



Perspective Article

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# A Come Teach It Podcast Interview The Path to Becoming a Special Education Educator The Science and Humanity of Special Education

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## Abstract

Being a special education teacher is a unique career path. The profession requires the combination of the usual teaching skills of a psychotherapist. This article is derived from a series of podcast interviews. The interviews are conducted by Dr. Michael Berger of Touro Worldwide University, and Mr. Jacob Larsen, M.A. of Santa Ana Valley High. This current article is the interview of Robert Hernandez, M.A. who is a Special Education Specialist/Teacher. In this interview, Mr. Hernandez first traces his life path that led him to the profession of special education teacher. In the interview, Mr. Hernandez also details how his development as a person, and his unique life experiences, led him to the unique vocation of teaching special education students. During the course of the interview, Mr. Hernandez identifies the personal and teaching qualities that are especially appropriate for a special education teacher. During the discussion, Mr. Hernandez identifies the educational issues that are unique to working with this population. Interspersed into the transcript of the interview are relevant references to the scientific literature that correlate with and further elucidate the ideas expressed during the interview and the dialogue with the two interviewers.

**Keywords:** Special education; Teaching, Career path

## Introduction to The Come Teach It Podcast

Come Teach It is a show about the rewarding and fulfilling experiences of the teaching lifestyle. We hope it serves as a vehicle to spread positive messages about the field of education, which too often suffers from purely negative PR. In this episode, we talk with special education instructor, Mr. Robert Hernandez. He beguiles us with insights about the benefits of inclusion, and how he developed a special program for mild/moderate students.

Speaker 1: Michael Berger, J.D., M.A.: Welcome to Come Teach It a show about the rewarding and fulfilling experiences of the teaching lifestyle. I'm Michael Berger

Speaker 2: Jake Larsen, M.A.: And I'm Jake Larsen. Our guests on this episode of Come Teach It is Robert Hernandez. He started

at Orange Coast Community College and then went to school in Maryland where he attended Frostburg State University and played Division 3 football. He graduated from National University where he also got his Master's in Special Education, and a single subject credential in Special Ed with an emphasis on mild and moderate disabilities. He just finished his 14th year teaching. And we're happy to have him here. So welcome to the show, Robert.

Speaker 3 Interviewee: Robert Hernandez, M.A.: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure being here today with Michael and Jake Larsen. Thank you very much.

Mr. Larsen: That's right. So, we all teach the same school and we eat lunch together most days. And we have a ton of respect for you,

Robert. So, thank you for being here. And I just kind of want to start the interview by going into your professional art. So how did you get to where you are in your career today?

### Mr. Hernandez' Path to Special Education Specialist

Mr. Hernandez: Well, that's a great question. My story begins in Santa Ana. I was born and raised in Santa Ana. But later on I want to say about when I was two, we moved just a few miles over to Irvine, and all my relatives, mom, dad, aunts and uncles all were graduates of Santa Ana High School, with the exception of one aunt that graduated from Valley High School. So, growing up in Irvine, I went to school at Irvine High School, graduated, and then went on to go to Orange Coast College, where later I transferred. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in life. At one point, I wanted to be a Spanish teacher. I had a high school teacher that was very influential in my life. I was able to travel to Spain a couple times. So that was kind of the avenue that I was headed towards. But later coaching football turned my path and ended up becoming an instructional aide.

Mr. Larsen: Well, let's, I want to back it up to you in school in Maryland. Yes. So where is Frostburg State University?

Mr. Hernandez: Frostburg State is up in the western mountains of Maryland, not far from Morgantown, West Virginia. My parents had retired there after I graduated high school. And I wanted to be close to them. So, after about a year, I had gotten enough credits to transfer. And so that's where I ended up going. And the year that I transferred over, just so happened, my parents decided to move back to California, but I wanted to stay there.

Dr. Berger: This is across the country. I think they're sending you a message [laughs].

Mr. Hernandez: Absolutely. So, I decided, well, you know what, I got accepted into the college, I made the football team. So, I decided to stay there and that's how I ended up in Western Maryland at Frostburg State.

Dr. Berger: So, what position are you—to give people a sense of the type of person we're talking to here? You were a wide receiver?

Mr. Hernandez: No, actually, I was a nose guard. Yeah. Okay. Yeah, I played nose guard.

Dr. Berger: For people who don't follow football, how would you explain that position?

Mr. Hernandez: Well, I would line up against the center and I would, I would man both gaps and try to crush the quarterback every play.

Mr. Larsen: So, you were the feared one?

Mr. Hernandez: I hopefully, I was. Yeah, I tried to be. I tried to be.

[Editor's comment: Much like in Rugby, the ball is placed on the field and someone who is usually in the front-center of the formation is to pass the ball backward to their teammates who

then try to advance the ball forward. Mr. Hernandez' job was to try to break through the other team's players and mess up the guy on the other team who gets the ball – the exact opposite of his future career trying to help people.]

Mr. Larsen: And so, you are playing that position in college?

Mr. Hernandez: Yes. So, I was able to do that, it actually took a toll on my body. And luckily, I didn't have any major injuries, but decided, you know, I'm playing Division III [Three] football. I played a year and then decided, you know, I'm just going to focus on school and just try to be a better student.

[Editors' comment: DIVISION iii (THREE) level means there is almost no chance that you can have a professional career in the sport.]

Mr. Larsen: Well, and then eventually sounds like it led you into having opportunities to coach as well.

Mr. Hernandez: Yes. So, come I back to California after two years, and I'm just not sure what I was going to do. Like I said, I wanted to be a Spanish teacher, but that didn't pan out. And a new high school was just about to open. And I remember my father bringing a newspaper because I'd just been back from Maryland, and so he said, they're opening a new high school and one of your old coaches is going to be the new head coach there because I graduated from Irvine and Northwood is just like the crosstown rival. So, I went in and I went to go interview with my old coach. He was the defensive coordinator—his name was Rick Curtis. And he hired me. But he said that he wanted me to go back to school and finish my degree. That was the one thing that I always gained from my coaches was positive—they always gave us great motivation and they wanted us to become someone in life. So, I took up the challenge. I took the job, but at the same time, I still didn't know what I was going to do for a job because you can't just live off of a coaching stipend. So, one of the other young coaches that I had met, who I'm still really good friends with, told me, why don't you become an instructional assistant for special education? And I was like, well, what is that? He's like, basically you go in the classroom, and you help students with mild learning disabilities.

[Editors' comment: In a press release dated 2018 the Jamul-Dulzura Union School District, reflecting the current educational philosophy, explains that "practicing inclusive teaching helps generate creativity and the "outside of the box" thinking necessary to be real world problem solvers. Inclusive education is implemented after the careful assessment and consideration of each student's needs. The Special Education Team at JDUSD has established the Least Restrictive Environment, where each student can receive their specially designed instruction. Along with personalized education plans, collaboration among teachers to develop a classroom environment that is accessible and meaningful to all learners is key to creating a successful learning environment [1]."]

Mr. Hernandez: So, I thought to myself, that sounds something interesting. And I kind of left out some things earlier, was, I'd had a close relative that had cerebral palsy, and I grew up around him as a kid. And most my other family, including my younger cousins, were always afraid of him. He was nonverbal. He drooled and he had a club hand and a club foot, but his brain was all there; he had his mental capacity was that of an adult, but he just had physical disabilities. So, going back to that I always like, loved being around him, we would watch wrestling together. And my mother was kind of his, through his case worker, social worker, she was like the middle person because he lived near us. So, going back, I decided, well, that would be great. If I can work with special needs people, you know, they can use some help.

Mr. Larsen: I know, we're eventually going to get into the part of the story where I mean, you do make massive changes to the way that our entire school district teaches special education, but now we're here at the beginning of you going into this, it doesn't seem like you even necessarily had thought of it until your coach had even said to teach Special Ed.

Mr. Hernandez: That's correct. So, I said, well, what do I need to do? How do I how do I get this position? And they said, well, you go to the district office, you apply for it. They give you like a basic test.? And if you pass it, then they'll put you in a classroom where we're, there's a position available. So, it worked out great. Actually, I got hired at the middle school that I'd gone to. And I was hired by one of my teachers that I'd had for a math class. And I remember her being in on the interview panel. And the funny story was she was a first-year teacher at that time. And me being an eighth grader, kind of squirrely, you know, I've gotten a couple phone calls home for maybe some behaviour in the class. But she remembered me as being a very polite young man. So, I was very happy, and she offered me the job. So that's where I ended up.

[Editors' comment: The ability of a teacher to recognize potential in a student is critical to be an exceptional teacher. One of the most profound demonstrations of this is found in the famous study titled *Pygmalion in the Classroom* in which it was found that teachers having a positive expectation regarding the potential of students to "bloom" was found to have been associated with academic growth for those students. One apparently powerful factor was that teachers reacted very positively to questions from students who were expected to "bloom" but not so for the students for whom the teacher was not given such an expectation [2].]

Mr. Larsen: So, because of her, you know, lapse in memory about your behaviour [laughs].

Mr. Hernandez: I was very concerned, and it wasn't that bad. It was nothing bad. But so yeah, I was working. So, then that was, that's how I got into the Special Education field. And I really, really enjoyed getting up going to school, working with kids helping them. And I remember saying to myself, you know what, this is something

that I would really like to do. And that that's where I sprung into the credential program, because I said, you know, what I'm doing everything that the teachers doing, except for writing the IEP. And that's what I'll learn in the credential program.

Dr. Berger: Except for collecting the teacher's salary.

Mr. Hernandez: That too, you're right.

Mr. Larsen: So, what is an IEP just for those who maybe aren't necessarily in the education world?

Mr. Hernandez: So, an IEP stands for individual education plan, and basically, it individualizes a student's education depending on their on their needs. So, each student has a different, they have different goals, because students have different methods of learning. So, we just try to tailor a plan for each student to be successful in whatever program or classroom that they are participating in.

Mr. Larsen: So, who sees these IEP's?

Mr. Hernandez: So, since they are legal documents: teachers, parents, sometimes there's outside agencies—regional centre, it's an organization here in Orange County that provides services. Sometimes they are passed out to attorneys or advocates. But basically, it's a legal document. And there's confidential confidentiality behind that as well. General education teachers are able to see them as well. And anyone that is involved or part of the IEP team.

Mr. Larsen: Okay, and so you started teaching with the credential 14 years ago, correct?

Mr. Hernandez: Yes. So initially, though, I started. So, one of the questions and I don't want to get ahead of myself was, how is how is special education changed? Well, 20 years ago, when I first started, they were hiring teachers on emergency credentials with hopes that teachers would get credentialed. And that's exactly what I did. So, I took advantage.

Mr. Larsen: That's bananas to me. Again, I'm only a fourth-year teacher, right? But I mean, we have to jump through many, many hoops before we even get into classrooms, right? Why was it that they were giving out these emergency credentials?

Mr. Hernandez: Because there was just a high demand for teachers at that time. There was a huge turnover rate. I remember in the credential program, the first class we took was, you had to go and observe classes, because the professor said, a lot of times teachers sign up for these programs. And then they get a classroom and then it's not what they expected, or they, you know, not what they initially wanted to do. So being an instructional aide for five years really gave me that kind of head start so I knew what I was getting into. But yeah, I jumped in on an emergency credential and it got me into to my position and, and I've worked my way to where I'm at today as part of that.

Mr. Larsen: What was special education like back then because I mean, as far as I can remember this is before the term autism was even being used as much.

Mr. Hernandez: Right. To be fair, special education was at a time where you would see a bungalow in the back of a school, you know, it was kind of separate. And classes were definitely secluded and there was not as much mainstreaming whereas today, things have changed tremendously. But when I first started, we still had what we then called SDC, which stands for Special Day Class, which has now kind of comeback full circle. But we also have all these other mainstreaming opportunities for our students to go out and participate. So, it's, it's kind of done a 360.

### Mainstream and Collaboration

[Editor's comment: "Mainstreaming is exactly what you think it is... The term is used as an informal way of describing the practice of including special needs students in regular classrooms and giving them the exact same opportunities as any other kid to enjoy every aspect of the school experience – from academics, to socialization [3]."]

[Additional comment: The General Education Collaboration Model is designed to support general educators teaching mainstreamed disabled students, through collaboration with special educators. The model is based on flexible departmentalization, program ownership, identification and development of supportive attitudes, student assessment as a measure of program effectiveness, and classroom modifications that support mainstreaming [4].]

Dr. Berger: And we Robert met through the opportunity to collaborate through a mainstreaming situation. Our school was under renovation. Right. And so, we had relocated to a brand-new high school that they built literally across the street. And so, the situation for us was that the, the campus was smaller than what we were at that we were moving to. And so special Ed was forced a little bit prematurely maybe or, or sooner than plans had had really wanted just based on classroom. So, we had to implement this collaboration model.

Mr. Hernandez: Right. I would agree with you on that forced aspect. It was a positive thing, I think.

Dr. Berger: Yeah, absolutely.

Mr. Hernandez: It was positive in the sense that the students got to participate in a general education class.

Dr. Berger: But a lot of the teachers and I'll say general Ed teachers, maybe you can give the perspective of the special Ed teachers. There wasn't a lot of training that took place. It was more along the lines of you're going to be working together. It was a plan that was put in action before it could be rolled out softly.

Mr. Hernandez: Right? Yeah, we didn't. We didn't have any training at that time. Later in the year, I remember going to some type of staff development where we got to go with our collaborative

teachers. And they gave us some strategies, you know, to help be successful for the Special Ed, and the general Ed end as well. I have to say, during that not only helped the students in the sense, but it definitely helped special education teachers we learned, you know, different strategies other than what we learned in our credential program. I remember our time together and some of the great things that we did together, and I learned so much from you.

Dr. Berger: Well, thank you. And that feeling is mutual, as you really helped me figure out alternative techniques and alternative techniques that would work for the entire population, not just special ed students, and we really made one of the things I'm most proud of a point of having our special ed students integrated in such a way that if there was somebody who was just walking into the room, they wouldn't know who was a special ed student and who was just a general population student. So, we had really good collaboration, and our personalities work together quite well, I believe.

Mr. Hernandez: Absolutely. I agree with you.

[Editors' Comment: There simply is no better recipe for success than when the general education teacher and the special education teacher have a good professional and personal relationship. There are ways and methods that can be pursued in order to foster working relationships, like building trust between colleagues, sharing a similar vision for student growth, developing routines, and supporting each other [5].]

Mr. Larsen: Did other general Ed teachers have a similar experience or some?

Mr. Hernandez: Yeah, I think some did, I think I think there was the other the other side to where maybe some teachers didn't It didn't work out as well. But through time, you know, we were able to, you know, work through it and come out on top, you know, and, and over the years it was an experience for everybody and then just the population grew and with that our high school not only just in our district but our high school, specifically. We have we offer so many different programs, which we'll touch later. But yeah, that was just a great learning year for us.

Mr. Larsen: I think our year was cut a little bit short, not due to any dysfunction that we were having. Right. We were rocking and rolling. Yeah, we were in great things, but situation develop that would ultimately lead to where you are. Now with the program you're doing right our time. Was cut a little bit short.

Mr. Hernandez: It was short and unexpected. So, touching on that I remember thinking to myself, all these junior high students were coming in from, you know, from the middle schools. And they had a special program there that they called, its titled last, which stands for language acquisition and social skills. And it was a program for students that may be their disabilities weren't as severe as some of the other students, but yet low enough to not be working towards a diploma, but more so a certificate of completion. So, I was thinking

to myself, I'm like, we have all these students that are coming into high school, and we don't have a program like that. So, either they would go or so are their disabilities, physical intellectual, what kind of disabilities do they have that would prevent them from being on a diploma track? It would be the intellectual because we have students that have physical disabilities that like my uncle had the capacity of an average student and could work on a diploma and go to community college or even higher. And that happens quite a bit, which is really, really great. So, going back, we didn't have that type of program for the kids that were coming in. So either they would kind of be on the in between, we'd call it, they weren't quite high enough to be in a regular classroom or general education class, but yet, they were too high to be in a moderate or to severe disability disabled class, and it wasn't fair for them. So, I remember approaching our department chair and just kind of asking him about it because I was interested about creating something like that. And he said, Well put something on paper and we'll present it to our program specialist to see you know what they think and At that time, when you and I were working together, there was four notorious students that just they were in a, they were they felt they fit in that category, but they were in the general education setting, and just not being successful.

Dr. Berger: And they were acting out.

Mr. Hernandez: Acting out and they just, they weren't being successful. So, I remembered it happened. Like an overnight. I was then told by the principal; we're going to do this and we're going to let you do it and we're going to roll it forward. And it happened that spring break.

Dr. Berger: And it was kind of like we're going to let you do this, but your population your students are going to be these kids who don't really have a lane, right? Just those four.

Mr. Hernandez: Yeah, just those four. Wow. But I remember coming back from spring break, and I if I remember correctly, I walked right up to you and I said, I said, I think I think my schedule is changing. You're like, what do you mean? I think they're giving me this, this new program. And he and I remember you saying, well, what does it start with something like oh, today? And remember, that was one of the most difficult things I had to do. Because not only were we colleagues, you know, we were friends. And luckily, you know, it worked out it was a difficult year.

Dr. Berger: Well, I think you need to express here publicly how supportive I was.

Mr. Hernandez: Absolutely. But I mean, the feelings are mutual. We both supported each other and, and, but it was hard for me to step away from what I was doing, because I enjoyed what I was doing with Michael.

Mr. Larsen: Did you see this as an opportunity?

Mr. Hernandez: I did.

Dr. Berger: And I saw it as a real need for the school that I could understand where Roberts's passion was, and that this was really

a thing that needed to take place, just the next year. When I was thinking not...

Mr. Larsen: This is the creation of a last program at high school, as you call it, the same thing?

Mr. Hernandez: You and that well, that's, that's what we call it. But today, it's known as a moderate program. We just call it a moderate program.

### A Program is Created

Dr. Berger: So, let me fill in one more piece. And it's a totally different ministrations. But it was clear once Robert put the proposal on paper and brought it to the attention of people, they didn't see it as this long term program that could develop into something that could really help a segment of the population that wasn't being served. They saw it as, hey, he can fix this immediate problem with these particular students who if we don't manage in some way, there could be real significant problems here. And so, it was like, Okay, this isn't the way you want to start the program, but this is your opportunity. Right? Maybe you can make it work from this.

Mr. Hernandez: Right. And at the beginning it was a really difficult challenge.

Dr. Berger: It was ad hoc. You were given a "broom closet" basically that you had to turn into a classroom.

Mr. Hernandez: Yes, I did. It was literally a copy. It was like a storage room. If you walked behind building a, there's those last windows that have bars on them. And literally, they drilled a dry erase board. They put four desks and then one teacher desk, because that's all that would fit in there. And I had these students from 7:35 to I don't remember what time we were getting out maybe was 2:50. And the parents have literally dropped them off.

Dr. Berger: It was after three o'clock. That was the year we had extended time.

Mr. Hernandez: Yeah, and there was no prep period for me. No lunch, no break. It was I had those kids the whole time and it was take them to lunch. Keep them for the whole day

Mr. Larsen: And you had to make this work because if it didn't, if it unravelled, then why would the school go forward with this and build upon it? So, what challenging circumstances though?

Mr. Hernandez: Definitely challenging and then going back to the IEP, like I tried to create an environment and a curriculum to help these students be successful. I tried to do everything that I could,

Dr. Berger: Including having to keep them away from each other sometimes in that room,

Mr. Hernandez: Right. And that's where, that IEP is what drives the student's education.

Dr. Berger: I thought you were going to say, and that's where being a nose guard came into help.

Mr. Hernandez: Oh, no but yeah, it was a difficult time but like I said that that IEP had to drive their education and I did everything that I possibly could at that time and mean, this is maybe five years into my team. My career, I'm still learning a lot. I'm still learning today, I'm still learning new things. But had I done it now I probably would have done it differently.

Dr. Berger: Only maybe a little more efficiently because I don't know that anything you could have done could have worked out better. Right. I mean, you've, and you've now you got through that year, right? Those students were all able to move on in a positive manner. And you stayed in that capacity, right. So, after those four students the next year, what would happen?

Mr. Hernandez: So, the school administration, the program specialists decided that it was best to separate those four students, it was just going to be the best thing. And it really was it worked out for them. And then the next year, it was like a clean start with the first group of ninth graders that I saw through for four years, and then there was a couple seniors and juniors that were kind of sprinkled into that program.

Dr. Berger: Do you recall how many students that was?

Mr. Hernandez: Yes, that was 15 students, which was a pretty good number and I remember I got my you know, classroom, an actual classroom. And I remember I wasn't really given a curriculum or guidelines. And at the time, you know, I don't remember what if that's when I don't remember what we were doing that year. I don't know if common core started, but I was trying to integrate whatever it was that we were doing into my program.

Dr. Berger: So, the students, they're not on diploma track, right? So, what is a successful high school experience for them between the freshmen to senior year?

Mr. Hernandez: So, going back to that last curriculum. We, I tried to create an environment where they are learning math skills that are going to benefit them in their adult lives. Whether it's budgeting, writing a check, calculating, making a grocery list, and then planning. So those are things that we found that we really work on and do routinely and just try to keep those skills up.

Dr. Berger: How about emotional items?

Mr. Hernandez: There's a lot of a lot of that that needs to be addressed. There's a lot of redirecting that needs to be done on a daily basis. Not only that, at times I feel that my role is not only as a teacher, but sometimes counselor. Sometimes just someone to give positive reinforcement because we have a lot of little issues on a daily basis. And my goal and I feel that I've learned how to be two steps ahead of a major meltdown or, or a fight or something, you know, just trying to try to be ahead of the game. And that's really helped us be successful. And but just giving the students the ability to problem solve basic things that they're going to need when they go because our other goal is that they get a job, and they're going to need those basic skills.

Mr. Larsen: How many high schools now in our district have adopted your system?

Mr. Hernandez: So, I believe that our school was the first—my classroom was the first—but I am now working with other teachers. The other high schools, Saddleback, and Santa Ana all have a moderate program.

Dr. Berger: Wow. And so, when the student's grad—well, I don't want to use that word. What is the word? Do they graduate? What is the culmination of their high school?

Mr. Hernandez: We do call it a graduation. When I do a transition meeting from eighth grade to ninth grade, I always let the parents know that this you know, this program is certificate of completion.

Dr. Berger: Certificate of completion. So that is the graduation. That's great, that is fantastic.

Mr. Hernandez: And we let them know that in four years, in May, your son or daughter is going to walk across the stage and they're going to get that blue sleeve and they're not going to be singled out and they're not going to be identified as a student with an IEP, that they get to participate in all the events: prom, grad night—if they so choose to. So, we let them know that they're fully included in everything.

Dr. Berger: What happens the day after that for them?

Mr. Hernandez: The day after that for them, they then go to our adult program until the age of 22. So, our district provides services to students on an IEP that receive a certificate till the age of 22.

Mr. Larsen: So, in order to receive the services, they have to get the certificate through your program.

Mr. Hernandez: Yes. And because we've had those students that are on the fine line, I've had a couple of students that were pulled off of diploma track as seniors and some people frown upon that. Whatever the parent decides, I support it. Because sometimes, you know, parents decide that their kids are going to need more services. And if they get a diploma—as soon as they get the diploma—they are they are done receiving services. Certificate though—they're going to get services until the age of 22.

Mr. Larsen: Is this a California thing? Or is this unique to Santa Ana and the program that you've created?

Mr. Hernandez: Well, this is definitely, I believe, it's a state. I'm not sure how the special education works out of state. But I know here in California that we are to provide services until the age of 22. And with the disabilities, that the students that I work with have, most of them qualify for regional centre support, which, after the age of 22, they receive services for the rest of their life. So maybe they need like job skills training or help finding a job or help filling out an application. They can get those services through regional centre. And Regional Centre also starts from birth to two. And then the districts usually pick up from there.

Dr. Berger: So, one last question about the process. You had mentioned that sometimes seniors are put off the graduation or diploma track and put into your program and you defer to parent decision making on that, but there must be a bit more complex process than just the parent saying, 'I want my kid to get services to age 22.'

Mr. Hernandez: Right. And generally, it doesn't come from me, as a teacher, as a professional. I can't give personal advice to parents. Usually it comes through testing for a tri-annual, and then maybe the school psychologist may decide based on cognitive abilities.

Dr. Berger: So, have you ever had a student who unfortunately suffered some sort of accident or trauma and they suffer a disability that would push them into your program? Is that something that could happen?

Mr. Hernandez: It can happen [although] I've never seen that happen. Most of the students that I've worked with, have been born with a disability but I do recall there was a student, and he got a diploma. But he'd come from another school district and he'd had a traumatic brain injury. Maybe when he was a sophomore in high school, and lost a lot of brain function, but was able to come in and with an IEP and with special education support, was able to get a diploma.

Mr. Larsen: Can I just ask you about a couple of the myths that surround the special education? As I know there are a bunch. Yes, and I kind of want to get your opinion on some of them. So, this isn't necessarily a myth, but this is a belief or maybe it's an old practice, but that special education students need to be in separate classes than the general education population. What do you think about that?

Mr. Hernandez: I believe that students should be in classes that are we use the term that are appropriate. I we feel that students should be included at some point in their day, necessarily doesn't have to be for entire But I know there's some classes that students we also don't want to bring stress on students or. And that's why sometimes my students that go into a general education class are put on like a modified grade. So, they're there for the social aspect to be out socializing with others, other teachers and students. But yeah, sometimes people feel that it takes away from the teaching lesson or the students. But I feel that if it's an appropriate placement, and it works for everybody, I think that's a positive thing. I think it could be done, if it's done correctly.

Dr. Berger: I think it's also good for teachers as well to have the variety and the different students in the class right. And sometimes that can even lead to an instructional aide being there or a collaborative teacher, right. It keeps the teacher engaged in such a way that they have to keep up on current practice and learning and involved.

Mr. Hernandez: And Truly, I've always heard this and most of the time, that general education students always say I've learned

a lot more from a student with a disability, you know, working or collaborating with,

Dr. Berger: Well, Lord knows I have learned so much from you. And a lot that I've learned happens at the lunches that we tend to have the Jake mentioned at the beginning. And so, there's just so much in this realm of special Ed, and special education. The people there, you guys are true heroes.

[Editors' comment: There are a number of myths about special education that we look forward to breaking in upcoming conversations and discussions [6]. These myths include: Special Education is only for students with physical or intellectual disabilities, that getting special education services is always a battle, that by being in special education you are forever labelled [7]. We hope that through our discussion with Mr. Hernandez that we have dispelled these myths and brought a better understanding how special education instruction can be an opportunity for student growth and teacher growth as well.]

Dr. Berger: Thank you very much.

Mr. Larsen: And I've appreciated really being on your hall this year, because even though I'm a general education teacher, they placed me on the Hall of all special Ed classes. And I've just seen the benefit not only in my own life, I love walking into my hallway and all the kids are saying my name and give me a high fives and fist bumps. But I've also seen the difference that it makes in my students, that they have gotten the opportunity to interact with your kids and I think it makes them better people to.

Mr. Hernandez: Absolutely.

Mr. Larsen: Thank you so much, Robert. We appreciate you being here.

## Summary and Conclusion

There is no doubt that being a special education teacher is a unique experience in the teaching profession. However, we have come to understand and appreciate that this experience does not have to be an independent one for either faculty or the special education students. When peers and colleagues collaborate and work together personal relationships are forged and students benefit.

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## Conflict of Interest

None of the authors have a conflict of interest.

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