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May 2019

Life Skills for Life-Long Learners: Teaching Functional Skills to Elementary Students with Special Needs

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https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2019.EDU.03

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Life Skills for Life-Long Learners:

Teaching Functional Life Skills to Elementary Students with Special Needs

by

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A culminating thesis project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2019

Abstract

Though extensive studies exist regarding teaching life skills at the middle school and high school level in special education to support students' transition to adulthood, a comparable amount of research is still needed to examine the use of life skills-based programs in elementary special education programs. The purpose of this study was to investigate how a six-week intervention using research-based practices targeting specific life skills impacted 2nd - 5th grade students with moderate to severe disabilities. This study involved a group of 7 students with varying disabilities and behavioral challenges, using video and peer modeling to enhance specific life skills twice a week, over a six-week period. The skill areas that were targeted included: hygiene (handwashing), social skills (appropriate greetings) and money skills (collecting money). The life skills were practiced during a weekly coffee cart activity that the class had started a year prior. During the coffee cart activity, the students practiced proper hygiene, learned how to make coffee, collected orders, and delivered coffee to staff within the school community. This research used a mixed methods approach, utilizing multiple data forms, including classroom observations during life skills instruction and interviews with teachers and parents. The findings demonstrate that the use of video and peer modeling to teach specific life skills is valuable to special education students. In addition, the results of the study show there are many barriers special education teachers face that deter them from implementing life-skills based programs including the lack of life skills standards and curriculum readily available.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my colleague, fellow researcher, and most importantly wonderful friend, Jennie Fung for being there for me every step of the way. To my other fellow writing group members, Tristan Tang and Deema Shihadih, I am very grateful for your constant encouragement. To my family and friends, I could not have gotten through this past year without your patience and unwavering support. Thank you to each and every one of you for your love and reassurance along the way. I would like to thank Jennifer Lucko, Ph.D. for her guidance this past year when working on my thesis. Through her leadership, she taught me the skills needed to be a researcher, not only in the field, but also when analyzing the data collected. Thank you for being my advisor and mentor in this writing process. I would also like to thank Jacquelyn Urbani, Ph.D. for her help, and carving time out of her busy schedule to work closely with me. And lastly, to my students, this work is for you and your bright futures. I am inspired by each of you, every single day.

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Introduction

According to a comprehensive U.S. survey conducted by Drascher, Parker and Sipterstein (2013), unemployment of adults with disabilities is more than twice as high than it is for the general population. This survey was commissioned by the Special Olympics and conducted by the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Shockingly, only 44% of adults with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) that are between the ages of 21-64 are in the labor force, compared to 83% of working-age adults without disabilities who are in the labor force (Drascher, Parker & Siperstein, 2013).

Today, the employment of people with disabilities is seen as a civil rights issue (Essex, Reed & Rall, 2016). The low employment rate for adults with disabilities is problematic because there is data that shows hiring people with disabilities is advantageous for businesses, government budgets and citizens. Studies show that when companies employ adults with disabilities, there is lower turnover, increased productivity and access to a broader pool of skilled workers (Essex, Reed & Rall, 2016). Knowing these statistics, how do special educators support these students with intellectual disabilities in the elementary years to set them up for success? Exposing students with intellectual disabilities to life skills curriculum at an early age is crucial to prepare them for the transition into the workforce.

This research study involved a life skills-based program located in Northern California with a special day class program designed specifically for students with disabilities. Over a six-week period, the special day class teacher, who was also the researcher, conducted research in her own classroom, using evidence-based practices (video and peer modeling) in the area of life skills. After the completion of the six weeks, the researcher examined the data collected

(observations, interviews, data tracking sheets). The researcher compared this data to the baseline data to ascertain if any changes resulted from the interventions. Additionally, paraprofessional/researcher observations regarding increased/decreased social skills, hygiene, money skills and participation helped in determining any changes observed over the research period.

Statement of Purpose

Life skills are important for people with and without disabilities and are especially critical to individuals with disabilities after they age out of high school (Bouck, 2010). The purpose of teaching functional academics to students with significant disabilities is to teach them how to respond appropriately to stimuli in order to perform employment, community, and independent living skills related to criterion of ultimate functioning. Functional teaching activities are instructional programs that involve skills of immediate usefulness to individuals and employ teaching materials that are real rather than simulated (Barbera, 2007). In other words, the skills must be immediately useful (i.e. learning to greet peers appropriately) and useful in future and adult settings (i.e. learning to greet a job interviewer appropriately). Currently, the Common Core State Standards provide little guidance to ensure students with disabilities are successful in meeting the demands of a more challenging curriculum, leaving special educators with the task of determining how to provide students with disabilities appropriate instruction (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar & Kiely, 2015). The literature suggests that the pedagogy of peer and video modeling are effective ways to teach new skills to students with significant disabilities (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar & Kiely, 2015).

The purpose of this research study was to document the effectiveness of specific interventions using video and peer modeling in the area of life skills (hygiene, social skills and money skills) on students with mild to moderate disabilities, grades 2-5, in hygiene, social and behavioral performance. This research study included the creation of data tracking tools used to measure the impact of research-based interventions, specifically, individual student improvement in relation to specific skills, after completing the six-week interventions during a life skills program.

This was a vulnerable population, so the research was conducted with the utmost care and confidentiality. Maladaptive behaviors and/or communication/participation observations which were witnessed in the classroom environment were gathered by the teacher to establish a baseline. The paraprofessionals working in the classroom were trained by the teacher on how to appropriately record data on the three life skills being observed (handwashing, appropriate greeting and collecting money) in the classroom. Though this research study fills a gap in the research literature on the topic, more research is needed to add to the current knowledgebase exploring the benefits of functional life skills to students with disabilities at the elementary level. This study explored two essential questions: How does the use of peer and video modeling to teach functional life skills to students with moderate to severe disabilities affect skill retention in the areas of hand-washing, making direct eye-contact, giving an appropriate greeting when approached, and exchanging money? Will six-weeks of targeted, research-based interventions improve my students' skills in the areas of hygiene, social skills and money skills?

Overview of the Research Design

The life skills areas that were targeted in this study were: hygiene (handwashing), social skills (appropriate greetings) and money skills (collecting money). The life skills were worked on during a weekly coffee cart activity that the class had started a year prior. During running of the coffee cart activity, the students practiced proper hygiene, learned how to make coffee, collected orders, and delivered coffee to staff within the school community. This study involved a group of 7 students with varying disabilities and behavioral challenges, using video and peer modeling to enhance specific life skills twice a week, over a six-week period. This study was conducted at Secrete Hill K-8 School in Northern California. The researcher conducting the study was the classroom teacher of the Special Day Class. This research used a mixed methods approach, utilizing multiple data forms, including classroom observations during life skills instruction and interviews with teachers and a parent. The data was collected using data tracking sheets to develop a baseline and to track the students' progress over the six-week time period.

Research Findings and Implications

My initial research questions focused on how teaching functional skills using peer and video modeling affected the retention of specific skills, and whether or not this pedagogy improved the students' skills in the areas of hygiene, social and money skills. The current research states that focusing on life and vocational skills are beneficial to students with moderate to severe disabilities in order to successfully transition into adulthood and maintain a job (Chiang, Ni & Lee, 2017). In order to have an independent life, one must have appropriate life skills. A large body of research has shown the importance of teaching life skills to students

with special needs at the middle and high school level, however there is limited research on how valuable it can be at the elementary level. Furthermore, findings from my research conducted in an elementary special education setting on the benefits of implementing targeted interventions to effectively teach life skills revealed that in fact, using peer and video modeling is effective when teaching new skills to students with moderate to severe disabilities. The results of the study show there are many barriers special education teachers face that deter them from implementing life-skills based programs into their own self-contained classrooms. The barriers that special educators face are as follows: lack of life skills curriculum and standards, behavioral challenges with some students, and lack of support or guidance from the administration.

It is the hope of the researcher that the completion of this research study will address the gap in research to identify the benefits of implementing peer and video modeling into a special day class program to students with moderate to severe disabilities to strengthen hygiene, money and social skills. Considering the lack of research in the area of life skills and elementary special education, it would be beneficial if there was an easily accessible life skills curriculum or set of standards to reference. It is the hope of the researcher to create or adopt their own life skills curriculum to implement into Special Day class Programs. Through this new life skills curriculum, collaboration could occur with both the general education classes and the High School Special Day Class.

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter is an examination of the research literature on life skills instruction, and specific interventions for students with special needs. There is a need for functional life skills at the elementary special education level, but a lack of curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to know where to begin. Furthermore, the academic research outlined is as follows: Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), Common Core State Standards and Students with Special Needs, Defining Life and Functional Skills, Interventions, Relationship-Building, and Transition into Adulthood.

Individuals with Disabilities Act (History of IDEA)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that requires schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities. It was originally known as the Education of Handicapped Children Act, passed in 1975. In 1990, amendments to the law were passed, effectively changing the name to IDEA. According to IDEA, the education of students with disabilities can be made more effective by ensuring that all employees are prepared and will have the skills necessary to enable students to be prepared to live productive, independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible (Turnbull, 2003). There were amendments to the IDEA in 2004 that required that each state create an additive educational framework that provided all students, including those with significant disabilities, the opportunity to access, to participate, and to progress in the general education curriculum in addition to receiving instruction in a functional life skills curriculum (Bobzien, 2014).

Bobzien (2014) states that in the United Sates, the curricular focus for students with significant disabilities is shifting again, moving from a strictly functional life skills approach toward one that emphasizes access to both the functional life skills curriculum and academic content from the general education curriculum. However, Ayres, Douglas and Lowrey et al., (2011), argue that legislation mandates what we must do to develop meaningful outcomes from the educational programs for students with disabilities. The IDEA emphasizes the connection between meaningful, individualized curriculum for students with disabilities and post-school outcomes. Ayres, Douglas, Lowrey and et al., (2011), states that 'appropriateness' and 'meaningfulness' in a child's educational program can be measured by whether or not the educational gains of a student actually prepare that student to lead an independent and productive adult life to the maximum extent possible. IDEA requires that educational targets be based on what students can currently do, both academically and functionally, by including a statement describing students Present Levels and Functional Performance (Yell & Drasgow, 2007).

According to Yell & Drasgow (2007), these statements should directly link to IEP goals and objectives to create a cycle of meaningful outcomes-based targets, appropriate teaching, and progress monitoring. IDEA's focus on transition out of high school and into adulthood increases this connection. In addition to meaningful educational goals, meaningful transition plans are required. Transition plans prepare students for post-school education, employment, independent living and community involvement by assessing students' needs, interests, preferences, and strengths in order to create objectives to help students achieve their goals (Yell & Drasgow (2007).

According to Turnbull (2003), there are four goals for students with disabilities outlined in IDEA. These frameworks reflect the core concepts of disability policy. The first goal is equality of opportunity, which is grounded in the nation's policy to prohibit discrimination. Antidiscrimination means to not discriminate against a person because of the person's disability and to provide reasonable accommodations so that the person can participate in a program. In education, some students who are not eligible under IDEA (students with ADD/ADHD), are protected under Section 504 (Turnbull, 2003). Cummins (1997) defines a quality of life domain as the students' rights (privacy, ownership, due process, barrier-free environments).

The second goal is full participation, which derives from the policy to ensure integration and prohibit segregation. Integration refers to the right of a person with a disability to not be segregated solely on the basis of disability from persons who do not have disabilities, to not be barred from participating in services that benefit persons who do not have disabilities and to not be limited to participating in services that are exclusively for people with disabilities. Under IDEA, the integration principle is carried out through access to the general education curriculum and the requirement for placement in the least restrictive setting (Turnbull, 2003).

The third goal outlined in IDEA is independent living. This goal involves the core concepts of antidiscrimination and integration, but it also involves the core concepts of empowerment, participatory decision making, and autonomy (Turnbull, 2003). Empowerment and participatory decision making refer to the right of a person with a disability or the person's representatives to have a say in what happens to the person. Under IDEA, the student's parents, and the student when appropriate, have the right to participate in the development and implementation of the student's IEP. Autonomy refers to the right of a person or the

person's representative to consent, refuse to consent, or otherwise control or exercise choice over what happens to the person. Under IDEA, the student's parents have the right to consent or object to classification, program, and placement. Likewise, under the Rehabilitation Act, a person with a disability has the right to make choices about how to live in the community. The choice about where and how to live is the statutory expression of the concept quality of life: choosing how to live is choosing one's quality of life (Turnbull, 2003).

The fourth and final goal is economic self-sufficiency. This refers to the core concept of productivity. Productivity refers to the engagement in a). income producing work, or b). unpaid work that contributes to a household or community. Under IDEA, the transition components of the IEP provisions ensure consideration of employment options for the student from age 14 forward (Turnbull, 2003).

Turnbull (2003) argues that given that IDEA clearly sets forth these four goals, it is disconcerting that they have been largely overlooked in the national dialogue related to outcomes for education. This omission is especially problematic given the postsecondary outcomes specifically related to these goals. Individuals with disabilities experience a higher rate of unemployment and underemployment, higher dropout rates, lower rates of postsecondary school enrollment, more restricted participation in community activities, more dependency on parents or, federal and state programs (Browning, Dunn, Rabren & Whetstone, 1995). As early as 1985, A.P. Turnbull & Turnbull (1985), argued that independence is a fundamental value in our society and defined independence as choosing how to live one's life within one's inherent capabilities and means consistent with one's personal values and preferences.

Quality of life has no single uniform definition (O'Boyle, 1997). The Special Interest Research Group on Quality of Life (1997) underscored that the key characteristics of a quality of life definition for individuals with intellectual disabilities are: general feelings of well-being, feelings of positive social involvement and opportunities to achieve personal potential. Schalock (1996) proposed eight quality of life domains: emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, self-determination, social inclusion and rights. When measuring quality of life, one must take into consideration the uniqueness of the individual person. Within the eight qualify of life domains, there are four specific goals that reflect the core concepts of disability policy (Turnbull, 2003). These four goals are: equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency. According to Cummins (1997), equality of opportunity is defined as the students' rights (privacy, ownership, due process, and barrier-free environments). Cummins (1997) defines full participation as social inclusion and interpersonal relationships, and independent living as self-determination. The fourth and final goal is economic self-sufficiency, and this is defined as material well-being, physical well-being, emotional well-being and personal development.

Common Core State Standards and Students with Disabilities

The Common Core State Standards provide guidance for general education students, but for special education students, there is not as much guidance. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been described as the next chapter in American education with the promise to deliver "fewer, clearer, and higher" standards aimed at preparing all students for college and career (Rothman, 2013). Though CCSS articulates minimum expectations for what college and career-ready students should know and be able to do in the 21st century, it is

beyond the scope of the standards to identify specific interventions and supports needed for

students who are performing below grade-level expectations (National Governors Association

Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Students with

disabilities represent a heterogeneous group of students whose instruction has always been

guided by the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (California Department of Education [CDE],

2014a; McLaughlin, 2012). Thus, a clear path to providing rigorous access to CCSS for students

with disabilities remains challenging.

According to Leko, Brownell, Sindelar & Kiely (2015), currently the Common Core State

Standards provide little guidance to ensure students with disabilities are successful in meeting

the demands of a more challenging curriculum, leaving special educators with the task of

determining how to provide students with disabilities appropriate instruction that achieves

these high goals. Resource specialists must implement the CCSS, as well as a Multi-Tiered

Support System through high quality, research-based core instruction, provided to all students

with increasingly intensive, personalized tiers of interventions. Resource specialists must have

well-developed collaboration skills to communicate and work with various service providers in

the ways required to design cohesive and precise instruction.

For students with more significant disabilities, there are the Common Core Essential

Elements. The Common Core Essential Elements focus on student learning to create

comparable expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The Essential

Elements use performance terms to describe what students should know and be able to do and

provide learning targets for students with significant cognitive challenges. There are specific

statements of knowledge and skills linked to the grade-level expectations identified in the

Common Core State Standards. The purpose of the Essential Elements is to build a bridge from the content in the Common Core State Standards to academic expectations for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (Dynamic Learning Maps Consortium, 2013). The Essential Elements address each strand of the Common Core across Mathematics and English Language Arts for grades Kindergarten through High School. The Essential Elements are differentiated by grade and they identify the key elements essential for each grade level. They address both content knowledge and skills-based expectations. The Essential Elements define differences from grade to grade in cognitive demand, content knowledge and skills-based expectations. However, it is not curriculum and does not define what instruction should look like. Moreover, they do not cover the entire range of learning experiences, ways a student can demonstrate their knowledge and skills, or mandate specific modes of communication. Furthermore, students' opportunities to learn and to demonstrate learning during assessment must be maximized by providing whatever communication, assistive technologies, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, or other access tools that are necessary and routinely used by the student during instruction (DLMC, 2013).

There is also the Special Education Administrators of County Offices (SEACO), this is used for students with moderate to severe disabilities as a guide to implement functional life skills strategies. Providing student, and their teachers with practical tools that help them prepare for the California Alternative Assessment (CAA) continues to be a challenge for special education leadership throughout the state. While IDEA and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandate giving access to grade-level standards, guidance for developing materials that support students and their IEP teams has been limited. This curriculum guide offers essential support

for teachers and students by aligning functional skills and objectives to California content standards. It is designed specifically to help prepare students for taking the CAA, providing a practical framework for promoting the highest possible degree of lifelong independence.

Life and Functional Skills in Special Education

A review of the literature indicates that focusing on life and vocational skills are beneficial to students with moderate to severe disabilities in order to successfully transition into adulthood and maintain a job (Chiang, Ni & Lee, 2017). However, there is little information and few studies on life skills training for individuals with disabilities at the elementary level, although it is very crucial for their future (Chiang, Ni & Lee, 2017). Life skills are defined as the skills required for daily life in the community. In order to have an independent life, one must have appropriate life skills. These skills can be grouped into five areas, including: self-care and domestic living, recreation and leisure, social interaction, employment, and community participation (Chiang, Ni & Lee, 2017). Life skills are important for people with and without disabilities and are especially critical to individuals with disabilities after they age out of high school (Bouck, 2010).

Functional skills are very similar to life skills, and are defined as: communicating, establishing and following schedules, and performing daily living tasks (Collins, Riggs, Galloway & Hager, 2010). I will be using the term 'life skills' when referring to my students and during my data collection process. Collins et al. (2010) argues these skills should be prioritized by the special education team. Furthermore, Colins et al. (2010) continues on to say that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires all students with special needs to have access to grade level core content in language arts, math, and science.

According to Browder and Snell (1998), a functional approach to special education focuses on individualized skills needed for independent functioning across educational, community, domestic, recreation/leisure, and vocational domains. These skills are identified through an ecological inventory of each student's current and future environment. There are guidelines for teaching core content with meaningful applications to facilitate successful transition for secondary students with moderate/severe disabilities (Browder & Snell, 1998).

Life skills instruction should be conducted in both classrooms and community settings, so students can learn to apply the learned life skills to their daily living environments (Clark et al., 1994). Given that acquiring appropriate life skills is crucial to students with and without disabilities, both general and special educators should be responsible for life skills instruction (Clark et al., 1994) and schools should allow teachers to have enough time to teach life skills (Bouck, 2010).

Social skills in special education. Foy, Massey, Duer & Ross et al. (1979) state that social skills are necessary for students with disabilities for academic development, social inclusion, and a successful transition to adult life and work. It has long been understood that individuals with intellectual disabilities seeking employment have functional difficulties beyond obvious cognitive or physical limitations (Foy, Massey, Duer, Ross, et al., 1979). For example, weaknesses in verbal skills, such as limited language repertoires and atypical speech patterns, emotional and behavioral deficits such as social withdrawal, absent or delayed smile and eye contact, as well as deficits in cooperation, turn-taking and poor generalization may result in many individuals with intellectual disabilities working in non-community or supported work sites (Foy, Massey, Duer, Ross, et al., 1979).

Research on the relations between social skills development and educational achievement indicates that specific prosocial skills are especially important in facilitating academic success while minimizing problem behavior in the classroom at an early age (Foy, Massey, Duer, Ross, et al., 1979). For example, functional communication skills, such as appropriately gaining a teacher's attention, provide an appropriate means for young children to gain access to reinforcing stimuli or escape from aversive situations. Similarly, the ability to tolerate restricted or delayed access to reinforcers in the absence of problem behavior is also a crucial social skill for young children (Bobzien, Gear, Judge & Raver, 2011). However, without appropriate skills in their repertoires, children are more likely to engage in a problem behavior (e.g., screaming, aggression) that could result in the delivery of reinforcement by caregivers and teachers (Bobzien, Gear, Judge & Raver, 2011).

According to Agran (2014), the diverse array of relationships adults identify as essential to their own thriving are just as important for children and youth with severe disabilities. Relationships assume a variety of forms throughout childhood and adolescence, ranging from casual and occasional to intimate and durable. Agran (2014) states that relationships with family members are the most prominent for many young people with disabilities. Relationships with same-age peers assume increasing importance, however, as children enter and progress through school. For example, interactions with classmates typically become more frequent and can evolve into close friendships or affiliations with networks of peers (Agran, 2014). Within the context of schools, the extensive interactions students have with general and special educators, related services providers, and other support staff are especially important. Each of these relationships can take on different forms and functions in the lives of students at different

points in their development. Each might require a somewhat distinct set of skills, attitudes, and opportunities to successfully navigate. Yet, this constellation of relationships collectively provides students with a rich context for learning an array of social, communication, and related skills; enhancing their sense of belonging and contribution; making personal connections that build social capital; promoting engagement in school and community activities; learning peer norms and values; obtaining support; and raising personal aspirations for adulthood (Agran, 2014).

Life skills instruction. According to Storey & Miner (2011), the purpose of learning functional academics is to respond appropriately to stimuli in order to perform employment, community, and independent living skills related to criterion of ultimate functioning. Functional teaching activities are instructional programs that involve skills of immediate usefulness to individuals and employ teaching materials that are real rather than simulated (Barbera, 2007). In other words, the skills must be immediately useful (i.e. learning to greet peers appropriately) and useful in future and adult settings (i.e. learning to greet a job interviewer appropriately). Hand washing and dressing skills are also important both in conjunction with toilet training and in general life. Self-help skills—anything from washing hands to hanging up a coat in a school cubby, eating chicken with a fork, or putting on a shirt—are all tasks that need to be taught differently than language skills. These self-help skills are a compilation of multiple skills that are all chained together (Barbera, 2007).

Interventions

Research indicates that specific interventions taught systematically and explicitly can improve students overall functioning in the areas of life and social skills (Storey & Miner, 2011).

Research from the Council of Exceptional Children overviews systematic instructional strategies that are useful for teachers. This research focuses on different strategies such as: task analysis, prompts, and error correction, specifically for different domains such as: employment, community and residential (Storey & Miner, 2011). Storey & Miner continues to discuss how these specific strategies are a guide for improving instructional practices for teachers and the strategies are in place to eliminate the idea that adults with disabilities have plateaued. It is crucial to continually foster life skills for students with disabilities, from a young age all the way throughout adulthood. Furthermore, Bobzien (2014) discusses how U.S. perceptions have moved from a deficit to a competence-based perspective for students with significant disabilities. Regardless of the disability, special educators should consider an individual's overall capability, preference, and engagement in activities when developing appropriate interventions. Focusing on enhancing their strengths will provide them with additional opportunities to have meaningful participation in school, and more positive educational outcomes (Bobzien, 2014).

      Video modeling. Gardner & Wolfe (2015) state the primary goal to focus on enhancing the quality of life for those with developmental disabilities is by promoting skill acquisition, which will enable students with disabilities to live, function and participate in a community. According to Gardner & Wolfe (2015), one instructional method that can help improve independence in performing daily living skills is video prompting (VP) or video modeling. Video modeling when combined with passive modeling can assist in the acquisition of learning. According to Bandura, other effective modeling techniques to use are passive modeling strategies. In this modeling technique the student merely observes the model's behavior

without directly interacting. The basis of social learning theory is that learning can occur through such passive observation of behavior (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015). In contrast, video modeling is an accessible modification technique that uses videotaped scenarios for students to observe rather than live ones, allowing students to focus on the consistent repetition of a task without distractions (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015).

Recent literature suggests that children with severe developmental delays may benefit through instructional techniques which include modeling life skills such as dressing and grooming through slow motion repetitive video presentation. Video modeling conveys realistic behavior with complex stimulus and response routines (Gardener & Wolfe, 2015). Earlier development of independence leads to a greater potential to thrive in a domestic and job-related setting (Pierce & Schreibman, 1994). In addition, one's ability to independently perform daily living skills (e.g., functional, self-care, domestic) can contribute to a person's meaningful participation in society and overall quality of life (Carnahan, Hume, Clarke, & Borders, 2009). Instruction focusing on daily living skill acquisition has been one of the focuses of research done with individuals who have developmental disabilities.

Peer modeling. Agran (2014) argues that fostering supportive relationships and friendships among students with severe dis-abilities and their peers can be a challenging endeavor, despite broad affirmation within the field of the need to expand the social contacts and connections of students with severe disabilities. Many students with severe disabilities experience complex communication challenges that can make interactions with peers and adults initially more difficult to navigate. For example, expressive and receptive language difficulties are especially pervasive among children and youth with severe disabilities.

Regular interaction opportunities and shared activities usually provide the context for peer relationships to develop and deepen. Agran (2014) believes inclusive learning opportunities are inconsistently available for students with severe disabilities. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education reports that nationally, only 17% of students with an intellectual disability, 39% of students with autism, and 13% of students with multiple disabilities spend most or all of their school day (i.e., 80% or more) in classes with their peers without disabilities. Moreover, social interactions among students with disabilities and their peers might seldom occur even within inclusive classrooms, cafeterias, and community settings (Agran, 2014).

Typical instructional strategies for children with severe developmental delays often include interactive modeling techniques with instructors delivering physical and verbal guidance and social responses such as "Good job!" or "Good girl!" meant as rewards for appropriate student behavior (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015). This response-contingent prompting is often used in combination with interactive modeling where the instructor literally leads the student by the hand so that the student sees him/herself modeling the behavior (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015). Leading a safe, productive and independent life should be the driving force behind instructional programs of many children with developmental disabilities. An earlier development of independence leads to a greater potential to thrive in domestic and job-related settings. Bandura noted that most behavior is learned through modeling and observing another person performing a given behavior. The social learning theory suggests that behavior learned through modeling and observing others can then act as a guide or model when individuals attempt to perform target skills independently (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015).

Transition to Adulthood in Special Education

Author Dubberly (2011) explains that transition planning is a required component (by age 16) of a disabled student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). The U.S. Department of Education (2007) mandated the following regarding transition services: The term "transition services" means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is designed to be within a results-oriented process. It is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment); continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. It is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests. It includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation (Dubberly, 2011).

Dee (2006) discusses how decisions are reached about the post-school destinations of young people with special needs. The researcher followed the stories of 12 young people for three years as they prepared to leave school. He wanted to discover how decisions were taken about what they would do and where they would go as well as the influences on those decisions. Dee states that disabled people, including those with learning difficulties are grossly disadvantaged in the workforce. The demands of the workforce are changing and having a job does not necessarily guarantee a good quality of life (2006).

According to the National Disability Rights Network, adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities continue to experience unacceptable rates of exclusion and segregation after nearly 40 years of access to free and appropriate experiences (2011). Dee (2006) states that educators and policy makers have theorized since the 1970s that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities would be prepared for an inclusive and participatory life as adults if they were offered access to critical educational skills that were individually determined and provided in a least restrictive environment. Furthermore, it was presumed that the path from school to adult employment would be smooth to ensure a reasonable expectation of a working life when students became adults. But this has not been the case. Most graduating students with intellectual and developmental disabilities make the transition either to a life of nonwork, languishing on waiting lists for services, or to segregated services that have no requirements for all the investment made during school (Dee, 2006).

Conclusion

Research demonstrates that there are numerous benefits to implementing life skills and functional skills in the classroom to prepare students for the transition into adulthood. The articles and studies indicated that life skills benefit students with special needs in the areas of communication, socialization, academics, and to prepare students to transition out of high school successfully. However, few articles discuss the implementation of life skills and specific interventions at the elementary level. A large body of research has shown the importance of teaching life skills to students with special needs at the middle and high school level, however there is limited research on how valuable it can be at the elementary level. The purpose of my research is to better understand how specific peer and video modeling interventions at the

elementary level in special education affects the acquisition of specific functional life skills (hygiene, money & social skills). Both peer and video modeling are research-based interventions that are very effective in teaching targeted skills to students with significant disabilities.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a six-week intervention using research-based practices to target specific life skills impacted 2nd - 5th grade students with moderate to severe disabilities. The skill areas that were targeted: hygiene (handwashing), social skills (appropriate greetings) and money skills (collecting money). The researcher conducted interviews with teachers and a parent, as well as conducted student observations during a six-week time period. This study explored two essential questions: How does the use of peer and video modeling to teach functional life skills to students with moderate to severe disabilities affect skill retention in the areas of hand-washing, making direct eye-contact, giving an appropriate greeting when approached, and exchanging money? Will six-weeks of targeted, research-based interventions improve my students' skills in the areas of hygiene, social skills and money skills?

Description of Rationale for Research Approach

This study researched how specific interventions of video and peer modeling were beneficial when teaching functional life skills to students with moderate and severe disabilities. When conducting this research, there was a mixed methods approach in order to gain a better understanding of how to effectively teach functional life skills in a self-contained special education setting. A qualitative approach provided a deeper understanding of how students learned by looking specifically at the skills: hygiene, money skills, and social skills, and finding ways to work with them based on how they learn (kinesthetic, auditory, visual, etc.). A qualitative approached looked at the data tracking sheets and determined the baseline, progress and if the students met the goal percentage.

The approach to research was both transformative and constructivist. Often times my special education students are marginalized in society, and my research worked towards making them contributing members of their own society. Moreover, the constructivist viewpoint is centered on the belief that humans construct understanding of the world around them through developing idiosyncratic meanings from their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Throughout the interview process with teachers, as well as asking parents the question of what they value most in their child's schooling (life skills vs. academics), I intended to go beyond factual data, and analyze the complexities of varying viewpoints. With the constructivist and the transformative approach, I relied on teacher and parent participation to share their own "point of view," and also tried to address important social issues. This research is intended to benefit my students, so that one day they are able to reach their full potential and be contributing members of their own society.

The transformative worldview allows participants to have a voice and focuses on empowerment (Creswell, 2014). Each participant has their own story and background, and I wanted to ensure my research was truly showing the human experience. I conducted research in my own classroom, where my students are comfortable and familiar, and I also have a strong relationship with the families. Throughout this research process, I developed a deeper understanding of how to enhance specific skills for my students in the area of hygiene, money skills and social skills.

Research Design

I conducted research in my own classroom at Secret Hill K-8 School. All of the names in my data collection are pseudonyms. I am a special education teacher for a 2-5 Special Day Class.

I have 7 students that are in a self-contained setting, meaning they are in my classroom the entire school day. Secret Hill is a Title 1 school that has approximately 711 students. Out of the 711 students, 54.9% of the students are English Language Learners and 82.7% qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch (CDE/CALPADS). The special day classrooms at Secret Hill K-8 include: a K-2 class, a 2-5 grade class and a 6-8 grade class. There are two-three paraprofessionals and a special education teacher in each special day classroom. The class size ranges from 7-10 students. The legal limit in the district for a Special Day Class is 12 students.

Data was collected to find a baseline in order to target specific skills (see Appendix A). It was collected over the course of six-weeks to track progress in the areas of hygiene, money skills and social skills. I worked with the K-2 special education teacher, and the middle school special education teacher, as we are on the same campus. My students will transition into the middle school classroom once they graduate fifth grade. I gathered data with these participants through the interviewing process (see Appendix B). I interviewed one parent to gather data on what they value most in their child's current educational plan: life skills, academics, or both are of equal importance (see Appendix B). By doing so, I tried to gain a deeper understanding of what they feel their child's strengths and weaknesses are in the area of life skills.

My classroom has been working on life skills by running a coffee cart on Fridays. When I initially envisioned the coffee cart, I knew I wanted to build a stronger relationship with my students and the school community. Some students collect the teachers' coffee orders from my mailbox, some make the coffee with adult supervision from a Keurig, and others deliver the coffee. We put the order forms in the front office on Thursday, and the teachers who order coffee leave their orders in my mailbox. We typically have 5-10 orders every Friday. The

students responsible for fulfilling the orders help set up the coffee Keurig station, placing the orders out in front of them, lining up the cups, getting the correct K-cups, creamer, and crossing out the orders when they are complete. We read through the coffee cart social story I created when we feel students need reminders on hygiene or following directions. Once the orders are fulfilled, the student finishing the order is responsible for crossing the order off. The coffee cart runs every Friday. There are certain skills that my students need to strengthen including: social skills (greetings), money skills (appropriately collecting money from the teachers and putting it in the designated money box), and hygiene (handwashing before working the coffee cart).

My classroom has 7 students with ranging abilities. Joseph is nonverbal, uses a diaper, and uses an Augmentative Alternative Communication device. He mainstreams daily for socialization with typical peers in the third-grade setting. He is in third-grade and performing at a Pre-K level. He can display maladaptive behaviors such as aggression and has a 1:1 aide for safety reasons. Maladaptive behaviors for this particular student include: hitting, biting, kicking, screaming, headbutting, scratching and self-injurious behaviors. Olivia is a seven-year-old student who recently moved to the United States from Haiti. She is newly potty-trained but needs to be on a strict toileting schedule. She has limited verbal abilities, this could be due to her home language being Haitian-Creole. She struggles with following teacher directives in the classroom and needs multiple prompts from staff to stay on task. Roger is a very verbal student but can be difficult to understand. He qualifies under a Speech and Language Impairment. Roger mainstreams twice a week in the second-grade general education setting. He is performing at a Kindergarten level. Jimmy is verbal with Down syndrome. He mainstreams every day in the third-grade general education setting for socialization with typical peers. He is

performing at a Kindergarten level. Jerry qualifies under an Intellectual Disability and a Vision

Impairment. He is legally blind without correctional glasses. Gavin qualifies under Autism. He is

in the fifth grade and is performing at a first-grade level in reading, and a third-grade level in

mathematics. Sam has Down syndrome and limited verbal abilities. He is in fifth grade and is

performing at a Kindergarten level. He also has behavioral goals for requesting a break when

feeling overwhelmed/frustrated. Most of my students are functioning at a Pre-K and

Kindergarten level, with the exception of Gavin. All of my students receive both Occupational

(OT) and Speech Therapy provided by the school district. All of my students receive between

60-90 minutes of both Speech and OT services per week.

Table 1: Student Participants

Name & Sex	Verbal/Nonverbal	Diagnosis	Age	Ethnicity	English Language Learner
Olivia-Female	Limited verbal abilities	Intellectual Disability/Speech & Language Impairment	7 years old	Haitian	Yes
Joseph-Male	Nonverbal	Other Health Impairment	10 years old	Caucasian	No
Roger-Male	Verbal	Speech and Language Impairment	7 years old	Caucasian/Asian	No
Jimmy-Male	Verbal	Intellectual Disability (Down syndrome)	8 years old	Hispanic	Yes
Jerry-Male	Verbal	Intellectual Disability/Vision Impairment	7 years old	Hispanic	Yes
Gavin-Male	Verbal	Autism	10 years old	Hispanic	Yes
Sam-Male	Limited verbal abilities	Intellectual Disability (Down syndrome)	10 years old	Hispanic	Yes

Table 2: Interviewees/Surveyors

Name (Pseudonym)	Occupation	Ethnicity	Age
Brittany	6-8 Special Day Class Teacher	Caucasian	52 years old
Tammy	K-2 Special Day Class Teacher	Caucasian	50 years old
Tiffany	2-5 Grade Paraprofessional	African American	45 years old
Jerry	2-5 Grade Paraprofessional	African American	48 years old
Olivia	Speech Therapist	Asian/Caucasian	27 years old
Bridget	Occupational Therapist	Caucasian	28 years old

My students thrive on following a routine schedule each day. They learn best when skills are taught in repetition and explicitly. Most of the academic work completed in my classroom is in small groups based on skill level. We typically do art projects on Friday and they are whole group. We rotate for English Language Arts centers for 30 minutes, twice a week, and small math groups every day. For specials, we have a dance teacher for the whole year, a music teacher, and library we attend every week. We walk to the San Rafael Farmers Market on Thursdays to practice our money skills. The students use the money earned from the coffee cart to fund their Farmers Market spending. This year I have also worked with Marin Humane Society to have a service dog come into our classroom twice a month. The students will either sit with the dog while the volunteer reads to them or take the dog on a walk. I try to incorporate a mixture of academic and functional life skills into my classroom to ensure that my students are prepared for the future, consistently focusing on independence.

Sampling Procedure

Parents of the students in the classroom were invited to have their children participate in the study and because they are minors, parents signed the attached consent form (some translated in Spanish). I sent the consent forms home with the students in the class. I invited the lower elementary and middle school special education teacher from the district and conducted face-to-face interviews. I asked my paraprofessionals and specialists (speech therapist and occupational therapist) if they would like to participate in collecting baseline data and on-going data to track the progress with the students in my classroom.

Methods

Teacher & parent interview data. I conducted in-person interviews with the lower elementary special day class teacher, and the middle school special day class teacher. I asked them specific questions about how they implement various life skills into their own classrooms. I interviewed the lower elementary and middle school teacher face-to-face. I recorded the interviews and transcribed the interviews later to analyze the data. Each interview was approximately 1 hour in length Below is a sample of the teacher and parent interview questions:

1. When do you think it is appropriate to focus on academics with students? When should instruction focus on vocational skills?

2. Can you describe a lesson or unit that you felt successfully taught life skills to students with moderate/severe disabilities? What did the students learn from this lesson?

3. What is the most important for your child to work on, life skills, academics or both?

Baseline data. I collected data by observing my students, conducted interviews with teachers, and used data collections sheets. First, I collected baseline data in the area of vocational skills (social skills, money skills and hygiene) when students run the weekly coffee cart. Then, I conducted video and peer modeling with my students 3 times throughout the week, over a two-week time period. We worked on 3 skill sets for a total of 6 weeks from January to mid-February (2 weeks total practicing 1 skill). Below is an example of how I

collected data:

Figure 1: Sample of Data Tracking Sheet

Baseline:

Skill # 1: By February 2019, _____ will appropriately acknowledge an interaction initiated by others by giving an appropriate response, either verbal or non-verbal with 80% accuracy.

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D

Interventions

The first skill I targeted is making eye contact with a teacher when delivering coffee and saying hello or thank you. I showed the students the video of myself and a paraprofessional modeling it, and then had them practice doing it with each other.

The second skill I practiced is how to properly hand wash. We practiced this skill over a two-week time period. I showed the students the video of me demonstrating step by step how to properly wash your hands before doing the coffee cart. I showed the students this video three different times throughout a week, and then had them individually demonstrate as I showed them the video step by step. The ultimate goal was to fade the prompting and have my students do it independently.

The final skill I worked on with my class was in the area of money skills. I had my students do peer modeling and practice how to appropriately collect money from the teachers when doing the coffee cart. I used two students from the general education classes (one 3rd grader and one 6th grader) who helped with the coffee cart. I had the general education students appropriately demonstrate making eye contact with each other, collect the money

(without grabbing, putting hand out in front of them), place the money in the designated money box, and saying "thank you." I had my students practice this skill three times throughout the week, over a two-week period.

My paraprofessionals helped track my students progress on the baseline data sheets during the interventions to determine if after six weeks of targeted interventions in the area of social skills, hygiene and money skills, if my students had met mastery. Mastery level is defined as 80% accuracy for my students (in 4/5 consecutive trials).

Data Analysis

When organizing my data, I transcribed my interviews by hand. If they were recorded, I listened to the recordings and broke down the interviews by putting it into text through an application called Transcribe. I analyzed my students progress on the tracking sheets by tracking the progress each week to determine were improving in the specific skills. Then, I inputted the data from the tracking sheets onto Google Forms to formulate percentages. I coded each interview, underlining important themes and key words. I described my expected codes and unexpected codes. My expected codes were in the areas of: curriculum and standards. One unexpected code that came up during a teacher interview was dealing with student behaviors and those challenges that can impeded other students' learning. I created a concept map to compare my findings with the existing literature. I described my findings by detailing any common themes or observed behavior patterns during the six weeks of skill interventions.

Validity and Reliability

Throughout my interviewing process, I gathered more information and interpreted the data differently. Interviewing two participants in different positions (lower elementary and middle) helped me connect different experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others. I used the same interview questions for both teachers. As I conducted my interviews, I sometimes strayed from some of the questions, making sure I was reading body language and feeling out the participant, ensuring that they were comfortable and confident in their responses. I think as an interviewer it is important to spend prolonged time conducting these interviews and breaking them up, so they are not back to back. This helped me gain a deeper understanding of each participant and ensured the accuracy and validity of my data.

When gathering my data on my students, I spent six weeks tracking their progress. I trained my paraprofessionals on how to collect accurate data and ensure there is a system in place that all parties understood and felt comfortable with. First, I had my paraprofessionals collect baseline data before teaching any specific skill. This gave me a better understanding of where each of my students were currently performing. I set up a detailed case study protocol and database (data collection sheets), so that my paraprofessionals could follow the procedures easily.

I am the classroom teacher, so I had to be aware of my own implicit biases as I was collecting and analyzing data. In order to maintain validity and reliability when interviewing both teachers, I always kept in mind that meaning is a function of the participants interactions with me, as the interviewer. I was also very cognizant of this and made sure it did not create an

unspoken preconception when interviewing both participants. I feel at our school site; my program is lacking in the area of implementing functional life skills. I am aware that the high school program solely focuses on life skills and community-based instruction, and I want to bridge that gap. I am eager to strengthen my students' skills and prepare them even further for the transition up to middle school. My own personal biases impacted my data collection and data analysis. However, my awareness of my own bias and familiarity with the students increased the validity. I strongly believe that this study can be generalized to increase retention in other skill sets with my students. I was a complete participant as well as an observer in the research study since am the teacher of the classroom. I was also teaching the lessons using explicit evidence-based interventions (peer and video modeling).

Findings

Findings from research conducted in an elementary special education setting on the benefits of implementing targeted interventions to effectively teach life skills revealed three major themes. The first theme pertains to the numerous barriers that dissuade special educators within my district from implementing life skills into their own programs. The most significant barrier is that there is not a set of functional life skills standards for teachers to reference, and furthermore, within our school district, there is not a specific life skills curriculum at the K-12 level that is readily available for teachers to implement. In addition, other barriers that were found are behavioral challenges with specific students in district special education programs and the difficulty in determining age-appropriate skills at the K-12 level for students with special needs.

The second theme to emerge in the findings surrounds the implications of peer and video modeling. Both peer and video modeling are research-based interventions that are very effective in teaching targeted skills to students with significant disabilities. Video modeling is an accessible modification technique that uses videotaped scenarios for students to observe rather than live ones, allowing students to focus on a consistent repetition without distractions (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015). Regular interaction opportunities and shared activities usually provide the context for peer relationships to develop and deepen. Unfortunately, inclusive learning opportunities are inconsistently available for students with more severe disabilities.

Finally, the third theme demonstrated in the findings is that implementing a life-skills based program in a school can be valuable for all students and creates a more inclusive school community. It is vital for my students to feel a sense of pride and purpose at their school,

making them feel like an integral part of their own school community. The extensive interactions students had with general and special educators, related services providers, and other support staff during the intervention are especially important. Each of these relationships can take on different forms and functions in the lives of students at different points in their development. Each might require a somewhat distinct set of skills, attitudes, and opportunities to successfully navigate. Yet, this constellation of relationships collectively provides students with a rich context for learning an array of social, communication, and related skills.

Barriers

Life skills curriculum and standards. Within my school district, there is not a specific set of life skills standards or a required life skills curriculum teachers must implement into their special education classrooms. As a special educator, I feel very strongly about implementing life skills in my classroom to better prepare my students, and I was curious if some of my student's parents felt similarly. I sat down with a parent of one of my student's, Roger. He is a second grader who is very social, a hard-worker, and is well-liked by his peers in the Special Day Class. Roger is currently performing at a Kindergarten level. He mainstreams twice a week, and thoroughly enjoys being in the general education classroom. Roger's mom noted the importance of focusing on life skills:

> Knowing what I know about my child, I think that life skills are so important for
> him. It ranks higher for me than academics. He needs to learn what is safe and
> what is not safe, just basic stuff that comes inherently to typically developing
> children. It is so strange to think that I never had to teach my other son any of
> these skills. For example, how to get dressed, how to bathe himself, how to
> brush his teeth. He can't do any of those things independently. Academics will
> come at a later time; life skills are crucial. Independence for him is what we are
> working on at home.

During the interviewing process, I knew I wanted to get diverse perspectives regarding implementing life skills into the classroom. I interviewed the K-2 Special Day Class teacher, Tammy, who is new to the district this year. She has been in the field for twenty-eight years, and her background in special education ranges from working with adults with criminal backgrounds, the medically fragile, in a group home, and now with the early elementary special day class.

She explains her viewpoint on teaching life skills to students with disabilities:

> I think that with the younger grades, you have to find a balance because you do not know what students are capable of as they move through school. You do not want to have this notion that they are not capable, so you are not going to focus on academics, and you are only going to focus on life skills. I think it is a balancing act, but as they get closer to adulthood then the transition becomes of utmost importance. It would be wonderful to have standards as a guide that basically go from K-12. It's a little skewed if you're looking at the special education demographic because they're not on target with the Common Core standards. They might not be potty trained by the time they are five years old or even fifteen years old. Having standards would be nice because you always know what the next step is, and you can refer to them.

Both parents and educators agree on the importance of teaching life skills at a young age, however, this research shows if teachers had the curriculum and standards readily accessible with a comprehensive guideline from the district, it would be much easier to implement. The ambiguity leaves special educators asking themselves the question of what to teach and trying to prioritize what is of utmost importance. It can be a challenge to juggle all of the demands placed on a special education teacher, such as managing student behaviors, various grade levels, paperwork, parent requests, and IEP meetings. As the K-2 Special Day Class teacher explained, "It would also be great to have functional life skills curriculum from Kindergarten all the way to High School. For example, I had to print all of my own curriculum to teach a lesson

on safety signs. It's so important, but then I have to find the resources to do it, so having the

standards and curriculum to support those standards would be huge."

Teaching students age-appropriate skills is another common barrier amongst special

educators. What does age-appropriate mean when a child has an intellectual delay? It is

difficult to pinpoint the term age-appropriate because most of special education is

individualized for the specific child. Ayres, Douglas, Lowrey and et al., (2011), believes that

'appropriateness' and 'meaningfulness' in a child's educational program can be measured by

whether or not the educational gains of a student actually prepare that student to lead an

independent and productive adult life to the maximum extent possible. The K-2 Special Day

Class teacher illustrated this point when she explained,

> It is hard to say age appropriate because really most of special education is what
> is appropriate to each individual child. I know in my classroom we teach a lot of
> safety skills. So really, it is what's appropriate to each student, but I think as a
> child gets older the life skills lessons become more important. Skills such as:
> personal space, communicating wants/needs, self-advocacy, but in the younger
> grades it is mostly about safety.

The instruction needs to be tailored to the individual child, nonetheless, there are common

areas of instruction that need to be taught to all children as they advance developmentally.

Brittany, the Middle School Special Day Class teacher, shared her thoughts on what age

appropriate means for her students, "Age appropriate can be so challenging. If it seems too

young for them or babyish, my students have no interest in completing the work. I try to find

curriculum that isn't elementary, but not too overwhelming for them, simplified curriculum that

is also very engaging." She continued on to say that having open communication with the high

school special education teacher to see what skills he is focusing on would be particularly useful

for her so that they could work together and plan out curriculum.

Behavioral challenges with students. Another barrier that was found was that some students are inappropriately placed in certain classrooms. The concept of the least restrictive environment refers to the IDEA's mandate that children with disabilities be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with typical peers. Inclusion is a right students with disabilities have to be placed in a general education setting with non-disabled students. Mainstreaming is when the child is educated with non-disabled peers when appropriate, but not necessarily exclusively in general education. In my special day class, students are in Specialized Academic Instruction (Special Day Class) for the entire day, and receive specials such as: music, art, library and dance. There are varying ability levels and grade-spans within a special day class. Some students may appear to be a good fit on paper, but in terms of the specific dynamics of the classroom, they are inappropriately placed. This usually has to do with more severe behaviors and lower cognitive functioning (hitting, kicking, property destruction, eloping etc.). Furthermore, districts will place a child initially in their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). IDEA says two things about LRE that are important to understand when working with the IEP team. The first is that a student should be with general education students to the "maximum extent that is appropriate." Special day classes, separate schools or removal from the general education class should only happen when a child's learning or attention issue—the "disability" under IDEA—is so severe that supplementary aids and services cannot provide them with an appropriate education. Appropriate refers to what's suitable or right for each child. Sometimes, putting a child in a general education classroom is not suitable because a specific service or program cannot be provided there.

Brittany, the Middle School Special Day Class teacher at my school, has 17 years of teaching experience, previously working in a residential facility for teens who were wards of the state.

She expressed how overwhelming it can be to juggle academics along with managing behaviors,

> You know, teaching for seven years in a really high intensity environment such as a residential facility, I dealt mostly with behaviors. It was all behavioral management, some days just getting the students inside of the classroom, and some days we were able to access curriculum. It was extremely difficult. Typically, after we come back from breaks, even now teaching my middle schoolers, I always review expectations, and our behavior system. Repetition is key. From there, I just see what kind of behaviors I am continuing to see, so I go deeper into modifying that specific behavior.

Inappropriate student placement is a unique challenge specifically to public schools and district level programs. This is different from a residential facility or a non-public school, students may be there primarily because their behaviors were so severe, they could not handle being in a district program. Placing a student in a special day class primarily because of the student's behaviors is an inappropriate placement because the majority of the class may not have as many severe behaviors. Therefore, some days the teacher may be focusing on managing extreme behaviors, rather than teaching any sort of curriculum. In our district, if a student is displaying aggressive behaviors, the best practice is to evacuate the rest of the class for safety reasons. Another staff member should remain with the teacher in charge for support when trying to de-escalate the student. This could take anywhere from ten minutes to two hours, depending on how quickly a child can de-escalate. Unfortunately, these situations are fairly common in a special day class, and this can impede not only on the child's learning, but the rest of the class as well. When dealing with these types of maladaptive behaviors, teaching

academics and life skills is very challenging to do. Some days it can simply feel like managing

behaviors, the priority shifting to keeping the environment calm and safe. This can also make it

difficult for socialization if students are at varying ability levels, and also might be limited

verbally.

Successful Interventions

Peer modeling. To begin with, many students with more severe disabilities experience

complex communication challenges that can make interactions with peers and adults initially

more difficult to navigate. Thus, expressive and receptive language difficulties are especially

pervasive among children and youth with severe disabilities. Typical instructional strategies for

children with severe developmental delays often include interactive modeling techniques with

instructors delivering physical and verbal guidance and social responses such as "Good job!" or

"Good girl!" meant as rewards for appropriate student behavior (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015). This

response-contingent prompting is often used in combination with interactive modeling where

the instructor literally leads the student by the hand so that the student sees him/herself

modeling the behavior (2015).

Collecting money. Over the six-week period of intervention, one of the skills students

practiced was the skill of collecting money and putting it in the designated money box. At the

beginning of the intervention, my students were collectively able to do this task with 30%

accuracy. A third-grade student from the general education class would come into our

classroom and help model the specific task for the students. After working this task in the

classroom for six weeks, five out of seven students were able to do so with 60% accuracy.

However, outside of the classroom when collecting money, the same five student's overall

percentage dropped to 50% accuracy. This could be due to many factors: overstimulation, distractions and overall excitement. There are many more steps to remember that accompany this task, such as pushing the coffee cart, giving the teachers their coffee, saying 'hello' and 'thank you,' and finally collecting the money and putting it in the designated box. Overall, mastery for this task was 80% accuracy, but my students made good progress. Mastery means in 4 out of 5 consecutive trials, my students needed to be completing this task with 80% accuracy. However, there were two students, Olivia and Joseph, who were unable to complete this task successfully. They often exhibited behaviors during the coffee cart that would stop from participating in the activity, including: hitting, kicking, crying, laying on the ground. As the researcher, I decided to not include their data with this particular task and focus on the students who were willing to participate. It appeared from the beginning to be too difficult of a task for those two students to complete. See table below:

Table 3: Collecting Money through Peer Modeling

Average Baseline	End of Six Weeks	Mastery Goal
30%	60%	80%

Peer modeling created positive results when teaching new life skills, however based on observations, time constraints made it not as successful as it could have been. General education peers were only coming into my classroom once a week for an hour, for six consecutive weeks, and this was not enough time for my students to grasp these new skills. Additionally, most of my students I have had for several years, and I am very accustomed to them and their behaviors, which at times led to over-prompting on my end. When over-

prompting, this leads to an expectation from the students for the verbal prompt before the work production occurs. I noticed that each task resulted in students needing 2-3 verbal prompts before they were able to complete the task successfully. Likewise, I am very aware of the response-contingent prompting and interactive modeling, and it was difficult to not habitually prompt my students when implementing peer modeling into my own classroom.

Another thing I noticed when conducting research was that my students were very prompt dependent, which made it challenging to implement peer modeling with a limited amount of time with the general education peers. Independence is the ultimate goal for my students, but communication barriers make it difficult for my students to fully engage conversationally with the general education peers. I did notice when I would teach a skill, and then have the general education student model the exact same skill. I would have this student hold one of my students' hand and model for them how to complete the task. I would have the general education student say out loud to the student, "I do," then point to the student and say, "you do." This was a successful strategy and made a vast impact, I noticed my students would respond quicker and more positively to their genera peer rather than the adult.

Video modeling. The repetition of video modeling provides scaffolding for students to grasp new skills. Video modeling was used once a week, for six weeks, in my elementary special day class to teach the skill of hand-washing. The skills were broken down into the following steps: turning on the water, getting soap, washing hands (rubbing back and forth), turning off the water and drying hands. The video was two-minutes long displaying the steps in a restroom of how to properly wash your hands using the steps listed above.

Handwashing. Video modeling proved to be an effective way to scaffold and break down the handwashing skills. My students were able to achieve more independence and grasped the concept of video modeling fairly quickly. I took a video of myself performing the tasks of hand-washing, and I would show my students the video before we would practice this skill in the bathroom. At the beginning of the six-week targeted interventions, my students (7 total) were washing their hands with 40% accuracy and needed multiple prompts to remember the steps. The hand-washing steps are: turn on sink, get soap, wash hands, turn off sink and get a paper towel to dry their hands. Most of my students skipped the step of washing hands thoroughly and drying their hands properly.

After six weeks, five of my students were able to complete each task with 75% accuracy, and two of my students were able to do it with 90% accuracy. At first, my students would need verbal prompts to remember to get soap or dry their hands. Towards the end of the six weeks, they only needed non-verbal prompts (pointing to the soap or the paper towel dispenser) to successfully complete the task. Even after watching the video in the classroom, my students would still need the non-verbal prompts to remind them of the steps to correctly wash their hands. Mastery for my students on this skill was 80% accuracy. My students made tremendous progress towards the hand-washing goal. At the end of the six-week intervention, I could simply point to the paper-towel dispenser or the soap dispenser to remind students, rather than giving a verbal prompt or a partial physical prompt (hand-over-hand). See table below:

Table 4: Handwashing through Video Modeling

Average Baseline	End of Six Weeks	Mastery Goal
40%	82%	80%

Appropriate greetings. When teaching appropriate greetings, my paraprofessional and I recorded a video of us modeling how to greet a teacher appropriately (wave hello, verbally say hi, give a high-five, etc.) Before showing them the video each week, my students were able to do this task with 45% accuracy. Students watched the video once a week. Some of my students have limited verbal abilities, so greetings are challenging for them, and they often would get overwhelmed if prompted to say hello. After showing them the videos after a six-week time period, my class as a whole (7 students) were able to perform appropriate greetings with 60% accuracy. Mastery for my students was 80% accuracy, but they made substantial progress over the six-week time period. Visual supports such as picture icons was extremely successful when prompting my students to give an appropriate greeting. Even after watching the video, when we would go into the school community, my students would still need the support of a visual icon. Towards the end of the six weeks, one of my students who at the beginning struggled with personal space and appropriate greetings, was saying, "Hello, get your coffee!" signing thank you to the teachers, and waving goodbye to the teachers, all while appropriately pushing the coffee cart. He flourished with this task, and I could tell he came out of his shell because he felt a sense of pride. See table below:

Table 5: Appropriate Greeting Through Video Modeling

Average Baseline	End of Six Weeks	Mastery Goal
45%	60%	80%

Belonging to the greater school community. One goal of mine when starting the coffee cart was to build a community where my students felt integrated. I wanted them to feel connected to their greater school community. Through peer modeling with general education students, I noticed a ripple effect. The general education students who would come into my classroom and help out with the coffee cart would say hello to my students, and then it grew into something bigger. The research suggests that relationships with same-age peers assume increasing importance as children enter and progress through school. For example, interactions with classmates typically become more frequent at the elementary age and can evolve into close friendships or affiliations with networks of peers (Agran, 2014). Not only were my students known for their coffee cart, they were also known by their typical peers as friends. The ripple effect started because eventually, other general education students from different grade levels were saying hello to my students and asking them to play on the schoolyard. Overall, my students appeared to be more confident going up to older students and engaging, giving a completely age-appropriate handshake, or just a wave and a smile.

One general education reported,

> The coffee cart makes everyone smile. It also makes happy teachers. It is so fun to see the kids pushing the coffee cart through the school in their green barista aprons. It also makes a connection with special education students and general education students who don't normally get to interact. My students now know the names of the students who deliver coffee to my classroom and they say thank you each time our coffee is delivered. It makes the school feel like one community instead of two separate groups of students. Ever since the coffee cart started last year, my students always say hi to your students and know their names. Just knowing someone's name can make a huge difference.

As cited above, general education teachers have expressed how much of a positive impact implementing a life skills-based program such as the coffee cart with the special day class has had on our school community. One even expressed interest in collaborating on implementing life skills curriculum with her general education 1st graders and the special day class students. Lastly, she shared: "I think activities like that normalizes it for kids. It gets students comfortable, in doing so they are more understanding and are accepting of differences."

Conclusion

Overall, I gained some valuable insight that echoed what the current literature states, evidence-based interventions, such as peer and video modeling are a successful way to teach new skills to students with special needs. To summarize, I believe implementing life skills-based practices is valuable for all students and creates a more inclusive school and community. In terms of expanding this vision of implementing a more cohesive life-skills program, Brittany expressed interest in coordinating with the high school team to better prepare our students for the transition up to high school. At the high school level, they run a Community-Based Instruction class, where students learn vocational skills and how to take public transit. She stated,

It would be so great, just like how we have our own special education meetings with our team, we could have special education meetings with the administration and the high school team. We could get so many ideas, it's great with our little small community here at school, but it would be even better to expand that and bridge the gap. We would be able to communicate more and discuss what kids are moving up. We would really be prepared and know what to focus on, be able to problem solve, and see how our class may shift. It seems it has ebbed and flowed in terms of higher-functioning versus lower-functioning students over the years, so I think this could be very helpful.

In conclusion, I believe as a special educator, one must consider the importance of not only preparing your students academically, but also in the area of life skills, as early as possible. This will make the transition up through the grade levels, into high school, and eventually into adulthood and the workforce that much smoother. As stated above, special educators face many challenges and barriers, but this research will provide a better understanding of how to effectively implement specific interventions using evidence-based practices into an elementary Special Day Class.

Implications

Introduction

This research study found that teaching life skills at the elementary level is effective, specifically when using research-based interventions such as video and peer modeling. In this study, a six-week intervention using evidence-based practices to teach life skills in the areas of hygiene, social skills and money skills, brought a more hands-on, interactive experience to a 2-5 grade moderate/severe Special Day Class. The implementation of this pedagogy strengthened a life skills program in an elementary special day class This research and the current literature proved that video modeling and peer modeling are successful, repetitive ways to teach new skills to students with disabilities.

This study provided evidence that although there are many things working against special educators in the area of implementing life skills, there are also successful interventions that in turn can make a positive impact on the greater school community. It showed that students with disabilities could sustain in learning tasks in the area of life skills when exposed to video and peer modeling. Video modeling is one instructional method that can help improve independence in performing daily living skills (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015). It is important as it displays examples of students with a variety of disabilities in a special day class, benefiting from a life skills program, using a classroom coffee cart activity. It supported students with their independence in the areas of hygiene, social skills and money skills. These skill areas are necessary for students with disabilities for academic development, social inclusion, and a successful transition to adult life and work (Foy, Massey, Duer & Ross et al., 1979.)

Implications for the Literature

The existing literature shows that video modeling is an accessible modification technique that uses videotaped scenarios for students to observe rather than live ones, allowing students to focus on a consistent repetition without distractions (Gardner & Wolfe, 2015). Furthermore, it suggests that children with severe developmental delays may benefit through instructional techniques which include modeling life skills such as dressing and grooming through slow motion repetitive video presentation. Video modeling conveys realistic behavior with complex stimulus and response routines (Gardener & Wolfe, 2015). Earlier development of independence has been suggested to lead to a greater potential to thrive in domestic and job-related settings (Pierce & Schreibman, 1994). In addition, one's ability to independently perform daily living skills (e.g., functional, self-care, domestic) can contribute to a person's meaningful participation in society and overall quality of life (Carnahan, Hume, Clarke, & Borders, 2009). This research study adds to the literature because it confirms that video modeling is an effective teaching strategy when working on a new skill.

Video modeling proved to be the most successful practice, and the students responded the most positively to this intervention. Instruction focusing on daily living skill acquisition has been one of the focuses of research done with individuals who have developmental disabilities. Agran (2014) states that regular interaction opportunities and shared activities with general education students and students with disabilities usually provides the environment for peer relationships to develop and deepen. The students formed significant relationships with the general education peers that would come into the classroom and help out. Watching these

relationships blossom over time was very impactful for me as the classroom teacher and researcher.

In this study, research-based interventions such as peer and video modeling were effective in teaching life skills at the elementary level. Video modeling was used to teach the skills of hand-washing and appropriate greetings. Over the six-week time period, the data showed significant improvements in these skills after watching explicit videos on how to complete each task appropriately. Peer modeling also proved to be successful, but not as successful as video modeling. There was more time needed with the general education peers in order to make peer modeling even more successful.

According to the National Disability Rights Network, adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities continue to experience unacceptable rates of exclusion and segregation after nearly 40 years of access to free and appropriate experiences (2011). According to Dee (2006), most graduating students with intellectual and developmental disabilities make the transition either to a life of nonwork, languishing on waiting lists for services, or to segregated services that have no requirements for all the investment made during school.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The interventions prove that video and peer modeling were both effective and impactful. If the researcher was continuing to collect data, the following is suggested: It would be beneficial to create or adopt a functional life skills curriculum, working with either the occupational therapist or speech therapist to add their area of expertise. Once the life skills curriculum is established, it would be proactive to meet with the administration, the lower

elementary special day class teacher and the middle school teacher to propose implementing this curriculum into the K-12 grade span. This could also be an opportunity to meet with the high school special day class teacher and get an idea of what skills he is targeting at the higher level. This will inform the teachers at the K-8 level to better align our programs

Additionally, administration could provide special educators with professional development opportunities in the area of behavior and life skills. The opportunity to collaborate and learn from one another would be extremely valuable. Often times special educators feel isolated and have the most challenging students, this would be an efficient way to bridge that gap.

One long-term goal for the researcher could be to create general education and special education life skills groups using the adopted life skills curriculum. The special education teacher could have her students push in to the general education setting, and the teachers could pick a skill each month to focus on. The general education students would act as peer models for the special education students.

Another long-term goal could be having the high school special day class students as mentors or "big buddies" to work with the elementary special day class students and work together on a skill in the area of functional life skills. The high school Special Day Class is a Community-Based program. The students are in the community working at a taco shop, restocking shelves and taking inventory at surf shop, and taking the bus to different stores such as Target. The high school students could take the bus to our school, and we could go out into the community with them practicing a skill such as purchasing skills. This would also be a

wonderful way for the high school teacher to be familiar with the students that will eventually be in his program.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, more time was needed with the general education peers to scaffold specific skills when teaching peer modeling. The special education teacher was only able to work on the skills once a week for an hour; this did not allow for enough time to efficiently teach the skills to the general education peer model. If the teacher had more than once a week with the specific students, the intervention could have been even more successful. Another limitation found in this study was lack of support from administration. Ideally, if a life skills curriculum was accessible or suggested to the special day class teacher, there would have been some guidance on how to incorporate it into the program. The final limitation was related to the teacher and parent interviews. As the researcher, I had planned to conduct a teacher interview with the high school special day class teacher. Due to the time constraints, the interview was not obtained, and that teacher's perspective was missing from the data collection. The perspective of more of the students' parents are missing. I was only able to obtain information from one parent interview, and it would have been insightful to have multiple parent perspectives. The research findings are specific to the population and amount of students in the classroom. With a bigger class size, more data could have been collected. I am a teacher at the school, so it is biased because I am doing this research to improve my special day class program. Last year, I implemented the coffee cart activity, and I knew that I wanted to strengthen specific skills. This

research project was a way for me to gauge how my students were performing in the specific skill areas.

Implications for Future Research

Implications from this study confirm that there is a crucial need for life skills curriculum and standards in special education, especially at the elementary level. There is still a great deal of research that be done around the topic of life skills programs at the elementary level in special education. With the noted benefits of a life skills-based program for this population of students, it is important to examine the potential for future research in this field. One significant consideration for future research is adopting or creating a life skills curriculum and observing how the adopted curriculum would benefit the special education students. To take it one step further, the researcher could use the adopted curriculum to create life skills circles with the general education classes on campus and observe the impact it not only had on the special education students, but the general education students as well.

Since the students in this study showed positive improvements in the areas of social skills, money skills, and hygiene, it would be of interest to research the potential positive impacts of peer buddies with the high school Special Day class in the area of life skills. It would be very impactful to partner with the high school Special Day class teacher and experience the community-based program experience so that my students are better prepared. If the employment of people with disabilities is seen as a civil rights issue, research which further enhances quality of life for these populations will assist in advancing equity for a historically marginalized population. It is fundamental to promote social justice in the areas of educational and work-related access.

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Appendix A: Data Tracking Sheets

Baseline:

Skill # 1: By February 2019, _____ will appropriately acknowledge an interaction initiated by others by giving an appropriate response, either verbal or non-verbal with 80% accuracy.

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D

Baseline:

Skill # 2: By February 2019, _____ will be able to demonstrate proper handwashing (i.e. turning on the faucet, putting soap on hands, rubbing hands together, turning off sink, and getting a paper towel to dry hands), with no teacher prompting with 80% accuracy.

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D

Baseline:

Skill # 3: By February 2019, _____ will be able to demonstrate the understanding that money is used to purchase items, will appropriately collect money from a customer, and put it in the designated location, with 1-2 teacher prompts with 80% accuracy.

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Teacher Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been in the special education field?

2. Can you describe a lesson or unit that you felt successfully taught life skills to students with moderate/severe disabilities? What did the students learn from this lesson?

3. When do you think it is appropriate to focus on academics with students? When should instruction focus on vocational skills?

4. Can you describe a lesson when you taught age-appropriate life skills to your class? Why do you think it was appropriate?

5. What interventions do you think should be put in place to teach life skills at the elementary level so that students are prepared in these skills at the middle and high school level?

6. Can you describe a lesson where you successfully used modeling interventions to teach a skill? What made it successful?

7. Why do you think modeling interventions are effective for teaching vocational skills?

8. As a special educator, it can be overwhelming juggling different academic levels, along with managing behaviors. How do you decide what to teach? How has your teaching focus shifted over the years?

9. What specific skills do you think should be taught when teaching vocational skills at different grade levels (elementary, middle and high school)?

10. How do you think we can better coordinate our special education K-8 program that filters into San Rafael High School to ensure that our students are prepared for the transition?

Parent Interview Questions:

1. What is the most important for your child to work on, life skills, academics or both?

2. What are your child's strengths in the area of life skills?

3. What are your child's weaknesses in the area of life skills?

Appendix C: IRB Letter

DOMINICAN
UNIVERSITY
of CALIFORNIA

November 28, 2018

Emily deRecat
50 Acacia Avenue
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Emily,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to inform you that your proposal entitled
*Life Skills for Life-Long Learners: Teaching Vocational Skills to Elementary Students
with Special Needs* (IRBPHP application #10719) has been approved.

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the
IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,

Randall Hall, PhD
Chair, IRBPHP