

# **St. Monica Academic Resource Team**

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## **Abstract**

Saint Monica Catholic School is a K-8 parochial school with a student population of approximately 825. Over the past few years, St. Monica Catholic School has experienced a marked increase in the number of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. This increase in students with special needs or accommodations has caused the school to reflect upon the need for an academic resource team to address teacher needs in the area of differentiation. The academic resource team will also work in conjunction with the June Cooper Learning Center to provide additional academic and behavioral support for students. This action research project used a mixed-methods design to examine teacher perceptions of differentiation, current student accommodation plans, and the need for an academic resource team. Results indicated that a large majority of teachers understand what differentiated instruction is, but struggle to successfully implement differentiation in the classroom due to a lack of more specific information on the accommodation forms as well as insufficient support from the school due to a lack of funding resources and personnel. The study revealed a gap between teachers' knowledge and understanding of differentiation and actual implementation on a daily basis in the classroom.

## **Introduction**

Alex sat in class staring at the board full of notes trying to copy them down into his notebook as instructed by his teacher. He was so focused on writing down the notes verbatim that he was unable to listen to the teachers' explanation. At the end of class Alex felt confused and overwhelmed. He went up to the teacher and explained that he was unable to copy the notes and listen to the lecture at the same time, and wondered if there was something the teacher could do to help him. The teacher, staring up from a stack of papers he was grading, simply replied, "Do the best you can." Alex went home defeated and confused and tried to make sense of his notes without success. He wished he had a way to take and understand the notes, but felt so defeated that he gave up on his homework and went to play video games.

The aforementioned scenario is not an isolated event in a specific classroom. Students are struggling in classrooms with, as Boyle (2010) noted, "more complex learning and behavioral issues than in the past" (p. 3). Within the milieu of special education, public schools provide a number of programs for students with learning disabilities, such as individual education plans (IEP), Response to Intervention (RtI) teams, and special education classes. Catholic schools do not have sufficient resources in place via federal funding to support the numerous programs found in public school systems to support students with special learning needs. For many Catholic schools, "precious dollars for student support are drying up [and] Catholic schools are still called to provide both opportunity and assistance to those students who are struggling" (Boyle, 2010, p. 30). As a result of the lack of funding and

resources, Catholic schools are implementing Response to Intervention (RtI), which “can serve as a framework to look at the needs of all students, not only those ‘deemed worthy’ to receive special education services” (Boyle, 2010, p. 4).

Not only is it the responsibility of Catholic schools to provide a quality education, it is also vital to understand the moral responsibility Catholic schools have to educate all students. Martin Scanlan (2009) stated that “Catholic Social Teaching (CST) outlines in unambiguous terms the moral duty for Catholic school leaders to cultivate inclusive service delivery systems to meet students’ special needs” (p. 537). Furthermore, while there is a moral obligation to provide inclusive services to students with learning disabilities, there is also a federal requirement to provide such services to students within a private school that receives any type of federal funding. In fact, according to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973,

[a] recipient that provides private elementary or secondary education may not, on the basis of handicap, exclude a qualified handicapped person if the person can, with minor adjustments, be provided an appropriate education, as defined in 104.33(b)(1), within that recipient’s program or activity” (34 C.F.R. 104.39(a)).

The moral obligation and federal regulation to educate students with disabilities provide the joint impetus to develop within Catholic schools academic resource teams that will assist not only the students with disabilities, but also the classroom teacher in whose class those students will be educated.

Student academic intervention teams have been used within the public school system for many years. The current model of RtI is viewed as “a framework for enhancing instruction and improving student outcomes, often discussed as a tiered prevention model in which students receive increasingly intense interventions based on need, and as a means of identifying students

with specific learning disabilities” (Tackett, Baker, & Scammacca, 2009, p. 3). RtI is a three-tiered model described by Hoover and Love (2011):

- Tier 1 refers to implementation of the core, general education classroom curricula.
- Tier 2 refers to supplemental instruction to support specific needs that surface within Tier 1 instruction.
- Tier 3 refers to highly specialized instruction that is more intensive to meet significant needs, including special education. (p. 40)

Student intervention teams have been adopted by Catholic schools and follow a similar format as RtI teams. Some Catholic school teachers and administrators are familiar with the concept of intervention teams where “teams try to remediate academic or behavioral issues in an effort to ameliorate difficulties before they worsen” (Boyle, 2010, p. 3). The formation of student intervention teams within the ethos of the Catholic school can be challenging because teachers will be asked to adapt their classroom and academic management styles in order to accommodate the daily observational monitoring of academics and behavior for some students (Boyle, 2012). However, implemented properly and with sufficient teacher input, student intervention teams can become an important resource for teachers and students within Catholic schools.

## **Background**

St. Monica Catholic School faces the challenge of providing an equitable educational experience for all students while maintaining its reputation for high academic rigor. St. Monica Catholic School is a Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade school with 875 students. Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade consist of four classes in each grade with an average of 23 students in each class. The school is located in a northern suburb of Dallas within the Dallas Independent School District. The student population is made up of students from lower income households

through upper income households with the majority being from the upper middle income bracket. Students in the junior high (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>) are grouped into “Honors” and “Regulars” in both Math and English/Language Arts. This grouping results in an inequality in class sizes in these two subjects, with the “Honors” classes having an average class size of 17 while the “Regulars” has an average class size of 25. This disparity in class size makes it difficult for those teachers who teach “Regulars” to provide adequate individual attention to those students who may struggle academically. St. Monica currently has a “pull-out” program for grades K-5 where students with reading and/or language disabilities are able to work with language specialists in small group environments. Grades 6-8 have a “pull-out” program solely for testing situations.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this action research was to evaluate the current process for accommodating students with special learning needs at St. Monica Catholic School and to develop the St. Monica Academic Resource Team (SMART) in order to provide students and teachers with necessary strategies and monitoring in order to provide an inclusive and successful educational environment for all students.

### **Research Questions**

The major research questions addressed in this action research project include:

1. How effective is the current accommodation system for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities at St. Monica Catholic School as evidenced by number of future referrals and academic progress of referred students?
2. What are the teachers’ perceptions of the current accommodation system and their comfort level in using differentiation in the classroom?
3. What will be the impact of the St. Monica Academic Resource Team on the educational progress of students and the use of differentiation in the classroom?

### **Literature Review**

This literature review examines three primary areas: (1) educational statistics relating to students with special needs; (2) Catholic Church documents explaining the role of the Catholic schools in educating students with special needs; and (3) studies on various intervention teams already in use. Research studies on the percentage of students diagnosed with a disability within the United States in grades kindergarten through eighth grade were examined specifically because these grades, K-8, represent the grades taught at the research site, St. Monica Catholic School. Studies showing the number of Catholic school students in the United States are also used in order to provide some context regarding the number of students with possible disabilities there are being educated in Catholic schools. Documents of the Catholic Church are reviewed in order to show that educating students with disabilities is a social justice issue within the Church. In the Gospel of Luke (18:16) Jesus says, “Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (New American Bible, Revised Edition, NABRE). As an educator within a Catholic school, Jesus’s command means that students with disabilities should not be turned away and that means should be taken within Catholic schools to assure that all students receive an equitable education and that all measures are taken to ensure those students with disabilities receive an appropriate education as well.

**Education statistics.** According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Child Find (2011), there are approximately 3,624,417 students, ages 6-13, who have some kind of disability in the United States Education System (IDEA Child Find, 2011).

The National Catholic Education Association has determined that there are 1,415,244 students in Catholic Elementary and Middle Schools (NCEA, 2012-2013). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, there were about 4,091,000 K-8 students in private schools and the enrollment is projected to decline over the next few years (NCES, 2013). Jennings (2013) noted, "Even with declining enrollments, Catholic schools are by far the largest private school sector. In 2010, half of the nation's private elementary school students and three-fourths of its private secondary school students attended Catholic schools." DeFiore (2006) cited a study by Bimonte (2004), noting that

[s]chools reported that they enrolled on average 14 students who were classified as having special needs. About one third of the schools indicated they had a paid resource teacher to assist children with special needs, up 5% from 2001. (p. 458)

Citing results from studies done by Bimonte (2004) and Kealey (1998, 2000), DeFiore provided statistics on the percentage of Catholic school students with disabilities (see Table 1). The statistics show that the largest percentage of students in Catholic schools, as of 2003, have either a speech impairment (62%), learning disability (68%), or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) (60%). These statistics show that Catholic schools must address the needs of students with these disabilities through some form of intervention program and that teachers need to receive training and support in order to implement differentiation strategies within the classroom to address the needs of these students.

**Catholic Church documents.** Catholic schools have a moral obligation to address the issue of inclusiveness and differentiation within their campuses in order to prevent alienation of parents with special needs children. Local educational agencies (LEA) have federal funding to support special education and accommodation teams for students requiring those services. It is up to Catholic schools to begin

[b]uilding consensus among its various constituents for a mission that includes students with disabilities. Aligning policy and practice to correspond to the expanded mission will require that the faculty involved have the time and resources to consider, understand, accept, and implement the changes that will appropriately include students with disabilities in all aspects of the life of the school. (Taymans & Termini, 2010, p. 33)

The Church understands the challenges that Catholic schools face and states strongly that

[t]he school must stimulate the pupil to exercise his intelligence through the dynamics of understanding to attain clarity and inventiveness. It must help him spell out the meaning of his experiences and their truths. Any school which neglects this duty and which offers merely pre-cast conclusions hinders the personal development of its pupils. (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 27)

Further, the Catholic Church, in the document *Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education), has recognized that

children and young people must be helped, with the aid of the latest advances in psychology and the arts and science of teaching, to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy. (Nuzzi & Hunt, 2012, p. 62)

In order to promulgate this mission, Catholic schools must provide an inclusive environment for those students with disabilities as stated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2005, "[o]ur young people are the Church of today and tomorrow. It is imperative that we provide them with schools ready to address

their spiritual, moral, and academic needs” (para. 19). Inclusion “is based on a total learning environment that reflects a philosophy of equitability for all students” (Taymans & Termini, 2010, p. 9). To provide an equitable education for all students in a Catholic school setting, there must be a philosophical change in how Catholic education is viewed. There are some who have the opinion that Catholic schools “used to be very economical, because Brothers, Priests and Nuns comprised a good percentage of the workforce; now, Catholic schools are either doomed to close, or be ivory bell-towers for elites” (Pathickey, 2013). In order to defend Catholic schools against negative opinions of this type, they must “engage an expanded range of students with special learning needs by increasing their curricula and support services beyond a traditional college preparatory focus” (Taymans & Termini, 2010, p. 16). The formation of academic intervention teams represents one strategy to provide a more inclusive environment for those students with special educational needs.

**Intervention strategies.** Providing academic interventions can be a daunting task because teachers and students have set schedules, especially in middle school, and rearranging schedules to accommodate small group academic interventions can be challenging. “In addition, the competing simultaneous demands of improving students’ basic skill sets (e.g., reading, writing, math) while helping them to learn and use content knowledge in science, social studies, language arts, history and foreign language coursework can pose difficulties to implementing RtI in secondary schools” (Prewett, Mellard, Deshler, Allen, Alexander, & Stern, 2012, p. 136). Academic interventions are vital to the success of those students with learning disabilities as well as those students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Being able to “change teacher interactions by the acknowledgment of the importance of academic interventions so that outcomes for

students with EBD are improved, we may be in a position to affect school climate in a proactive manner” (Vannest, Harrison, Temple-Harvey, Ramsey, & Parker, 2011, p. 531). Providing teacher support for classroom intervention is also important because “teacher support can be a particularly important factor to consider when studying students with low academic self-efficacy” (Mercer, Nellis, Martinez, & Kirk, 2010, p. 325).

## Method

The purpose of this action research project was to explore the need for an academic resource team to assist teachers in the implementation of differentiated instruction in the classroom. An original survey instrument using qualitative and quantitative questioning was used to obtain teacher input.

**Participants.** The sampling procedure used by the researcher was convenience sampling. The 42 participants were restricted to full-time teaching faculty, all of whom completed the survey. The teaching faculty consists of 4 teachers per grade level for grades K-6 and 14 junior high subject teachers for a total teaching population of 42, not including the education specialists who work with grades K-5 and the pull-out teacher who works with grades 6-8 on testing accommodations. The participants were selected because of their daily interaction with the student population in the classroom where they have opportunities to work with students with mild to moderate disabilities and implement differentiation strategies. The majority of teachers have more than 5 years of teaching with some having more than 20+ years of teaching. There are a few teachers in their first year at St. Monica School. Teachers receive yearly professional development on a variety of teaching subjects including differentiation, ELA strategies, math strategies, and behavioral intervention. All full-time teachers were surveyed in this study and will receive the benefits of the

implementation of the academic resource team.

**Instruments.** A mixed-methods approach was used for this research. Administrative data from the 2012-2013 school year was used to review the types and percentage of learning disabilities that are evident through the accommodation program the school currently uses. A quantitative survey of six multiple choice questions was used to gather data on teachers' perceptions of differentiation, the current accommodation model, and the usefulness of the implementation of an academic resource team (see Appendix A). This survey allowed the 2013-2014 school year teachers to rate what they believe the success of the current accommodation system to be and their comfort level in utilizing differentiation techniques in the classroom. Four qualitative questions were included on the survey to allow teachers to clarify their answers on the quantitative questions, which will provide a clearer understanding regarding the quantitative questions as well as allowing the researcher to address specific needs of the teachers. Teachers were also asked to provide ways in which they differentiate. The participants were asked what they would like to see in an intervention team with regarding assistance for students with disabilities as well as the availability of resources for them within the school.

**Procedures.** The survey given to teachers consisted of six quantitative questions and four qualitative questions. The survey was sent to the full-time faculty via SurveyMonkey, and teachers were asked to complete the survey within a week's time. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete and could be taken at the teacher's convenience.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this action research project was to evaluate the current knowledge of and process for accommodating students

with special learning needs at St. Monica and develop the St. Monica Academic Resource Team (SMART) in order to provide students and teachers with the necessary strategies and monitoring in order to provide as inclusive and successful educational environment for all students. An original survey instrument including quantitative questioning as well as open-ended questions was used in this mixed-method study. Teachers were asked to answer questions that addressed their knowledge, usage, and desire for professional development on the issue of differentiated instruction. Teachers were also asked to elaborate, through the use of open-ended questions, in order for the researcher to better understand their beliefs regarding the role of differentiation, accommodations, and the implementation of an academic resource team.

### **Current Student Needs**

Data on current accommodations and disabilities was gathered based upon the 2012-2013 school year (see Figure 1). This data shows that the majority of students who currently receive accommodations do so as a result of being diagnosed with ADD/ADHD. Language and reading disorder are also prevalent among those receiving accommodations along with Math disorders. Within the St. Monica School population, based on 2012-2013 data, there were 146 students in grades 1-8 who have a diagnosed disability and receive some sort of accommodation. Of this number, 13.7% have a main diagnosis of ADHD with 10.6% having a diagnosis of ADHD-combined. About 33% of the students with accommodations have been diagnosed with a Reading disorder, Dyslexia, or a Language Disorder. Almost seven percent are diagnosed with ADHD inattentive, 3.42% with Auditory Processing disorder, 2.74% with a Math disorder, 2.74% with written expression disorder and 26.71% as other.

### **Teachers' Current Knowledge about Differentiation**

The survey revealed that about 54% of the teachers feel comfortable enough with differentiated instruction to create lessons in the classroom and/or assist other teachers in developing differentiated lessons in the classroom (see Figure 2). Forty percent of the teachers surveyed felt they knew enough about differentiation to help students with basic accommodations and about 5% felt that they did not know enough about differentiation to successfully implement differentiation in the classroom. These results showed that approximately 94% of the full-time faculty is able to implement differentiated instruction in the classroom in order to address a student's basic accommodations. Some of the qualitative answers show the concerns some teachers have with regards to providing differentiation in the classroom on a larger scale and they have to do with the accommodation forms currently used. Some teachers expressed that there needs to be "more personalized suggestions tailored to specific students." Other teachers feel a need for "[b]etter explanations of what exactly needs to be provided for the student." Through the qualitative responses, teachers revealed more information and guidance for individual students in order to feel comfortable in implementing differentiation fully in the classroom.

Teachers' use of differentiated instruction in the classroom, as evidenced by the study, showed that only 41% of the full-time teachers provided differentiated instruction on a daily basis, while 33% provide differentiated instruction on a weekly basis and 26% provide differentiated instruction as needed. These statistics show that although 94% of the faculty feels comfortable with their knowledge of differentiated instruction, far fewer teachers are implementing differentiation on a daily basis in their classrooms. Further professional development in the area of universal design for instruction may be necessary in order to assist teachers in

providing a teaching environment that allows for daily differentiation.

### **Willingness to Attend Professional Development on DI**

Seventy-six percent of the full-time faculty expressed great interest in receiving additional high quality professional development in the field of differentiation while 21% are somewhat interested and only 2% are not interested. These statistics show a willingness on the part of the full-time faculty to continue their professional development in the field of differentiated instruction.

### **Value of Academic Resource Team**

Teachers overwhelmingly support the development and implementation of an academic resource team with 93% indicating such a team would be very beneficial or extremely beneficial. When asked to explain their answer, one teacher responded,

[a] team of professionals focused on direct interventions for students would be helpful. If a student centered comprehensive plan can be established with firm objectives and accessibility without compromising instructional time in the regular classroom, then I feel it would be very beneficial to students.

Another teacher wrote, "[t]here are many students who have special needs and there are times when I feel incapable of accommodating them properly without assistance." These qualitative answers show there is a gap at the school when it comes to providing individualized differentiation.

One teacher summed up the purpose of an academic resource team when they stated,

I think that often students who struggle both behaviorally and academically can be the most challenging in the classroom, and need the most help. These students need special attention and strategies within the classroom to better meet their needs and to help them be more academically successful. An Academic Resource Team could provide

the teacher and the student more strategies and resources to help them. It is clear from this study that an academic resource team would provide essential instruction and support for teachers as well as individualized attention for students who struggle academically and behaviorally. This is made clear when 56% of the teachers feel the current accommodation forms are somewhat helpful in differentiated instruction and only 5% feel they are extremely helpful. This disparity in the usefulness of the accommodation forms shows a real need to provide teachers with specific student-centered accommodations that teachers successfully use to implement differentiation strategies for those students who need those strategies.

This survey shows that there is a great need for the development and implementation of an academic resource team in order to provide quality professional development and guidance for teachers in the area of differentiation as well as provide individualized educational plans for students which can be implemented by teachers when differentiating in the classroom. In order to address the needs of the teachers in the field of differentiated instruction, an academic resource team whose purpose would be a resource for those teachers as well as students and parents would greatly benefit the entire St. Monica Catholic School community.

### **Purpose of June Cooper Learning Center**

The June Cooper Learning Center (JCLC), which is being established at St. Monica, will be a space that will provide academic support for teachers, students and parents. The survey issued to teachers asked them to identify the role of the June Cooper Learning Center. There were a few main themes present in the qualitative data received (see Figure 3) regarding the perceived purpose of the June Cooper Learning Center. Most respondents mentioned the need for the JCLC to provide for the accommodations of individual

students. One respondent summarized this theme in their statement, "To make accommodations and provide help for struggling learners grades K through 8." Another prevalent theme within the responses was the need to provide support for students who are struggling. One respondent made the comment that "the JCLC should be a place where struggling children can go to get help from someone trained in the area that they are struggling in." A third theme focused on supporting teachers and parents in the area of differentiation. A respondent commented, "Teacher support might also be useful to give suggestions that might help students succeed," while another commented, "It [the JCLC] could provide parent education...to provide a student-school-parent partnership to successfully overcome these issues." According to these qualitative responses, the JCLC's purpose should be holistic in nature, addressing not only the differentiation for students, but also providing resources and support for teachers and parents as well.

### **Current Accommodation Efforts**

When questioned about the helpfulness of the current accommodation forms, more than half of the respondents, 55%, found the forms to be very helpful, while only 4.76% found the current forms to be extremely helpful. Almost 29% of the respondents answered that they found the current accommodation forms somewhat helpful and 11.90% did not find the forms helpful at all. Out of the 42 full-time faculty members who responded, 35 found the current accommodation forms to be either very or somewhat helpful. The statistics that seem to be of concern are the ones where only two faculty members find the accommodation forms extremely helpful and the five faculty members who do not find the accommodation forms helpful at all.

One item on the survey allowed respondents to clarify their stance with regards to the accommodation forms. Forty percent of the respondents noted that more specific



information needs to be included on the accommodation forms in order for teachers to be able to address individual needs. Eleven percent of respondents explained that a list of possible strategies that could be used for the various accommodations would enable the teacher to implement those strategies in the classroom. Twelve percent of the respondents stated that the accommodation forms were fine and no changes were necessary. Fourteen percent of those who answered the survey expressed frustration at the number of students who have accommodation forms and their inability to, as one teacher stated, “Feasibly look at all the accommodation forms for everyone to ensure each child gets the help they need.” These qualitative answers are beneficial in helping to understand why teachers do not fully implement differentiated instruction in the classroom. It appears, from these narratives, that teachers are looking for more specific information and detailed strategies that can be used with different children.

### **Additional Supports**

When asked what additional support they would like, 33% of the teachers stated that they wanted training programs, in-services, and the ability to attend conferences on differentiation. This response shows that there is a willingness and desire for further training on the topic of differentiation. Sixteen percent of the respondents voiced a desire to have a specialized individual who could help struggling students and make suggestions to teachers on how to individualize differentiation. Nineteen percent of the respondents were “unsure” or needed no additional support regarding differentiation. The remaining responses were varied and dealt with more specific details on accommodation forms, a better description of services offered for students, and better technology to aide in helping students. The question prompted a desire for more training and better services at St. Monica, which is the goal of the academic resource team in conjunction with the June Cooper Learning Center.

### **Discussion and Extension**

The purpose of this action research project was to identify the need for an academic resource team in order to provide teachers with resources and professional development in order to implement daily quality differentiated instruction. The study showed that teachers feel somewhat comfortable in their knowledge of differentiated instruction, but struggle to implement differentiated instruction due to a lack of specific strategies, lack of time and resources. The teachers also support the development of an academic resource team which would provide not only support for teachers, but also provide a resource for students who need additional support and guidance that they may not be able to receive in the classroom.

### **Discussion of Major Findings**

An unexpected outcome of the survey was that 94% of the full-time teaching faculty knows enough about differentiation to implement differentiation strategies in the classroom; however, almost 39% of the same respondents found the accommodation forms either somewhat helpful or not helpful at all. This disparity between the ability to differentiate and an inability to use the accommodation forms shows there is a need to provide accommodation forms that provide student-specific strategies for differentiation. Another conclusion that can be drawn from these two statistics is that teachers may be able to differentiate in the classroom, but lack the knowledge to identify student-specific strategies of differentiation. This conclusion was evident in the qualitative narratives provided by the respondents when answering the question, “What additional support would you like regarding differentiation?” Many respondents requested additional resources and/or training to help identify types of differentiation strategies that can be used in the classroom for individual students. Professional development in the field of

differentiation seems to be an element that is needed to help the faculty implement quality differentiation strategies in the classroom.

Questions relating to the formation of an academic resource team as well as the purpose of the June Cooper Learning Center indicated a need for more resources for teachers, especially grade-level specific professional development. Teachers indicated that more information on each student with accommodations was necessary in order for teachers to provide the assistance each child needed and the academic resource team could facilitate this discussion. Respondents also indicated that the June Cooper Learning Center would be useful by allowing students who may need additional support to go and receive that assistance. The Center could also be a place for additional resources for teachers to examine in order to help them in the classroom.

### **Application of Findings**

This action research project has revealed that there is a strong need for additional professional development support for teachers in order for differentiation to be fully and effectively implemented school-wide. The teachers' insights into their understanding and use of differentiation in the classroom show that the accommodation forms currently used for students with diagnosed mild learning disabilities need to contain more specific suggestions regarding differentiated strategies that can be used. This action research project also revealed a willingness on the part of teachers to receive additional specialized professional development in the field of differentiated education.

Another finding of this AR project is the need to develop accommodation forms that are more student-specific and provide more detailed information regarding differentiation strategies that teachers can implement in the classroom. Care will need to be taken not to individualize the

accommodation forms so much that the teacher will have to develop multiple lessons for different students. The accommodation forms will have to provide specific enough information that teachers can help individual students, but general enough that similar strategies can be applied to a variety of students.

### **Dissemination**

The results and final research report of this action research project will be shared with the principal, assistant principal, and school counselor in May 2014. A research brief will be submitted to the St. Monica School Board, Parent Teacher Organization, and Dad's Club in order to ensure communication to all prominent stakeholders. A research brief will also be submitted to the school faculty at the end-of-year faculty meeting to inform the teachers of the plan of action regarding the academic resource team. A town-hall style meeting may be called in the fall of 2014 to inform parents of the purpose of the academic resource team and how it will work in conjunction with the June Cooper Learning Center.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study lie in the fact that the accommodation data comes from the 2012-2013 school year. The 2013-2014 student data was not available for the purpose of this project. Another limitation is the willingness of teachers to be honest in the anonymous narrative survey which was given. Many times teachers may not be as forthcoming with their thoughts for a variety of reasons, including fear of more work, a desire not to show weakness in their teaching abilities, or no desire to get involved as has been my personal experience in working with other faculty members.

### **Future Directions**

Beginning in May 2014, this researcher will meet with the school counselor to coordinate a plan of action to develop the

academic resource team for the 2014-2015 school year. The plan is to gather a team of individuals to form the academic resource team. Those included would be the Assistant Principal, Elementary resource teachers, junior high resource teacher, and 3-5 classroom teachers, depending on the grade level of the student. The classroom teachers would rotate off the team if the student was not in their grade level. The team will meet to develop a mission statement and philosophy in order to provide direction. Once a mission statement and philosophy are drawn up, the team can meet with the faculty to discuss their mission within the school and how teachers can access their resources. Teachers will also be instructed on how to send referrals and how to request classroom assistance. The academic resource team would also be responsible for providing quality professional development throughout the year for teachers. A yearly report will be submitted to the administration, school board, and pastor to show the progress of the academic resource team. Each year, standardized test scores, classroom grades, and benchmarks will be used to monitor the progress of students as well as teachers. The academic resource team will work in unison with the June Cooper Learning Center to provide continual support for teachers, students and parents. Professional development in the area of differentiation will be scheduled for the fall 2014 in-service for teachers.

### Conclusion

With the increase in students with mild to moderate disabilities being admitted to Catholic schools, there is a need to provide teachers with the strategies and quality professional development that will enable them to implement successful differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Teachers at St. Monica have a willingness to want to know more about differentiated instruction but are concerned with the additional time requirements that will be demanded upon their already limited time resources. Providing a resource team will help teachers

not only identify students with mild to moderate disabilities but will be a wellspring of professional strategies to help them work with these students is a necessary part of a school's strategic plan. The development and implementation of the St. Monica Academic Resource Team (SMART) will address the need of more support for teachers by working with teachers to develop individualized accommodation plans that will provide detailed information and strategies for each child. The SMART will also provide teachers with the necessary tools to help them formulate strategies that work in their classrooms. With the SMART, working collaboratively with the June Cooper Learning Center, St. Monica Catholic School will truly be a school that welcomes and promotes the academic success of students, regardless of ability.

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Table 1

*Percent of U.S. Catholic Elementary and Middle Schools with Selected Disabilities*

Disability category	1997	1999	2003
Speech impairments	62%	74%	62%
Learning disabilities	66%	79%	68%
Physical disabilities	20%	20%	17%
Hearing impairments	25%	25%	18%
Visual impairments	16%	15%	13%
Autism/non-language learning disorders	5%	21%	15%
Emotional/behavioral	5%	21%	20%
ADD/ADHD	--	--	60%
Multiple disabilities	--	--	14%

*Note.* Sources: Bimonte, 2004; Kealey, 1998, 2000

Figure 1

St. Monica School Student Diagnosis, 2012-2013

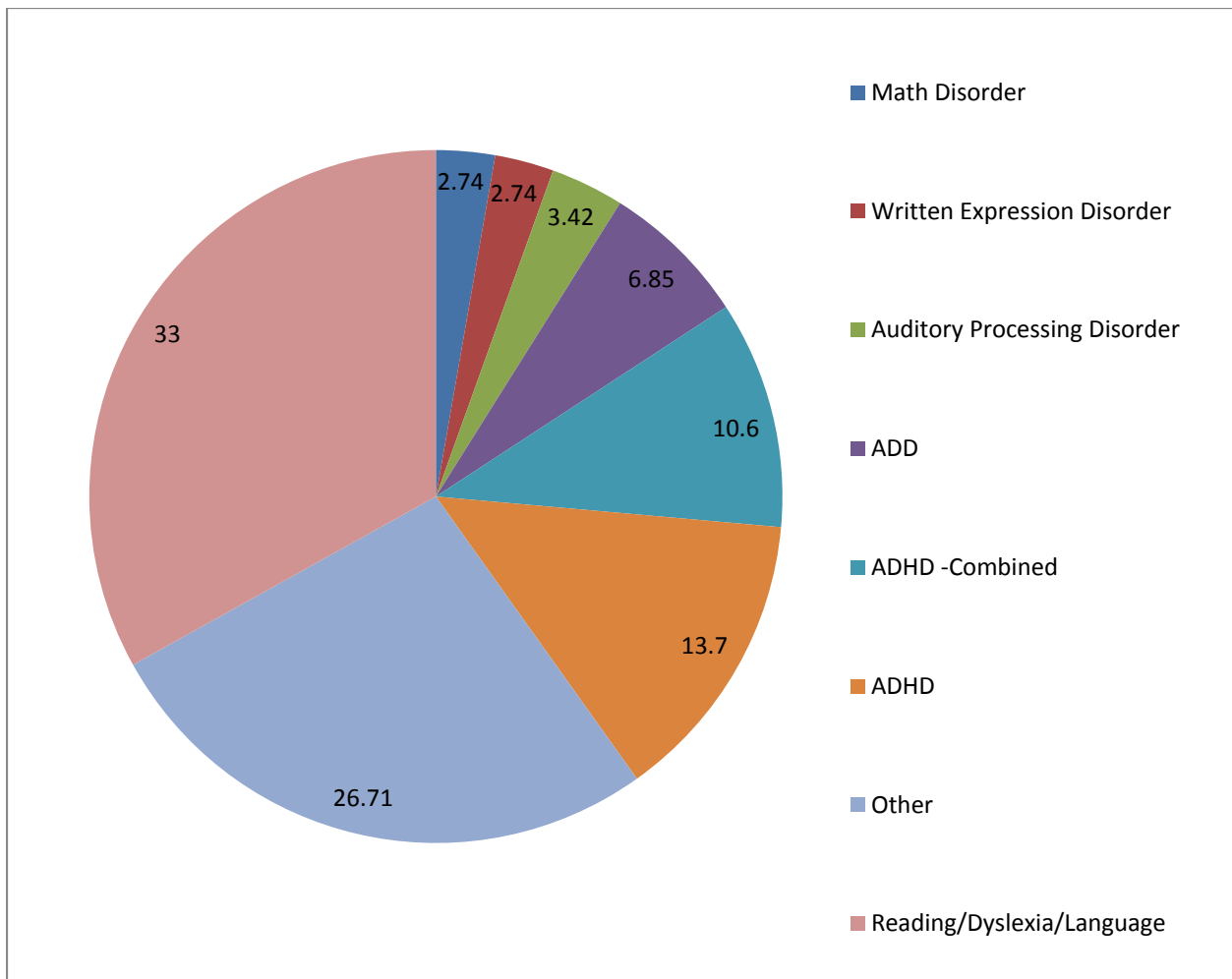
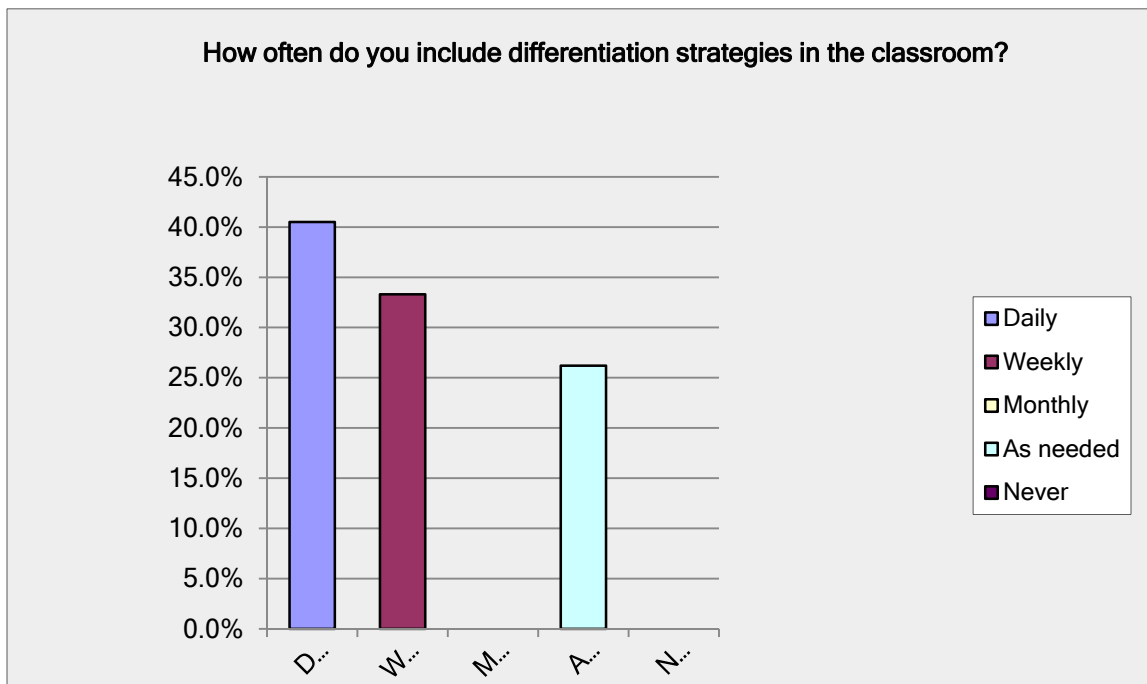
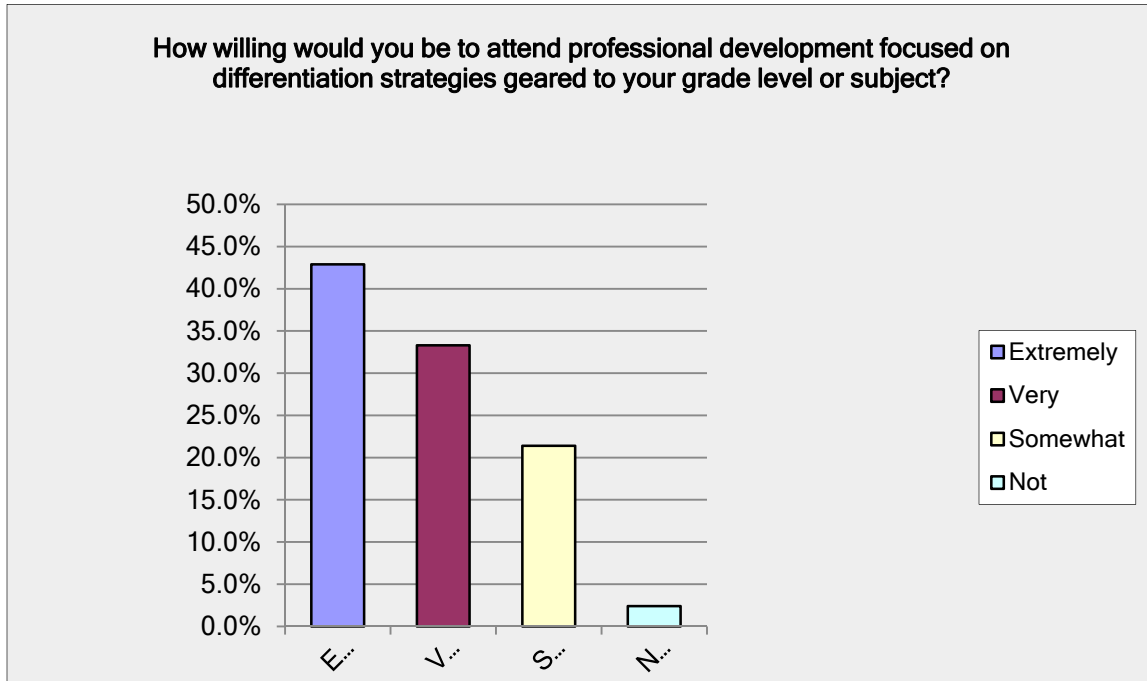
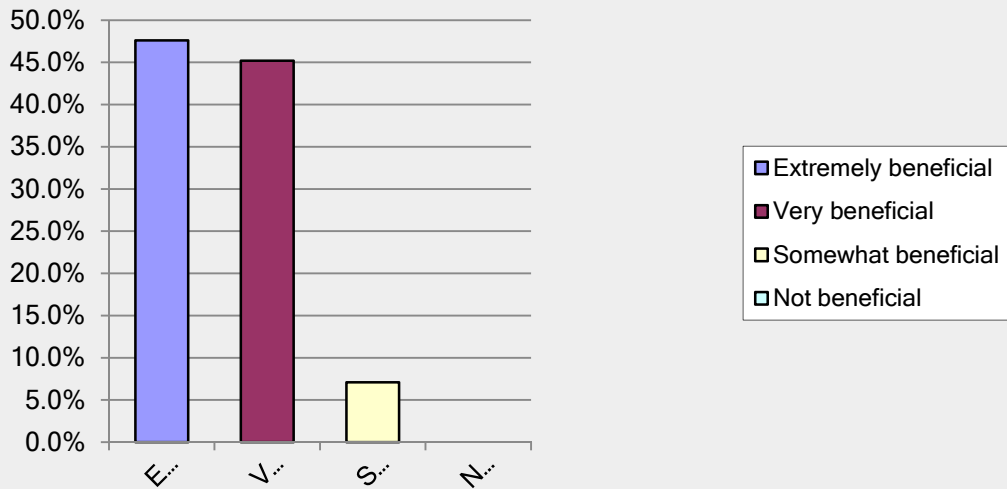


Figure 2

Results of St. Monica Teacher Survey



**Do you believe an Academic Resource Team to help those students who struggle academically and behaviorally would be beneficial here at St. Monica?**



**Please rate the helpfulness of the current accommodation forms in your planning for differentiated instruction.**

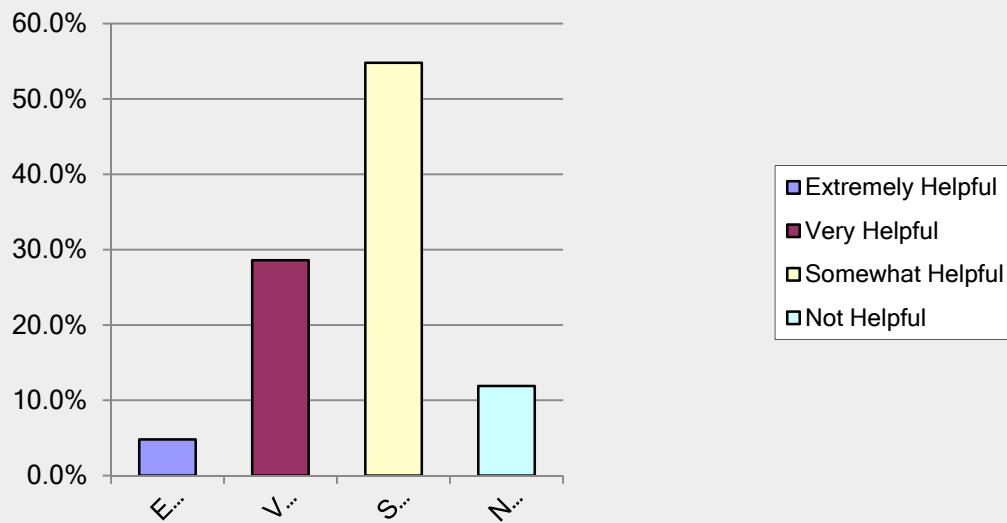




Figure 3

*Qualitative Results from St. Monica Teacher Survey question #7 (October 2013) with Key Themes Highlighted*

Q 7: What do you believe the purpose of the June Cooper Learning Center should be?

R: The JCLC should have access to services/therapy for students with diagnosed learning differences. It could offer **interventions for students** who are experiencing a deficit in any area, short or long term. For older students, it could offer classes/counseling in **techniques/strategies** to personally deal with their particular issues. It could provide parent education in all of the above to provide a student-school-parent partnership to successfully overcome these issues.

R: To **meet the needs** of all students who struggle with academic issues for various reasons that St. Monica is able to assist.

R: I think it should be a place where students, parents, and teachers can go to **receive the extra support** needed to ensure academic success.

R: I believe the purpose should be **to help students** who are struggling, as well as who need added enrichment.

R: To **assist in the accommodation** of at risk for failing students, and those that have learning differences by offering extra instructional time and assistance when necessary.

R: I believe that the June Cooper Learning Center should be a place where struggling children can go to **get help from someone** trained in the area that they are struggling in. These instructors should be upbeat and encouraging to the students because often time the morale of a struggling student is at its lowest.

R: I think the purpose should be to help identify students with disabilities, **help teach those students strategies** to cope with their disability, and provide support for those students throughout the year.

## Appendix A

### Sample Survey Protocol

#### Differentiated Instruction at St. Monica Catholic School

Please answer the following questions in order to help us develop an intervention team that will support the work that teachers at St. Monica engage in on a daily basis.

1. How knowledgeable are you about differentiated instruction?

- I am quite knowledgeable
- I know enough to be able to help other teachers implement differentiation strategies
- I know enough to assist with basic student accommodations
- I know about differentiation but am unsure how to successfully implement it in my classroom

2. How often do you include differentiation strategies in the classroom?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Never

3. How do you implement differentiated instruction in the classroom?

- Only for tests
- Only for homework
- Only for classwork
- For all of the above.

4. How willing would you be to attend professional development focused on differentiation strategies?

- 4. Extremely
- 3 Very
- 2 Somewhat
- 1 Not

5. Do you believe an Academic Resource Team to help those students who struggle academically and behaviorally would be beneficial here at St. Monica?

- 4. Very Beneficial
- 3. Somewhat Beneficial
- 2. Not Beneficial

6. Why did you answer the way you did in number 5? Please explain.

7. What do you believe the purpose of the June Cooper Learning Center should be?
8. Please rate the helpfulness of the current accommodation forms in your planning for differentiated instruction.
  4. Extremely helpful
  3. Very Helpful
  2. Somewhat helpful
  1. Not helpful
9. What could be changed on the accommodation forms to make them more user friendly for teachers?
10. What additional support would you like regarding differentiation?