

Working Together for Learning Together: Supporting Students and Teachers with Collaborative Instruction

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Abstract

Professional educators are called upon to provide effective instruction to student populations that increasingly consist of multiple cultures, languages, and ethnic backgrounds. Based on current special education law, schools are working toward establishing more collaborative cultures by stressing partnerships between general and special education teachers, which often includes initiating inclusive practices such as co-teaching. This article reviews the professional literature regarding the inception of inclusive practices and the factors that influenced this concept in the field. Particularly, skills for collaboration and the practice of co-teaching are examined in the context of the developing trend toward more collaborative interactions in school setting.

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Implementation of inclusive practices is growing in importance (Friend & Shamberger, 2008; Idol, 2006; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). However, the concept of including students with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers without disabilities has been in existence for decades, albeit with both early and, sometimes continuing resistance (Reeve & Hallahan, 1994; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Zigmond, 2001). At the same time, professionals increasingly are recognizing the key role that collaboration plays in reaching the educational standards that characterize contemporary education. However, like inclusion, collaboration is a complex endeavor that evokes controversy (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to examine the development, current trends for, and disagreements surrounding both inclusive practices and co-teaching and to analyze how the synergy between these two significant educational trends can either lead to improved outcomes for students with disabilities or prevent students from reaching their potential. The intent is to highlight how the field of education has an obligation to address these two critical trends in policy, professional preparation, and practice.

Understanding Inclusive Practices

Until the middle of the 20th century, classrooms consisted mostly of students who shared similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds with each other and their teachers (Kode, 2002). Further, according to Ferri and Connor (2006), before P.L. 94-142 was passed in 1975, roughly four million children in need of special education services were denied adequate school support and nearly a million others were excluded from school altogether. That exclusionary thinking ultimately resulted in two separate education systems – general education and special education (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado, & Chung, 2008).

Early Influences

To a large degree, the civil rights movement influenced parents and advocates of children with disabilities in their struggle to end the practice of excluding their children from public education (Markel & Greenbaum, 1979). Proponents wanted children with special needs to receive their education alongside their typically developing peers (Friend & Shamberger, 2008). As a result of increasing demand for schools to include children with disabilities, the long-standing pattern of educational separatism and inequity began to change through the 1950s and 1960s (Kode, 2002). For example, in 1954 the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* established that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal for African American students and therefore deemed unconstitutional. One year after that decision, in 1955, the first study was conducted that raised questions regarding whether separate education for students with disabilities was producing desired student achievement outcomes (Blatt, 1958). That research sparked a series of studies and influential articles by researchers and school reformers during the following 10-year period that increasingly questioned the effectiveness of segregating students with disabilities as a way to provide education (e.g., Dunn, 1968; Goldstein, Moss, & Jordan, 1965), at first under specific conditions and referred to as mainstreaming but eventually evolving to today's broader concept of inclusion.

Foundational Law and Court Cases

During the 1960s, the civil rights movement continued to fuel grassroots activism that characterized society during that time. The work of parents and advocates ushered in sweeping change regarding how the educational system treated students with disabilities. For example, the Federal government intervened in exclusionary school practices by signing P.L. 94-142 into law in 1975, which mandated that in exchange for federal funds, states must provide a free and appropriate education for all eligible students with disabilities (Yell, Katsiyannis, & Hazelkorn, 2007). Now commonly known as IDEA, P.L. 92-142 and its subsequent reauthorizations solidified the foundation of inclusive education. Its far-reaching implications helped establish the blueprint for how special education should operate in schools, especially regarding the rights of students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment, most frequently alongside

their typically developing peers (Winzer, 1993).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, despite the new special education law, schools often fell short of parents' expectations for the inclusion of their children with disabilities in general education classrooms (Winzer, 1993). A decade after P.L. 94-142 was signed into law, a few schools were slowly changing and allowing students with significant disabilities to be educated in general education settings. The practice was called inclusion (Kluth, Villa & Thousand, 2001/2002). However, the increase in students served in general education classrooms and resource rooms from 1977-1990 was miniscule; conversely, the decrease in the number of students with disabilities served in separate classes, schools, or similar facilities were negligible (Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996). Eventually, families turned first to due process hearings then sought out the Office of Civil Rights for quicker court involvement and more satisfactory results (Winzer, 1993).

The courts responded favorably to parents' wishes with several major decisions supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting (Friend & Shamberger, 2008). For example, in the 1983 case of *Roncker v. Walter*, it was argued that assigning students to specific programs and schools based on disability was not in the students' best interest. The ruling favored inclusive settings over segregated placements and established a *principle of portability*. In the *Roncker* case, the court found that districts must make placement decisions based on individual student needs. To do otherwise violated federal law (*Roncker v. Walter*, 700 F.2d 1058 (6th Cir.) at 1063, cert. denied, 464 U.S. 864, 1983).

Another favorable case was that of *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District* (1993). A U.S. circuit court ruled that the family of Raphael Oberti, a student with Down syndrome, did not have to prove that he could function in the general education setting. Instead, the burden of proof was on the district to prove why he should not be included in the general education classroom with the appropriate aids and services including professional development for faculty and staff (*Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District*, 789 F.Supp. 1322 D.N.J., 1992). A case with similar implications involved a student with an intellectual disability. In *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Holland* (14 F.3d 1398, 994), the 9th Circuit Court made it clear that the presumed setting and starting point for all placement decisions regarding students with disabilities is the general education setting. The burden of proof as to why a student cannot participate in the general education setting is the responsibility of the school district. In order for a student to receive his or her education outside of the general education setting, documentation is required as to why that placement would be better than the general education setting (Friend & Shamberger, 2008).

Controversy over Inclusive Practices

Providing students with disabilities a free and appropriate education in general education settings has been heatedly debated for decades (e.g., Eisenman & Ferretti, 2010). Issues

include those related to (a) educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom without negatively affecting the education of typical peers, (b) roles and responsibilities of general and special educators and other related services professionals in the classroom setting, and (c) equal and/or equitable access to the general curriculum with full and welcome membership in the classroom for students with disabilities (Ferretti & Eisenman, 2010; McLaughlin, 2010).

These controversies began almost as soon as mainstreaming debuted as an educational practice, but they have escalated in the twenty-first century, primarily because of the seeming misalignment of the core tenets of IDEA and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, formerly called the No Child Left Behind Act). Specifically, the requirement that nearly all students, regardless of disability, are held to the same standards of proficiency on high-stakes testing in some ways seems to run counter to the provisions that ensure students with disabilities receive individualized instruction to meet their unique educational and social needs (McLaughlin, 2010).

Beyond the classroom, controversy about inclusive practices extends to families and communities. For example, researchers continue to better understand the social and cultural factors associated with educating students with disabilities. Do some families prefer a separate education? How should school professionals respond when families from some cultures are not particularly concerned with the goal of independence that often characterizes inclusive settings? Further, researchers, policy makers, and professionals in schools continue to analyze what type of teacher preparation is most effective in producing teachers who can ensure academic achievement of the diverse students in today's schools (Eisenman & Ferretti, 2010).

The Need for Collaboration in Educational Settings

For several decades, school reform initiatives, bolstered by federal mandates, have prompted greater emphasis on developing highly collaborative school cultures. This trend is not surprising: Schools are merely reflecting comparable trends that already are well-documented in other disciplines such as industry, medicine and mental health, all of which have modeled the idea that more can be accomplished by collegial partnerships and teams that work together toward common goals than by individuals laboring alone (Hansen, 2007). Further, the increasing diversity among students in schools has made it clear that any single teacher is unlikely to be able to address the complex needs of those learners. Finally, collaboration gradually has become a vehicle in schools for problem solving about student issues, increasing teachers' skills, and managing school operations (Friend & Cook, 2013). Ultimately, students with disabilities are included more often in the general curriculum and classroom, general and special educators are expected to work together collaboratively. Experts prioritize school collaboration in order that these students can receive more comprehensive instruction as a result of professionals sharing goals, planning, and instructional responsibilities (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron & Vanhover, 2006).

Defining Collaboration

At the same time that collaboration is being urged among educators, confusion exists over what exactly constitutes collaboration in school settings (Paulsen, 2008). Some professionals refer to any work on a specific project or goal with others as collaboration, while others mistakenly consider it collaboration when a few vocally strong group members persuade less vocal colleagues to go along with their agenda. Friend and Cook (2013) define collaboration as a style of interpersonal interactions that exists between at least two parties having equally valued contributions and sharing in the decision-making process and accountability necessary to reach a common goal. They also emphasize that school personnel who adopt this style of interaction prioritize effective communication, active listening, problem solving and teaming in order to strengthen and maintain dynamic professional relationships.

Controversy Related to Collaboration

Although intuitively appealing—who could argue against professionals working together?—collaboration is not always easily accomplished. Much of the controversy related to it is a direct result of the rising expectation for inclusive practices (Frattura & Capper, 2007). The prospect of educating students with disabilities in a general education classroom alongside typically developing peers is often overwhelming, especially for the general educator but sometimes for the special educator as well. One solution proposed is co-teaching, that is, partnering these teachers for the delivery of instruction (Little & Theiker, 2009; Nevin, Cramer, Voigt & Salazar, 2008). Although not always the case, this relatively sophisticated application of collaboration, one of its most rapidly growing applications, often results in conflict, including interpersonal relationships, feasibility, and perceptions of effectiveness.

Some researchers suggest that co-teaching can help address the challenges faced by general education and special education teachers who find themselves overwhelmed in isolation or struggling in a new teaching partnership (Little & Theiker, 2009), and they have reported benefits for students and teachers. They find that schools that value a culture of collaboration and make co-teaching a priority support student achievement (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009, Rea & Connell, 2005), which is vital in this age of heightened school accountability. Specific findings include that students with disabilities and other diverse learners exhibited increased levels of class participation or engagement in co-taught classrooms in comparison to peers in non-co-taught classrooms (Piechura-Couture, Tichenor, Touchton, Macisaac, & Heins, 2006; Wilson & Michaels, 2006). These findings are attributed to decreased student/teacher ratios made possible by effective co-teaching (Friend, 2008).

In contrast to these optimistic outcomes, other studies (e.g., Bauwens & Hourcade, 1991; Zigmond & Magiera, 2001) raise questions regarding this service delivery model. For example, Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) do not fully embrace co-teaching as being a truly evidence-based practice. According to these researchers, many difficult issues can be identified with a rigorous analysis of co-teaching research. Some studies

fail to include appropriate control groups of students, some lack reliable data due to factors such as student absenteeism or attrition due to moving, and yet others lack valid measures of student achievement. Taken together, these problems cast a long shadow on the clarity of co-teaching's effectiveness. The subtext is a question: Is the challenging work of collaborating with a co-teacher going to produce the results needed? Some researchers have concluded that until far better data have been obtained practitioners should be warned to use co-teaching cautiously (Simmons & Magiera, 2007; Zigmond & Magiera, 2001).

Collaboration Skills

At the same time that pressure is building for school professionals to embrace the notion of collaboration, researchers also have reported that many educators lack the self-awareness, dispositions, and professional knowledge and skills necessary for collaborating with each other, diverse families, and other stakeholders involved in the education of students with special needs (Rea & Connell, 2005; Van Laarhoven, Munk, Lynch, Bosma, & Rouse, 2006). For example, some believe that their classrooms are proprietary and they resent the expectation that they should work in partnership with other teachers. Others note that since they are teacher of record for students' test scores they should be the sole determiner of instructional strategies and activities. And so, the supply of teachers with effective collaboration skills remains critically lacking (Grant & Gillette, 2006; Kaufman & Brooks, 1996), especially between general and special education teachers (Smith, 2005).

What is clear is that collaboration requires skills that teachers sometimes lack when they enter the profession (Cahill & Mitra, 2008). The degree of effective collaboration needed to provide competent instruction to diverse learners in today's classrooms, serve their families and communities, and share responsibilities with colleagues and other service providers is significant and should be taught to preservice teachers in their teacher education programs (Grant & Gillette, 2006). For example, Friend and Cook (2013) posit that a critical area of collaboration skill development includes communication skills for effective interactions with families and colleagues from diverse cultures. These authors also stress the importance of having knowledge and skill in navigating the problem solving process.

Professional Development

In addition to ensuring that new teachers have adequate collaboration skills, systems must understand that veteran teachers and administrators need similar support. They need to receive on-going professional development to fully participate in and entirely support collaborative endeavors in the school setting (Cook & Friend, 2010). Enhancing the collaboration skills of school personnel is in line with the professional literature which addresses such topics as collaborative school culture, various education initiatives for improving outcomes for students with disabilities and processes for facilitating effective school reform (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Having first established the need for collaboration skills training for pre-service teachers and ongoing professional

development for in service teachers and their administrators, the next step is identification of common barriers that often hinder the development of effective collaborative relationships.

Barriers to Collaboration

Identifying and addressing barriers to collaboration is essential to establishing and sustaining successful collaborative practices that foster student success, including co-teaching. Additionally, pinpointing problems regarding collaboration in school settings could serve as a basis for future school reform initiatives (Cramer & Stivers, 2007). Examining barriers to collaboration also provides a basis for designing appropriate professional development to facilitate a more responsive teaching force (Cramer & Stivers, 2007; Idol, 2006).

Teacher Education

As noted earlier, perhaps the biggest and most pervasive barrier to collaborative practice is the pattern of current teacher education programs. In most settings, university programs train teacher candidates (general and special education) separately and then expect them to work together effectively in the classroom. Although there are a few exceptions to these practices, most teacher education programs, especially those preparing secondary educators, neither teach their candidates the needed skills for establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships nor model them within their universities (Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Griffin, Jones, & Kilgore, 2006). These barriers must be overcome if general and special education teachers are to maximize their instructional potential through collaboration.

Time

Lack of time, especially for joint planning between general and special educators, has been identified as another of the most common barriers to school collaboration (Friend, 2008; Spencer, 2005). General education and special education teachers' daily schedules are so full that they have very little time to work together (Hines, 2008). More time in the school day would allow them (and other school professionals) increased opportunities to talk with each other formally (grade level meetings, staff meetings) or informally (lunch, planning periods) to share ideas, goals, and responsibilities (Griffin et al., 2006). Although some teachers report being able to plan collaboratively during brief snippets of time (e.g., while passing each other in the hall or waiting at the copier), others resort to meeting before or after school hours (Hackman & Berry, 2000). The ideal would be to have time for collaboration incorporated into the school day (Conoley & Conoley, 2010).

Scheduling and Administrative Support

Lack of administrative support in creatively finding and designating mutual planning time usually translates to lack of time during the school day for collaborative lesson planning and discussion of student progress and areas of need (Murray, 2004). When

practitioners lack the benefit of adequate support to help them find time in the school day to collaborate, then it is likely that at least some of the educational needs of the students they serve go unmet, thus jeopardizing their meaningful access to the general curriculum (Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, and Spagna, 2004). Similarly, lack of support for professional development in collaboration skills can deprive general and special educators of much needed appropriate communication with each other about student needs and progress, parent concerns, and the sharing of ideas to improve instruction; it may also prevent them from being mutually supportive of each other (Titone, 2005).

Attitudinal Issues

Negative attitudes of some educators also hinder collaboration between general and special education teachers (Griffin, Jones & Kilgore, 2006; Hansen, 2007). These barriers may be attributed to a lack of communication, insufficient staff development, stereotypical beliefs, and preconceived notions which are detrimental to establishing collegiality among school personnel and between the school, families, and the community (Friend & Cook, 2013; Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Additionally, parents, guardians and community members who have had negative school experiences and school personnel who are unwilling to operate outside of the regular school day hours are unlikely candidates for successful collaboration (Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006).

Other roadblocks such as limited classroom space and lack of instructional resources also hinder teacher collaboration. Moreover, insufficient staff development opportunities specifically planned to meet teachers' identified needs should also be addressed in order to facilitate ongoing collaboration (Friend & Cook, 2013).

Conditions for Collaboration

Just as there are barriers to collaboration, there are also factors that influence positive conditions for collaboration (Hackman & Berry, 2000). In order for educators who possess adequate skills and knowledge to achieve positive outcomes for their collaborative efforts, certain key elements must first be addressed. Friend and Cook (2013) identified several critical elements to effective collaboration which include the following:

1. Voluntariness – the individuals involved in the endeavor must have the attitude that they will give themselves to working with others, bring their resources and input to the table and value the contributions of others.
2. Parity – each of the collaborating individuals should understand each has equal power and influence.
3. Mutual Goals –collaborative partners should all embrace and work toward a common goal(s).
4. Shared Resources – collaborators should agree that materials, funds, ideas, time and talents are brought to the group and pooled for accomplishing the shared goal(s).

5. Shared Accountability – collaborating partners need to understand that outcomes of the collaboration, good and bad, are the responsibility of all involved.

Friend and Cook (2013) also emphasize additional factors essential to the collaborative process that are concurrently prerequisite and emergent. These include the value placed on collaboration by partners. Collaborators believe that their collective work is more likely to result in better outcomes than if they work individually. These researchers further explain that trust among school professionals who collaborate grows along a continuum, is foundational to establishment of collaborative relationships and progresses as a lifeline for the sustainability of the collaboration. This proves to be beneficial for both students and educators alike.

An Analysis of Co-Teaching as a Collaborative Practice

Schools are in search of solutions to the challenges faced by educators in 21st century classrooms. Accordingly, districts are undertaking reform efforts that promote inclusive practices within a collaborative school climate. Further, it must be emphasized that collaboration is a style used to carry out activities with its main purpose being to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and other learning needs. Co-teaching, due to its highly collaborative nature, is increasingly initiated to facilitate inclusive practices and thus raise student achievement. The following section provides additional detail on the history, research and current trends of co-teaching.

The origin of the instructional delivery model known today as co-teaching can be traced to the late 1950s. During that era, educators and researchers from the United States and abroad questioned the effectiveness of traditional school organization and teaching practices (Blatt, 1958; Kode, 2002). To address these issues, alternative models of instruction were explored, including team teaching, wherein an expert teacher provided instruction for a large group of students which was later divided and led by other teachers for discussion, extension, and assessment (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger 2010). This practice was viewed as a more efficient use of teacher skills and expert knowledge as they worked closely to coordinate their efforts.

After the passage of special education law and as part of efforts to include students with disabilities, the term co-teaching emerged in the early 1980s as a specialized application of a two-teacher classroom partnership (Friend, et al., 2010). During the remainder of the 1980s, the co-teaching concept drew the attention of researchers. A series of studies examined cooperative support groups which consisted of an administrator and several teachers who engaged in planning, problem-solving and peer-observation with feedback (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). In subsequent decades, understanding of co-teaching was clarified, the complexities of it were identified, and essential components of it were established. Currently, the concept of co-teaching continues to receive attention as an instructional delivery option today (Friend et al., 2010).

Co-Teaching Research

Nearly two decades have passed since researchers expressed concerns over the ability of the then current educational system to adequately address the future needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Bouwens & Hourcade, 1991). Now, well into the 21st century, uncertainty lingers regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of traditional education practices for serving students with disabilities and other diverse needs. These issues have formed the impetus for ongoing implementation and investigation of co-teaching as an alternative method of delivering special education services within the general classroom (Friend et al., 2010).

Questions persist regarding the implementation of co-teaching as a viable method of collaboratively educating students who receive special education services, in spite of the ongoing emphasis on accountability and the use of evidence based practices (Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Although collaborative school environments have been found to support student achievement (Lee & Loeb, 2000; McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009), which is critical to school accountability, practitioners should consider the available evidence in the professional literature.

Types of Co-Teaching Research

Co-teaching is acknowledged by many experts as a means for promoting a more collaborative school culture (Bouck, 2007; Hansen, 2007; Murawski & Hughes, (2009). As such, researchers have studied co-teaching from different aspects in an effort to determine its efficacy as a sound instructional practice for servicing the needs and improving the outcomes of students with disabilities (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Hang & Rabren, 2009). Teacher perception studies constitute the majority of research on co-teaching. For example, Austin (2001) studied the perceptions of 12 co-teaching partners. Results suggested that general education teachers were perceived to do more work than special educators. Data indicated that general and special education teachers believed the delivery of content specific instruction to be the bulk of the workload. Special educators were seen as having expertise in accommodations and modifying lessons.

In a different type of study, Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie (2007) conducted a metasynthesis of qualitative studies that explored teacher perceptions attitudes, behaviors, interactions, and classroom structures. Their findings provided broader understandings of what co-teachers generally view as essential to effective co-teaching such as common planning time and the importance of administrative support of the co-teaching process. However, they also found it difficult to conduct precise investigations of co-teaching due to problematic issues such as forming appropriate control groups. Student absenteeism and attrition, along with the scarcity of valid student achievement measures were also factors critical to understanding co-teaching research.

Although much of the co-teaching research is qualitative, a few quantitative studies support the co-teaching model (Friend et al., 2010). For example, Murawski and

Swanson (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of co-teaching studies spanning from the years 1991-1998. Their findings suggested that co-teaching is a moderately effective service delivery model, particularly in language arts or literacy instruction and to a lesser degree in math. Similarly, McDuffie, Mastropieri, and Scruggs (2009) found the use of peer tutors in a co-taught science class to be an effective approach to helping students with disabilities do well on unit and cumulative posttests. Further, Hang & Rabren (2009) found that the achievement of students with disabilities in co-taught classes approximated that of students without disabilities.

In conclusion, the current focus on promoting collaborative school cultures is intended to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and to foster increased levels of involvement for the parents and families of these students (Silverman, Hazelwood, & Cronin, 2009; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Research suggests that collaboration in school settings is critical to school success (Idol, 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010; Silverman et al., 2009). Although some districts choose co-teaching as a means to accomplish greater school collaboration, the sharing of workloads, and expertise, some general and special educators feel unprepared to co-teach (Friend, 2008; Capizzi, 2009). In order to better prepare teachers to work together in heterogeneous classrooms, more research on co-teaching is needed. Research on school reform that improves instructional practices and increases student achievement has identified collaboration as a critical element in successful initiatives (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). The field of education would benefit from extending the literature on how to strengthen roles and responsibilities of its teaching professionals and improve outcomes for students in the process.

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