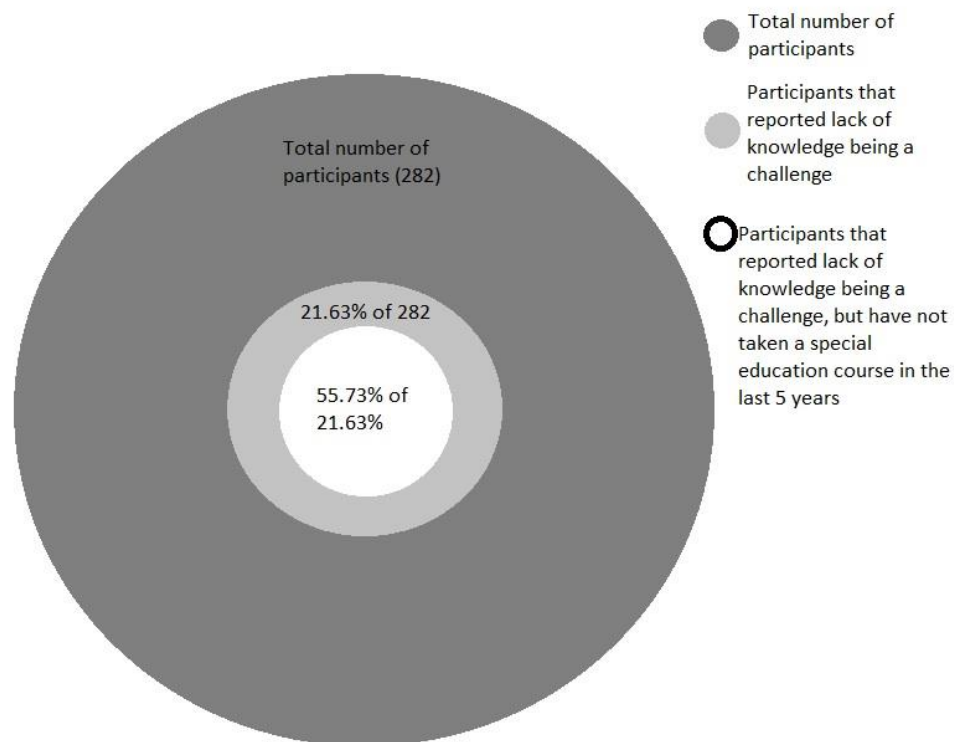


Figure 6: Percentage of teacher participants that reported lack of knowledge as a challenge and have not taken a special needs course. The figure shows the total percentage of the 282 participants that reported that lack of knowledge was a challenge to meeting the needs of special needs children. The figure also shows that over half of that percentage also reported not taking a special education course in the last five years.

This statistic begs the question, what is keeping teachers from building their knowledge in the field of special education?

Many might say that lack of funds keeps teachers from attending professional growth opportunities that focus on special education. However, none of the participants from the principal/early childhood educator survey reported having no funds for professional growth opportunities for their teachers. As stated previously, 51.69% of participants from this survey reported covering at least \$300 dollars for their teachers to participate in professional growth opportunities.

One principal from the Minnesota district stated, “The congregation provides \$700/Teacher/Year for continuing education. Teachers have the freedom to choose how to use these funds.” If teachers choose their courses based on what they feel they would benefit by, encouraging is all administration is able to do. Teachers may choose what they would like to continue their education in whether it be reading instruction, classroom dynamics, classroom management, etc. Continuing education in special education is not a necessity. Therefore, unless a teacher deems it worthy of their time, they do not choose to gain knowledge in the special education field. Since so many synodical teachers are reporting that lack of knowledge and resources are an issue to effectively serving students with special needs, one solution is to choose to professionally develop in the field of special needs in order to benefit these special students.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that many educators reported having a lack of time, knowledge, and resources, one must wonder about the validity of these reasons. While lack of time, knowledge, and resources are real challenges, they might also be used as excuses to avoid teaching students with special needs. As stated previously, 25.89% of teachers reported that teaching students with special needs was frustrating because of student motivation,

teacher's patience, balancing "normal" students with special needs students, and dealing with students who have emotional or behavioral disorders. It has been shown that although the lack of knowledge is one of the biggest problems to teaching special needs students in the synod, many teachers have not made the effort to attend any classes, workshops, or seminars that focus on special needs in the last five years. These challenges would be difficult for even the most experienced of teachers.

It is obvious that when it comes to educating those with special needs, certain priorities must be established in order to provide teachers with enough time to prepare and aid students with special needs as well as further their knowledge in the special education field. These are challenges that the majority of synodical teachers seem to face. These challenges will not be absolved until administration and teachers can agree on alternative methods for educating these children and foster a more positive attitude when it comes to helping students with special needs.

Recommendations

Lack of time.

Recommendation One: Teachers should use peer tutoring to give students the one-on-one time they need.

Lack of time was reported as a challenge to teaching students with special needs by 24.5% of all of the participants from both surveys. When a teacher cannot give on-on-one time to a student, what is the next best alternative? Ideally, a school would have a special needs teacher whose sole focus is helping special needs students in the classroom and providing strategies for the teacher to use. Unfortunately, as it was brought out in research of the WELS synod, there are not many teachers who are available that are

trained in special education. Martin Luther College, the WELS teacher training school, is currently addressing this shortage by requiring all students to take special education courses, as well as offering a special education major and a Master's in Education with a special education emphasis. If teachers wish, they may also take online special education courses through the college.

Another option would be to have volunteers come in to the school and work with the students one-on-one. While volunteers can be a God-send, there are complications that can arise from having volunteers come from the outside. First, volunteers may not be able to be available as consistently as a special student needs them to be. If a student needs help daily, it is difficult to have someone volunteer that is able to consistently be there for them every day of the school week. Another obstacle is that the volunteer does not usually observe how the teacher is teaching a specific concept. Because this is the case, the volunteer may end up teaching the student a different way than the teacher wants the concept taught. This may cause the student to become more confused.

The best alternative to teacher one-on-one time is peer one-on-one time. In a meta-analytic review of 26 single-case research experiments, researchers found that peer mentoring is an effective teaching method to improve academic achievement regardless of the amount of peer mentoring, grade level, or disability. The 26 research experiments tested a total of 938 students in grades 1-12. Researchers noted that vocabulary yielded the largest effect, followed by math, then reading with a large to moderate effect size, spelling, and social studies the smallest effect size. Of the 26 single-case research experiments most of them reported on students with special needs. This meta-analytic

review contained data that supported the use of peer mentoring in all grade levels, levels of ability, and most—if not all—subjects (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013).

When implemented correctly, peer mentoring does more than help one student achieve; it benefits the educator and the classroom as a whole. Teacher benefits of peer mentoring include: increased opportunity for individualized instruction; increased facilitation of inclusion/mainstreaming; opportunity to monitor student performance individually; and opportunities to reduce inappropriate behaviors (Miller, 2005). Peer mentoring helps create a positive and inclusive classroom environment by: providing better teacher-student ratios; increasing student engagement (15%-35% with teacher only to 46%-75% with peer mentor); providing more opportunities for students to respond socially and academically; providing the opportunity for immediate feedback and error correction; increasing opportunities for collaboration; and improving the level of assistance and support for all students (Miller, 2005). Peer mentoring benefits more than the student with disabilities, it spreads to benefit teachers and the classroom environment.

Recommendation Two: Lutheran schools that enroll special needs students need to provide additional planning time for classroom teachers.

“Most students with special needs require additional adjustment during the teaching period, and this adjustment can take time away from meeting curriculum outcomes” (Horne, Timmons, & Adamowycz, 2008). This conclusion came after a study where 60% of the teachers surveyed indicated that more time was needed in order to effectively teach in an inclusive environment. This study not only pointed out that teachers need additional planning time, but also additional classroom time in order to accommodate students with special needs. Adapting lesson plans are not the only thing that

takes additional time from teachers, but also adjusted testing time, adjusted instruction time, and adjusted classroom management time to name a few. Time is essential in operating an effective classroom where inclusion is necessary. If administration cannot provide this extra time then they need to limit the number of special needs students in the classroom.

A study from 1997 suggested that a teacher should have no more than three special needs students in the classroom at one time in order to teach effectively in a general education classroom (Norrell, 1997). Obviously, this is not a reasonable suggestion due to the fact that the number of students being served under the Disabilities Education Act has increased by almost 2 million students since 1991 and that's only students with documented IEPs (NCES, 2016). Despite this fact, there is currently no federal legislation that determines the appropriate special needs student to teacher ratio in a general education classroom. This calculation is left up to the states' government to decide. In Minnesota, the teacher caseload/workload rule uses "student contact minutes, evaluation and re-evaluation time, indirect services, IEPs managed, travel time and other services required" ("Minnesota's New Special Education Caseload/Workload Rule"). Are elements like these being taken into account when synodical schools contemplate whether or not to allow a student with special needs into one of their classrooms? If not, why not and what qualifiers are being used when considering whether or not a special needs student should be enrolled?

Recommendation Three: If teachers are not able to find time to help special needs students due to classroom numbers, extracurricular activities, or another obstacle, the

administration needs to provide personnel to help meet the needs of their special education students.

The role of a teacher in the synodical schools can be more than just educating children in the classroom. Often, the teacher is called to fulfill other duties such as, coaching a sport, playing organ in church, being the head of a department, etc. Having a student with special needs in the classroom adds to the already full workload a teacher has. Unless, the administration is able to free up some of the teacher's time to accommodate for special needs students, they need to provide the teacher with additional aids in order for the classroom to run efficiently for all students. These personnel can range from volunteer parents, educational aids, special education teachers, etc.

Lack of knowledge.

How the synod can help support students with special needs as a whole.

Recommendation: The Synod should be supporting groups like the CESE financially so that they can gather resources for teachers to use with their special needs students.

One of the greatest blessings that come from being able to provide special needs services is the opportunity to continue sharing the Word with these children. If services cannot be provided parents feel that it is in their child's best academic interest to educate them in the local public school. There are times when parents don't even have the option to send their children to the local WELS school because the school does not have the resources to help their child.

Some of the biggest improvements to special education can be made through the efforts of the Christian Educators for Special Education organization. This group has the

potential to greatly impact the way the synod schools deal with students with special needs. Currently, the organization only hosts an annual special education conference. Most of their funding comes from this conference, but the majority of the funds go into investing for the following year's conference. The organization is working to compile a database of teachers with special education training throughout the WELS. This database would serve as a support web for general education teachers to speak with someone about a special needs student they are working with and for the correspondent in turn to offer resources that have worked for them in the past. Another objective that the CESE would like to accomplish is collect special education resources such as links to materials available and articles about various special needs topics. These different supports could prove invaluable to the growth of special education programs across the WELS (J. Mose, personal communication, March 15, 2018).

As of now, the organization is working through volunteers to accomplish their goals. While this is cost effective, many of our teachers and students are suffering from the lack of aid available for teachers in the synod. It would be in the Synod's best interest to support the CESE financially in order to complete their work in a reasonable amount of time. Considering the number of identified special needs students in synod schools is over 3,000 this should be made a priority not only for the teachers' sake but also the spiritual needs of the children enrolled in synod schools.

How schools can improve teacher knowledge in the field of Special Needs.

Recommendation One: Schools/Classrooms that have students with special needs, especially those over the 6% mark, should make a concentrated effort to further their

knowledge of special needs methods through conferences, classes, or professional learning communities.

The need for teachers to have knowledge and the ability to teach students with special needs is greater than it ever has been. Has teacher instruction risen to meet the needs of the growing field of special education? According to the participants in the surveys, they have not. One study calculated that, on average, a student training to be a general education teacher takes 1.5 classes that are focused on special education. The average special education teacher takes about 11 courses to prepare to educate students with special needs (Cameron & Cook, 2007). As seen in the survey results above, not enough teachers are enrolling in special education classes, workshops, or seminars to meet the needs of their students.

As previously mentioned, Martin Luther College has recently added a special education major to its education programs and also has this emphasis in its graduate program. Special education courses are also available to take as continuing education courses. Administrators need to make an effort to have all or some of their teachers enroll in these continuing education opportunities.

If finances are an issue, creating a Professional Learning Community as a faculty can also be a great benefit to the school as a whole. Professional Learning Communities (PLC) are groups of teachers that, “learn deeply with colleagues about an identified topic, to develop shared meaning, and identify shared purposes related to the topic” (Hord, 2009). The goal of a PLC is to get teachers engaged with one another about how to improve student learning. In a place where special needs is concerned, a PLC may focus on how to help a student or group of students with a particular need through research,

conferences, and searching for resources. Not only do teachers in PLCs grow professionally through their learning but it also fosters a positive relationship among the faculty because they are working together to achieve a common goal.

In a meta-analysis of eight studies about PLCs, the researchers found increased student achievement when the teachers were involved in a PLC. These studies showed an increase of 50% of students performing at or above grade level to 80% of students performing at or above grade level when their teachers were involved in a PLC. Teachers also saw an increase in performance on standardized testing. Ratings on a statewide standardized test went from acceptable in 1999–2000 with 50% of the students passing subject area tests in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, to exemplary in 2001–2002 with over 90% of the students passing each subject area test (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). While these results are not specifically of special needs students, it does show how student performance is improved when teachers work together to help students be the best they can be.

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Appendix A: Principal/ Early Childhood Director Survey

1. Are you a principal or an early childhood director?
2. What percentage of your school population is identified as special needs (students with an IEP or receiving specialized aid)?
 - a. 0%
 - b. 1-2%
 - c. 3-4%
 - d. 5-6%
 - e. More than 6%
3. Does your school provide services for students with special needs? (Check all that apply)
 - a. Resource Room
 - b. Tutoring (can be volunteer)
 - c. Paraprofessional services
 - d. Other
 - e. None
4. If you do not provide services, what is keeping your school from providing services for these students?
5. Do you receive help from sources outside your school (i.e. specialists from the local public school)?
6. How long have you been providing services for students with special needs?
7. In what ways have these students benefited academically?

8. Does your school offer opportunities for its called workers to further their education on special needs? If so, how?
9. What challenges have come with offering special needs services? (i.e. financial, shortage of educators, lack of knowledge, etc.)
10. What blessings have you seen come from your special education programs?
11. What is the name of the school you serve and where is it located?

Appendix B: Teacher Survey

1. What percentage of the students in your classroom have been identified as special needs (students that have an IEP or receive specialized aid)?
 - a. 0%
 - b. 1-2%
 - c. 3-4%
 - d. 5-6%
 - e. More than 6%

2. What methods or strategies do you use in your classroom to aid students with special needs? (Check all that apply)
 - a. Direct Instruction
 - b. Tutoring
 - c. Paraprofessional Services
 - d. Other
 - e. None

3. If you do not use any specially-designed methods/strategies what is keeping you from providing services for your students?

4. How have these methods/strategies helped special needs students in your classroom?

5. What methods/strategies have you found most effective?

6. What resources do you have to use to aid you in the education of special needs students?

7. Do you work with a specialized educator (paraprofessional, speech pathologist, etc.) to fulfill your student's needs?
8. Have you had focused training in the area of special education in the last five years? If so, what (conferences, continuing education, etc)?
9. What benefits have you seen in your classroom from using special education methods?
10. What are some challenges that you have experienced working with special needs students?
11. What is the name of the school you serve and where is it located?