

## **Exceptional Students, Exceptional Technology**

**Charlene Reid  
Instructional Resource Teacher  
Carbonear Collegiate  
charlene Reid@nlesd.ca**

If you graduated more than 10 years ago you could recall how special education practices were conducted. Students were often isolated and restricted from the academically capable students. For these learners their diagnosed ‘special needs’ often confined them to a single classroom with designated teachers. Students were classified as those with disabilities and therefore removed from the learning environment of others. Oh how times have changed. Students with exceptionalities experience entirely different learning opportunities. Unlike the past, students with exceptionalities are educated within the least restricted environment, among their peers.

Students with exceptional needs often require an increase amount of teacher attention in order to optimize their learning experiences. Naturally, teachers have become overwhelmed with providing assistance for all students with various learning challenges. There is a solution, technology. The incorporation of technology within the learning environment has the ability to ensure all students learn.

Innovative advances have made it possible for individuals with exceptionalities to participate in learning activities with their peers. These tools allow all students, despite their learning challenges, to partake in classroom activities which in the past were unimaginable. The incorporation of innovations to deplete learning challenges is referred to as assistive technology and it has changed special education.

The Technology Educators Special Interest Council recognizes the need to inform and promote the incorporation of assistive technology. At their first Summer Institute of Technology Integration conference, educators were given the opportunity to explore the potential of assistive technology. Sessions were conducted to exhibit the possibilities of handheld devices such as mobile phones and tablets as inclusive learning tools. The session “Exceptional Students, Exceptional Technology” provided an overview of handheld devices as assistive technology tools.

Even though software features within these devices can provide assistance to many learners, teachers are often unaware of their potential. An overview of the available features and the corresponding potential of handhelds as assistive technology tools was the first area of focus. Among the iOS software a number of options are available on Apple’s handheld devices. The iOS software classifies these features in their settings under the accessibility tab. The accessibility features include a number of categories such as vision, hearing, learning and physical and motor.

Participants were presented with the potential of various features, particularly, the options of speech to text and text to speech. The speech to text feature integrates the use of SIRI, the voice activation component, as a speech to text converter. The integration of SIRI can

diminish learning struggles with written output challenges. Additionally, the text to speech component, also known as speech selection, was highlighted during the session. The activation of speech selection enables text in various applications to be read. Students with reading challenges can avail of this option as a means to overcoming their struggles during reading activities. These two features have the potential to greatly impact student learning for a number of exceptionalities.

Participants were also introduced to various applications. A particular realm included applications specifically focused on assessment and evaluation, such as iBooks and Pages. iBooks provides students the ability to have a text read, a term defined, or even further explained by conducting a web search. Pages was also introduced as an assistive technology tool. Pages is a word processing application which provides many great opportunities for students with exceptional needs. During the session participants were introduced to the features of Pages. These include the incorporation of speech to text as well as text to speech within a document and the various sharing features like AirDrop. The highlighted features of AirDrop include the ability to send documents by integrating the Bluetooth features of each iOS device.

The possibilities of technology in education are endless. All teachers must unlock the potential of assistive technology, as the integration of these tools will greatly enhance learning for all students. The integration of technology in the classroom can ensure all students learn together. Technology is exceptional and our exceptional students must avail of its potential.