Program Improvement Project

By Deidra Fifee

1. Purpose
   a. The purpose of the project is to improve and enhance participation of special education students in a variety of instructional settings including self-contained (life skills), resource, and general education with inclusive support. Students learn differently and have many learning modalities and limitations that are manifested by disabilities. Using graphic organizers is a scientifically based strategy that has proven to increase meaningful participation and helps to facilitate systematic teaching strategies and produce long-term generalization of essential knowledge and skills. Instructional concerns noted in Juan Seguin’s campus improvement plan includes, decreased growth in sub populations as measured by STAAR results for grades 3, 4, and 5. Subject areas include reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. The reasons hypothesized include difficulty with connecting abstract concepts to the real world, weak understanding of narrative versus expository writing, weak vocabulary, lack of hands on opportunities and insufficient use of manipulatives and modeling. The goals set forth include, more exposure to media literacy, ipads used as an instructional tool, and using nonlinguistic representation in identifying similarities and differences, cooperative learning and using advance organizers throughout the year.

2. Activities
   a. Strategies used included after school department meetings to discuss concerns faced with working with students with exceptional needs.
   b. Para professionals expressed how difficult is when working with multiple students with different abilities and disabilities in addition to combating disruptive and challenging behaviors. They embraced the idea of having the opportunity to periodically attend grade level planning meetings to get advance notice of the content, materials and activities that will be used in unit studies.
   c. Para professionals cooperatively worked before school and after school to prepare materials that the students can manipulate during instruction to show their understanding and mastery of the content covered. Special education department meetings were held where presentations of ideas and literature from scientifically based articles referencing the positive impact in using graphic/advance organizers took place. Follow up meetings where all stakeholders presented examples of artifacts that students created using graphic organizers. Mini training were conducted using thinking maps which are designed to approach concepts using flow maps for sequencing, brace maps for identifying whole parts and the components which make up the whole, circle maps for brain storming, semantic maps for cause and effect, bubble maps for describing, double bubble maps for comparing and contrasting and bridge maps for analogies and defining the relating factors. The implementation and differentiation of uses were discussed to assure developmental appropriateness that would be enriched with cultural diversity to facilitate real-life experiences.
   d. Issues were addressed to identify students who needed partially completed maps and determining the percentage that would be completed and determining when scaffolding should occur to produce more constructive learning.
3. Review of Literature

a. Graphic organizers are filled with countless ways of making abstract concepts simple. Teaching students with special needs can be very challenging and mentally and physically exhausting. Many students in special education have low cognitive abilities and presenting concepts using traditional methods is complex and sometimes seems impossible. I have found great success with making learning interactive and interesting by integrating technology, such as kidspiration, inspiration, and Microsoft SmartArt and charts, in addition to the website www.writedesignonline.com/organizers/index.html. By using concrete models and high definition visual representations from google images and clipart, students are exposed to meaningful avenues of learning new content through the use of graphic organizers. Learning in 3s has been my motto as an educator. Most children can count up to 3 and most can say or identify at least ABC. Using 3s can be extended using a flow map for beginning, middle, end, the popular KWL or describing steps using first, next, last. Categorizing in 3s is also another idea that can be used across the curriculum. Most educators have been trained in Fort bend ISD to use Thinking maps, however differentiating the uses have not been approached. This project has revealed and enlightened the educators at Juan Seguin on creative implementation which have broken down barriers that previously existed and made learning more meaningful for not only special needs children, but the population as a whole. It has also served as a direct response to the campus improvement plan which is to increase focus on rigorous instruction and use advance organizers throughout the year.

b. There is significant amount of scientifically based research as it relates to the positive impact of using graphic organizers.

The focus of this article is to provide instructors with explicit steps yet divergent strategies to enhance students’ proficiency with solving math word problems using graphic organizers. The author attempts to simplify the complexities students encounter when solving word math problems by breaking down the process using five steps. The five steps include restating the problem question, decide what information is necessary to solve the problem, sequence the operations, perform the calculation, and view the problem holistically to determine if the result is reasonable. The author places strong inferences on the importance of relating math problem solving to reading a story. Math teachers are encouraged to have students act out the events and stop teaching students to look for key words. The graphic organizer presented to incorporate with these five steps is a strategic diamond shape designed to reinforce a beginning, middle and end. These strategies are ideal for all teachers. If students are to construct their own knowledge they must be given opportunities to connect their personal experiences to new learning in a structured fashion to enhance learning.

The authors of this article conducted a seven week study on 5th graders to determine the effectiveness of three different approaches in using concept maps. The three concept maps included map correction, scaffold fading, and map generation. The experimental study was designed to reveal the benefits of converting linear text to graphic presentations, which makes
learning easier to retain and retrieve, in addition to providing interrelationships. The results of the study revealed that using map correction enhanced comprehension and scaffold fading enhanced summarization. Map generation was least effective because it was determined that it leads to cognitive overload. This article is very beneficial to educators because students experience great difficulties when summarizing. The authors also elaborated on the importance of providing a framework of no more than 40% of the content to be learned. If more content is given then learning becomes passive. It’s noteworthy to state that teachers must refer to Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development” when applying this strategy, especially when working with students with special needs.


Drawing conclusions can be taken literally by students who are not familiar with the term. They may actually perceive it as the need to physically draw an image. The authors of this article reiterate the importance designing custom tiered graphic organizers that increases cognitive demand, however based on the functioning level of each student. The article focuses on differentiation in content, process and product. For instance, process may be differentiated by small group and product may be tied to capability. The article provides suggestions on the considerations that teachers must take into account when creating tiered graphic organizers. This article is ideal for educators because it discusses the “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2002, and expresses a how teachers must stop dramatically under educating the population.


Graphic organizers are not worksheets. This is a strong factual statement made by the authors of this article, because I must admit that I have distributed a skeletal graphic organizer before to my students. The article is enlightening for all educators because little research exist that describes the implementation of graphic organizers. The Authors posit that graphic organizers should be partially constructed. In doing this, the teacher must preplan and follow a sequence of steps when implementing a graphic organizer. The first step is to analyze the task by identifying the words and concepts that need to be included. Second, the teacher must arrange them in an orderly fashion that provides interrelationships. The third step is to evaluate the clarity. The final step is to determine what slots to leave empty to promote active reading.


This article proved that providing partial graphic organizers increased text comprehension and note-taking skills. This was a quasi-experimental design study done on college students to determine students’ note-taking preference; linear or graphic, and how it affected performance on post assessments. This is an exceptional article for educators, because it increases the awareness that teachers must guide and appropriately scaffold instruction in order for optimal learning to occur, which in turn will maximize students’ performance.

Kohler, P., (2009). Don’t Just Tell Me; Show Me: Using Graphic Organizers Effectively. *The Teaching Professor, 23*(6), June/July. This article focused on how teachers present new knowledge to students linguistically, leaving students clueless on how to represent this new knowledge meaningfully. Research has proven that brain activity is enhanced when information is presented visually. Graphic organizers structure information into patterns and allows you to use labels to make relationships. This is an eye-opener for educators because students develop
and process information at differently rates. It’s noteworthy to say that taking time to plan ahead, allows the teacher more time to facilitate and guide students so that they can construct their own knowledge.

4. Evaluation of the Project
   a. Random walk through evaluations were conducted and it was rewarding to witness students who had fine motor challenges participate meaningful in instruction by selecting and categorizing visual representations of the content being taught. Before they were tracing letters on laminated paper with dry erase markers to keep busy. It was also very obvious that students with attention deficits and behavior disorders were more engaged while using their ipads to create their own graphic organizers and selecting images from google to describe new vocabulary words.
   b. The project is an evident success because the para professionals are more confident in working with the students because they are more prepared. Professional and collaborative relationships are evolving because of the opportunities to plan with the grade level teams.
   c. Because of the nature of the project, which was to increase meaningful participation with the use of graphic organizers, the results cannot be displayed in a chart format. However, the artifacts of the students’ work, is a clear reflection of success for all.
   d. In conclusion, the proof is in the putting. Educators must continue to strive to break down barriers and think out of the box to include learners of all abilities in meaningful constructive learning. Using graphic organizers is a scientifically based instructional practice that should be incorporated in cross-curricular content for all ages and grade levels.

5. Reflection
   a. Finding time for the para professionals to meet during grade level planning times was the most challenging task of all. The severity of the students on campus requires inclusive support all day, even during lunch and recess. Administrators could have provided substitutes while launching this project.
   b. In order for the implementation of the graphic organizers to be continued, an accountability system must be put in place.
   c. The improvement project required the insight of a leader. Buy in was easy because it required the stakeholders to come out of their comfort zones and volunteer a lot of their personal time. My presentation was professional and had many resources, ideas, and research to back me up. In the end, the time and effort was well spent. The results included a decrease in class disruption, and increase in student participation, and the development of professional collaborative relationships.
Describe: My analysis of performing a program evaluation project was enlightening. To facilitate closing the gap, increase use of technology and graphic organizers was recommended to increase student access to instruction.

Analyze: a. The importance of increasing technology and using graphic organizers has enhanced and defined my skills in recommending and adapting instruction.
   b. My desired position as a future independent contractor will enable me to fulfill my mission as a life-long learner.
   c. My experiences and previous knowledge has been enhanced by my education, research in the case studies I have reviewed, and direct on the job training with special education children.

Appraise: My findings are very beneficial because training and partnerships with colleagues need to be improved.

Transform: a. Insights I have gained include a heightened awareness of due process implications.
   b. My future plans are directly on target with the need to provide quality, individualized, education services for special needs citizens and increase parent and community involvement.