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The Effects of Collaboration between a Physical and Health Disabilities Teacher and a General Education Teacher On Students with Disabilities During a Pandemic and Remote Learning

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The Effects of Collaboration
between a Physical and Health Disabilities Teacher
and a General Education Teacher
On Students with Disabilities
During a Pandemic and Remote Learning

A Project Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead
By

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In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in
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THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

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I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting me in my academic endeavors. I would also like to thank my school district, ISD 917, and our member districts for allowing me to conduct my research.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT 4

CHAPTER ONE 5

 Background Information.....5

 General Problem/Issue.....5

 Purpose of Study and Rationale.....5

 Hypothesis.....6

 Subjects and Setting.....6

 Description of Subjects.....6

 Selection Criteria.....6

 Description of the Setting.....6

 Permissions/ Research Ethics.....7

 Informed Consent.....7

 IRB approval.....7

 Definition of Terms.....7

CHAPTER TWO.....9

 Review of Literature.....9

 Definition of Teacher Collaboration.....9

 Methods of Collaboration.....10

 Student Success When Teachers Collaborate.....10

CHAPTER THREE.....12

 Research Questions.....12

 Methods.....12

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Data Collection.....	12
Ethical Issues.....	13
Protection of Human Subjects.....	13
Qualitative Research Information.....	13
COVID-19.....	13
Auto-Ethnography.....	13
Content Analysis.....	14
CHAPTER FOUR.....	15
Data Collection.....	15
Data Analysis.....	15
Conclusion.....	24
CHAPTER FIVE.....	26
Implications for Practice.....	26
Action Plan.....	26
Distance Learning Recommendations.....	26
References.....	29

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how student grades are impacted when teachers collaborate on a weekly basis. A group of 10 students with average intelligence would have been used in this study. They would have been split into two groups of 5. With one group, I would have provided weekly collaboration with the teachers. With the other group, I would have provided monthly collaboration. I would have tracked progress by monitoring student grades. The collaboration would have been provided through email, phone, and in-person consultation to resolve student concerns. Only students whose parents had signed informed consent would have participated in the study. Grades would have been monitored weekly for data research. Due to the events of COVID-19 and a move to distance learning, this research was not able to be conducted. Instead, data was collected through an auto-ethnography design to reflect my teaching experience during COVID-19 and distance learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, collaboration, communication, general education teacher, in-person, phone, email, physical/ health disabilities teacher

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background Information

In recent years, there has been a growth in the area of specific licensures, specifically with a focus on physical and health disabilities. There has been a recognized need for teachers to have an extensive knowledge in this specific area as it pertains to student needs. “Teachers instructing students with physical and health disabilities need specialized knowledge and skills to provide these students an appropriate educational environment” (Helen & Frederick, p. 219). Due to this, more teachers are getting licensure in this area.

General Problem/Issue

When working in this position the teacher provides both indirect and direct service time to the students on the caseload. During the indirect service time, the Physical and Health Disabilities (P/HD) teacher often collaborates with the general education teacher. During this time the P/HD teacher will provide the teacher with tools and resources to help the students be successful in their general education classes.

In looking at this important role, I would like to frame my action research question around this. My question would be as follows: How will collaboration between a Physical and Health Disabilities teacher and a general education teacher benefit the students? In looking at this question I would like to examine methods of preferred communication, which methods are more successful, and how students might progress.

Purpose of Study and Rationale. The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of teacher collaboration. From this, research can be used to implement more or less collaboration between teachers depending on which yields better results.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Hypothesis. Collaboration between teachers has been shown to be effective as a practice. In addition to this, having more frequent collaboration has been proven to be beneficial between teachers. Based on this, I believe that collaboration between teachers will help students to be successful in their general education classroom(s).

Subjects and Setting

Description of subjects. The participants in this study include both the teachers and the students. The teachers will collaborate with me on student needs. I will then provide them with resources or ideas to help the students. The teachers will then bring our discussion materials into the student's school day to help the student. From there we will see if the collaboration tools and ideas have a significant impact on the child's education.

The participants will be chosen from a caseload of students who are at an average intellectual level but may need extra tools to help them be successful due to physical or health disabilities. This caseload will be provided to me as this is my field. I will send out consent forms to parents to find participants from there.

Selection criteria. The selection criteria is based on the students' service minute needs. The minutes needed to indicate that indirect service time will be provided, which is when I will collaborate with teachers on their concerns for the student as they pertain to staying on course with their general education peers. I will need to communicate with these teachers in a variety of ways regarding physical/health disability needs to support my thesis. This may be through email, phone, or in-person communication. The subjects will be divided up into those subcategories as needed.

Description of the setting. The study will take place across one school district that encompasses the majority of my caseload. This is a small suburban school district in the south

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

metropolitan area of Minnesota. Within this district, I service students in elementary, middle, and high school. I will work with the teachers in their individual classrooms or through indirect communication such as phone or email. The setting may vary school-to-school.

Permissions/ Research Ethics

Informed consent. Assurance of the protection of human subjects in this study was provided. A notice of confidentiality was reviewed and will be maintained by keeping names anonymous and withholding identifying details. All subjects were informed of the purpose and rationale for the research. Requirements were outlined and provided. Subjects were given the choice to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. For the subjects who are minors, permission was granted by legal guardians.

IRB approval. Permission was obtained to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board at the University and the intermediate school district, which services the member school districts. Permission was received from the superintendent of the school district.

Definition of Terms.

Collaboration. Noun. The action of working with someone to produce or create something.

Communication. Noun. The imparting or exchanging of information or news.

Email. Noun. Messages distributed by electronic means from one computer user to one or more recipients via a network.

General education teacher. Noun. General Education Teachers are required to provide differentiated instruction to students at all levels, which includes students in Special Education.

In-Person. Noun. With the personal presence or action of the individual specified.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Phone. Noun. a system for transmitting voices over a distance using wire or radio, by converting acoustic vibrations to electrical signals.

Physical/ health disabilities teacher. Noun. Physical and Other Health Disabilities Teacher. The Physical/Health Disabilities (P/HD) teacher is licensed to serve students ages birth to 21 and is involved with educational interventions or evaluation for students who have a physical or medical diagnosis or have experienced traumatic brain injury.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Review of Literature

The area of Physical and Health Disabilities teaching has been growing in recent years. This position focuses on serving a specific population to ensure that the students have the appropriate adaptations and accommodations to be successful in the general education classroom. In *A National Perspective of Competencies for Teachers of Individuals with Physical and Health Disabilities* it explains the population of students, “The area of physical and health disabilities includes three populations of students teachers typically encounter in the schools. These populations consist of students with (a) orthopedic impairments, (b) other health impairments (including complex health care needs and technology dependent students), and (c) multiple disabilities (in which a physical or health impairment is present).” In order to help those students be successful in those classrooms the Physical and Health Disabilities teacher often collaborates with the student’s teacher through indirect service minutes. In looking at this crucial piece of the position, I aim to ask how collaboration between a Physical and Health Disabilities teacher and a general education teacher will benefit the students.

Definition of teacher collaboration

Teacher collaboration has become essential to student success as we move towards a more inclusive environment when it comes to students with special needs. When looking at what collaboration means, there is a clear definition. The definition is provided as, "a style of direct interaction. Regardless of the model, the focus is on teachers working together with an assumption that collaboration leads to improved student academic achievement” (Lingo et al., p.6). Teacher collaboration can be completed through various methods. Those methods include

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

in-person, through email, or over the phone. Regardless of the method, the common goal is to help students be successful.

Methods of collaboration

In the article, *Smart phones permitted: How teachers use text messaging to collaborate*, it explores the different modes of communication that can be used for teachers to collaborate. Along with texting, it states that researchers have “explored the use of a range of IS [Information Systems] including the use of wikis, blogs, and email. They found these were valuable tools for enhancing and supporting collaboration and communication among teachers.” The article addresses that teachers do not always have time to communicate during the school day and that their methods might be beneficial. By using these methods, the teacher has the option of responding before, during, or after school. This opens the door for more opportunities to collaborate and share ideas.

Student success when teachers collaborate

There has been extensive research into the effectiveness of teacher collaboration as tied to student outcomes. A research study was completed to determine why some schools showed increased success on their test scores. From this study, “the most crucial finding was that the most effective schools, based on test score improvement over time after controlling for demographic factors, had developed an unusually high degree of “relational trust” among their administrators, teachers, and parents” (Anrig, p. 32). The collaboration and relationship building are directly tied to their success. Similar findings were detailed in *Influence of teacher collaboration on job satisfaction and student achievement*. It stated that, “collaboration allows teachers to learn instructional techniques from each other and receive feedback which could result in improved teaching and student performance (Carroll and Foster, 2008, Johnson, 2003).”

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

(Reeves et al., p. 228). This study described how the collaboration led to success in multiple ways.

Chapter 3

Methods

Research Questions

When working as a Physical/Health Disabilities teacher, I serve two important roles. First, I am a direct service provider, where I teach students how to use tools and resources. Secondly, I am an indirect service provider, where I teach the general education teachers how to accommodate and meet the needs of the students with physical and health disabilities. In looking at the role I am wondering how collaboration between a Physical and Health Disabilities teacher and a general education teacher will benefit the students. Furthermore, I would like to examine methods of preferred communication, which methods are more successful, and how students might progress.

Methods

In order to answer these questions, I will provide the teacher with a survey beforehand outlining their preferred methods of communication (in-person, email, or phone). From this, I will then provide consultation services to them regarding their students individual physical and health disability needs over that preferred method of contact. I will track student grades online to see the progression on a weekly basis. After, I will administer a follow-up survey to determine if they liked the method of communication and if they found it to be successful.

Data Collection.

1. Surveys. Two surveys will be provided during the action research study. The first will ask the teachers for their preferred method of communication. This will be given before the study begins. The second will ask how they liked the method of communication and if

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

they thought it was successful. This will be administered every one to two weeks and will conclude after two months of research has been completed.

2. Data collection chart. A data collection chart will be used on a weekly basis throughout the study to track students' grades and progress. This will be used over the two months of the study. Grades will be pulled from the online grading system that each school uses.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues may arise if outside factors impact the student's success in school. Students may miss school due to health or other issues due to their physical and health disabilities.

Protection of human subjects. No significant risk is posed in this study. All information will remain confidential and will be used only for the purpose of this study. Initial parental and student consent is required to participate. Students and parents can withdraw their consent to participate at any point with no consequence.

Qualitative Research Information

COVID-19. During the month of March 2020 schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This required teachers to adapt and modify their methods of instruction as the schools went into a Distance Learning approach. Teachers were given time, resources, and directions on how this approach should function in order to be in compliance as far as due process and to give the students the best education possible.

Auto-Ethnography. An autoethnography is defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, 2004). During the month of April, journal entries were kept that pertained to the focus question. This led to the insight of common themes during distance learning that teachers can consider and learn from when looking to the future.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Content Analysis. This new method of instruction hindered me from being able to implement my original study. Instead, I followed an auto-ethnographic approach in collecting data. The focus question based on this was, “what has been my experience during the COVID-19 school closure crisis?” I collected data during my experience as it related to the changes of our method of service.

Chapter 4**Results****Data Collection**

My data collection started in the month of April 2020 and continued to be collected throughout the month on workdays. Prior to this data collection, I had been given time and guidance from my administrators on how to plan and implement my lessons and due process during this time. My first journal was written on April 1st and my last one was written on April 30th. I analyzed the information to find trends and themes that occurred during my Distance Learning experience. The themes that I found were as follows: changes in services being prioritized or implemented, changes in student participation, changes in communication and meetings, and changes in the due process paperwork based on the circumstances.

Data Analysis

Table 1

Common themes during Distance Learning

Themes	Situational Occurrences During Data Collection
Changes in Services being Prioritized or Implemented	9
Changes in Student Participation	4
Changes in Communication and Meetings	6
Changes in the Due Process Paperwork	3

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Changes in services being prioritized or implemented The most frequent theme that appeared during the Distance Learning period of data collection was that of changing services. I had to alter the delivery of services as well as the goals we prioritized working on. At times, I had to completely alter my method of instruction due to resources and student abilities.

Table 2

Ways in which services were changed based on journal entries

Changes in Services Being Prioritized or Implemented	Situational Occurrences During Data Collection
Requests or Need for Additional Help	5
Learning New Tools	3
Changes in the Prioritization of Goals	1

Instances of requests or need for additional help.

I said that I would check in with her teachers if they have not given her an answer to her questions within the next week. However, I would like to encourage her to keep advocating for herself. This is something she would typically be expected to do if school were in session, but I am offering additional help now since the student reported that she is already overwhelmed with all the changes.

Today, I had a teacher request that I help train her class on how to use the application Snap & Read. I only service one of her students, so I typically wouldn't do a whole class lesson.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

She was missing about five assignments according to her teacher's message on Seesaw. When I asked her about it, she said that she was missing one of her needed logins to complete math. She asked if I could do anything about this. I contacted her teacher during our meeting and was able to send the student the password immediately.

Instances of learning new tools.

I tried to coach him and his mom through how to download and use the Co:Writer on the Chromebook. The parent grew frustrated, so we decided that as long as he was practicing his typing skills and could use word prediction tools then we would not push the use of a Co:Writer during this time. The student is learning to use new tools on the Chromebook now instead.

I met with a student who is working on his writing skills. He is learning to use different tools to assist him in writing. Those tools include word prediction, speech-to-text, spell check, and other tools as they are available.

Instances of changes in the prioritization of goals.

Usually, during the standard school year, we meet once a week and I help him reorganize his papers. We have been working on finding ways that he can do this independently, without needing another person to assist. Due to his physical impairment, he is struggling to do this independently at home. I offered to help, but he stated that it is not something we can easily do virtually. Due to this, we are addressing other goals on his IEP that can be worked on through distance learning. Those goals are related to self-advocacy and following accommodations and adaptations that are put in place for him.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

I was often asked to go above and beyond my typical services during this time period to help the students to be successful. Along with this, I was often required to teach new tools that students would be utilizing during this time. However, the most difficult part was that it was not always possible to help students work towards their Individual Education Plan goals. As an educator, this can be frustrating as I strive to help students meet all goals, which wasn't always an option.

Changes in student participation Another common theme that occurred during Distance Learning was that of changing student participation. There were strong results in the area of participation initially, but student participation began to decrease as time went on. Students began to participate less due to various reasons. Some of those reasons include technological complications, lack of motivation, or a number of other stressors and barriers in their lives. Teachers did their best to maintain student engagement and reach out to all students.

Table 3

Ways in which student participation changed based on journal entries

Changes in Student Participation	Situational Occurrences During Data Collection
Immediate Initial Participation	1
Decrease in Participation	3

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Instance of immediate initial participation.

I also assigned the students their first task. I was happy to see that by the end of the day, 4 students had completed their first task.

Instances of a decrease in participation.

I spent part of the day today emailing my students who had not completed any of their work this week. I sent additional emails to them as a reminder. From the new emails I sent, only a few went in and completed their work. If I hadn't received any work by the afternoon, I followed up with their case managers and checked their grades.

My students have become less responsive recently, as have the parents. They have reported that they are overwhelmed with work and the current situation in the world, as there are so many unknowns. I was supposed to meet with a student today that I meet with weekly at the same time. He did not show up to our Google Meet. I sat and waited the whole time in case he was running late.

The parents are also starting to become less responsive at this point in time. Parents that emailed me back during the first weeks are now not responding to my emails. I would like to follow up again, but we were told not to "overwhelm" them. We were directed by our district administration to only reach out the number of times service minutes would be provided. For example, if it's twice monthly, we only reach out twice that month.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Students began to participate in my services less as time went on. I had to adjust and work more with the case managers to ensure that students were completing their required classwork. It was difficult to keep engagement even with the students who had initially participated. It also became difficult to communicate with parents to have them assist in keeping the students on track. Parents began to respond at a lesser rate as time went on.

Changes in communication and meetings The next reoccurring theme was that there were changes in communication and meetings. Since instruction and meeting could no longer take place in-person, we had to adapt. Teachers were given options of email, phone calls, video chats, and websites in order to communicate with families and students.

Table 4

Ways in which communication and meetings have changed based on journal entries

Changes in Communication and Meetings	Situational Occurrences During Data Collection
Difficulty in Communication in due process Meetings	4
Difficulty Contacting Students	2

Instances of difficulty in communication in due process meetings.

The meeting consisted of over 7 people, which made it difficult to effectively communicate. The meeting was held over Google Meet. The parents phoned in but did not join via video. This meant that every time someone wanted to speak, they had to announce who they were again.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

The meeting started off with technical difficulties. The case manager was able to join the Google Meet, but her audio and camera were not working. She worked with her district's tech department to try and fix it for the first 10 minutes of the meeting. They were not successful. She ended up calling into one of the other meeting member's phones and going on Facetime. She ran the meeting this way, the other member held the Facetime call up to her computer camera. Since the meeting was presented in this way, she tried to go over everything as quickly as possible.

We held an IEP meeting today. The parent had a difficult time working with Google Meet. We tried to explain it to her, but she did not understand the set-up process. Due to this, she ended up joining over the phone.

Instances of difficulty contacting students.

I had my first Google Meet with a student today. It was difficult to set up the meeting. Since I work outside of the district, I am blocked from sending the middle school students' direct emails. They can only email people within their network. This meant that I had to email the case manager, who then had to email him to set up a time. Once the time was determined, I created a Google Calendar invite. I sent this to the case manager, and she had to then share it with the student.

I work with a student who has a household where his parents' primary and only language is Spanish. The student is in ELL classes and struggles with reading. In addition to this, he also has a traumatic brain injury. The combination of these things has made it difficult to communicate with him during this time. I have been working with a translator at the school to convey my

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

lessons. She is calling home and explaining to the parents what is expected. The population at his school has many students who live in Spanish speaking homes. This means that the translator has been very busy making calls for other teachers. She was not able to make my call last week but made it today. The student's mother reported that it is easiest to try and talk directly to the student. I am going to use Seesaw to do this in the future.

Communication and meetings were harder to manage than what was initially expected. Many families had difficulty accessing or working the technology that was being implemented during Distance Learning. It was also hard to contact families that did not speak English. Teachers were required to go through interpreters, who were busy with the large amounts of requests coming in.

Changes in the due process paperwork A change that was crucial as far as being in compliance was to change the due process paperwork process. Students' regularly implemented Individual Education Plans would no longer fit this method of learning. The solution was to write Individual Distance Learning Plans, which would outline what the student's education and goals would look like at this time. This was to be approved by the parents.

Table 5

Ways in which due process paperwork has changed based on journal entries

Changes in the Due Process Paperwork	Situational Occurrences During Data Collection
Implementing Individual Distance Learning Plans	3
Changing Service Minutes	2

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

Instances of implementing Individual Distance Learning Plans.

Today, I met with case managers and parents to discuss what the Individual Distance Learning Plans (IDL P) will look like. My first meeting was over Google Meet with both the case manager and the parent. We went through the IDLP step by step. We discussed the student's goals and how those might look different over distance learning. I have been working with the student on self-advocacy in relation to his physical impairment. We discussed that this can still be worked on while distance learning.

Previously, we had been told that any work we are assigning to the students counts as our direct minutes. Now, we are being told that it has to be direct communication with the students. In other words, an email to them directly or a face-to-face Google Meet. I had already written a few IDLPs based on the information that was first provided to us, so I spent the afternoon emailing case managers to update them on the change. I then had to login to SpedForms and Infinite Campus to change the aforementioned IDLPs so that they fit my new service plan.

Today, I mostly communicated with case managers. I emailed all of them to let them know that my portion of the IDLPs are complete and ready to be sent home. Services will begin next week based on parent approval of the IDLPs. We are just asking for email or verbal approval at this time given the current circumstances.

Instances of changing service minutes.

Originally, I had planned on keeping student minutes pretty much the same during distance learning, but now a lot of them have lower direct time and higher indirect time. I will spend more

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

time connecting with their case managers and teachers to ensure that the students are keeping up and have all of the resources that they need during this period.

One of the big conversations that I had today involved how to utilize paraprofessionals during this time. The case manager that I spoke with wants the paraprofessional to call the student to check on needs. She was trying to determine the frequency of the calls. On the IDLP, she had written that the paraprofessional would have 10 minutes of direct time. She wanted to know if there should be two phone calls a week at 5 minutes each, one at 10 minutes, or five that would be 2 minutes long. I expressed that I didn't think two minutes phone calls would be productive. I recommended calling twice a week at five minutes. She could call once earlier in the week to make sure the student has all materials and once at the end of the week to see if the student had any questions regarding the work he was given.

The process of developing an Individual Distance Learning Plan was a team effort. It required the teachers to collaborate on what the students focus should be at this time. It also required that the parents approved of the plan. There were many changes that needed to be made in order to provide services appropriately. One of the biggest changes that was shown in the research was that of service minutes.

Conclusion

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were given the task of learning how to teach in a Distance Learning Format. Adaptations had to be made regarding curriculum, method

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

of instruction, content, tools, expectations, communication, and the due process system. Teachers were given a challenge and high expectations and were able to rise to the occasion.

In completing a daily journal for the entire month of April, I gained significant insight into common themes and needs during this time. There were areas that improved over time, such as services being implemented and utilized, success of communication and meetings, and figuring out the new due process procedure. However, there are areas that we should make sure we work on going forward, such as student engagement and participation. If schools hope to use Distance Learning as the method of instruction for the future, we should use this information to learn and grow from this research.

Chapter 5

Implications for Practice

Action Plan

I was not able to gather data related to my original action research study due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I had completed a literature review, which helped me gain insight into the practice. My original research question was this: “How will collaboration between a Physical and Health Disabilities teacher and a general education teacher benefit the students?” I began to see benefits from practicing collaboration as my research began.

The benefit that I had researched in my literature review was that it can help the teachers to be successful. The teachers will build stronger relationships with each other when they collaborate. When working with others, it also gives the teachers an opportunity to learn more methods of instruction and techniques. Their coworkers would also have the ability to provide feedback.

In making recommendations for the future, I do not feel that I can confidently promote a specific method of communication. Without adequate data collection, I would not want to make any assumptions. However, I do feel confident in recommending that teachers collaborate. There are proven benefits from this based on other studies and I will encourage my coworkers to collaborate whenever possible in the future.

Distance Learning Recommendations

In the auto-ethnographic data that was collected, I found four common themes throughout my Distance Learning experience. Those themes included changes in services being prioritized or implemented, changes in student participation, changes in communication and meetings, and

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

changes in the due process paperwork based on the circumstances. This period of teaching involved many changes and adaptations for educators.

Typically, during the school year, we can focus in on all Individual Education Plan goals. During this period of Distance Learning, that was not always possible. Some of the goals required materials, resources, or one-on-one services in order to make sufficient progress. Due to the changes in having access to these tools, I had to adjust my lessons accordingly. The students were often susceptible to the changes, as it became difficult to work on a goal when they could not progress. Based on this, I focused more on what they could do and helped the students to progress towards those goals.

In my research, I also found that participation changed over time. Students required extra prompts and reminders to complete their work. At times, the students would not even complete their work, or they would not show up to meetings that we had scheduled. I also found the parents to be less responsive as time went on. It was difficult to maintain engagement, as there didn't seem to be an adequate incentive for anyone. Most students only wanted to complete required work that might impact their grades. It was important to have grace and flexibility when it came to having expectations. I learned to assist in their required work, instead of assigning my own.

Based on my journals, I also found changes in communication and meetings. It was hard to get ahold of my students. There were also barriers, such as language barriers and technological issues. Technology proved to be difficult for the parents to navigate and it took extra time and patience to figure out. I learned to collaborate with the parents and work with coworkers in order to successfully communicate.

THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATION

There were also many adjustments made as far as due process paperwork. I had to write Individual Distance Learning Plans for my students when the method of instruction changed. This was a new process that I had to take the time to learn. In writing these, I found that it was important to write down realistic service minutes and to only include goals that can be worked on from a distance.

Based on the research, I have four key recommendations for teachers who would have to implement distance learning. The first would be to focus on areas where you can help students progress, instead of working on goals that are not realistic during this time period. The Individual Distance Learning Plan can be written to support this. The second recommendation would be to have grace and flexibility. We do not want to overwhelm the students in an already challenging situation. We should be flexible on what we require of them based on ability and need. My next recommendation would be to collaborate for successful communication. Many students, parents, and coworkers may require extra help during this time. It is important that we collaborate with the entire team to enforce effective communication. The last recommendation that I have would be to write a realistic plan. When having parents review minutes and goals that will be worked on, make sure that everyone is comfortable and finds the plan to be realistic.

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