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Collaborative education : working together toward accommodating all learners in the regular classroom

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Collaborative education : working together toward accommodating all learners in the regular classroom

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to inform readers about the efficacy of collaborative teaching. A review of pull-out resource room structure is presented, focusing on the amount of time students miss from the regular classroom. Scheduling is mentioned as a concern, as pull-out students are away from their regular classroom peers and environment for extended periods of time. Its effective and appropriate links to PL 94-142, PL 101-476, and the IDEA are presented.

Collaborative teaching is then defined as an alternative to students being pulled out to receive resource room services. The premises of collaborative teaching are shared. Included are the major components to consider when creating a collaborative teaching team including patience, commitment, communication, resources, and time. Following is a section concentrating on some of the difficulties with collaborative education.

The article continues with descriptions and applications of five collaborative teaching models: one teaching/one assisting, station teaching, parallel tea~hing, alternative teaching, and team teaching. It is noted in.this section that variety in the use of these various teaching models will prove to be most effective for teachers and students. Social and academic benefits for students, as well as benefits for teachers, are discussed as the paper culminates.

Collaborative Education: Working Together

Toward Accommodating All Learners

In the Regular Classroom

A Journal Article

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Anita A. Quirk

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to inform readers about the efficacy of collaborative teaching. A review of pull-out resource room structure is presented, focusing on the amount of time students miss from the regular classroom. Scheduling is mentioned as a concern, as pull-out students are away from their regular classroom peers and environment for extended periods of time. Its effective and appropriate links to PL 94-142, PL 101-476, and the IDEA are presented. Collaborative teaching is then defined as an alternative to students being pulled out to receive resource room services. The premises of collaborative teaching are shared. Included are the major components to consider when creating a collaborative teaching team including patience, commitment, communication, resources, and time. Following is a section concentrating on some of the difficulties with collaborative education. The article continues with descriptions and applications of five collaborative teaching models: one teaching/one assisting, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching. It is noted in this section that variety in the use of these various teaching models will prove to be most effective for teachers and students. Social and academic benefits for students, as well as benefits for teachers, are discussed as the paper culminates.

Collaborative Education:

Working Together Toward Accommodating All Learners

In the Regular Classroom

Josh bursts noisily into the classroom. In one hand, he holds a crumpled stack of completed worksheets. The other hand is flaunting the candy bar he "earned" in special reading class to his twenty classmates who were working quietly on an independent reading assignment. All eyes are on Josh as he whispers about his delicious treat. Sara nudges Adam, asking, "Why does he always get special treats like that? I wish I could go to the resource room for reading."

Later, Holly enters the classroom to find her peers enjoying a wonderful session of "Authors' Circle" in progress. She quietly joins the circle as Nikki finishes reading her story aloud. Holly wishes she could write and share stories with the group. They were having such fun! "I wish I wasn't in the dumb reading class," Holly thought glumly.

Resource Rooms

For as long as I can remember, there have been resource rooms. The goal of resource rooms in special education is to help students with learning difficulties in a smaller setting. Special education teachers set up Individual Education Plans (IEPs) which create goals for individual students to meet and plans for specific activities. Parents, classroom teachers,

resource teachers, and possibly special education consultants reconvene within an allotted amount of time (for example, nine weeks) to discuss whether or not the goals are being met by the child. At that point, the goals are reassessed to continue to meet the needs of the child.

Schedules

The daily schedule of a student who is categorized as "Learning Disabled" will most likely include his/her absence from the regular classroom to receive the smaller group instruction described by the IEP. Holly, from our anecdote, is served by a special teacher in the resource room for reading, language, math, and spelling. She leaves the regular classroom at 8:30 for her reading and language block. Holly returns to the classroom in time to line up with her classmates for recess. After recess, Holly returns to the resource room for math instruction. She arrives back at the classroom for lunch and recess. It's back to the resource room after recess for the afternoon reading block which includes spelling. She joins the regular classroom for the last recess of the day and remains with her classroom peers for the remainder of the day, which includes specials time. Holly totes stapled stacks of completed worksheets back to the regular classroom to stuff in her backpack and take home. The classroom teacher often wonders what kinds of things Holly is working on to improve her reading,

language, spelling, and math skills. Unfortunately, Holly's

regular classroom teacher and her resource room teacher do not

communicate regarding Holly's curriculum.   There never seems to

be enough time or effort available for one more meeting in the

day.

Law

"More often than not, teachers and administrators - and to

some extent the children themselves - assume that adequate

reading instruction for all children cannot be provided in the

regular classroom" (Brandts 1999, p. 9).   The intentions of the

special education resource program certainly aim toward keeping

the best interests of the struggling students in mind, but could

there be a better way to aid students and keep them in the

regular classroom?

As an assistance to children labeled "Learning Disabled"

Public Law 94-142 was established in 1975.   In short, Public Law

94 - 142 is based on the principle of providing an environment

which allows a student-centered situation including minimal

distractions and a lower teacher to pupil ratio.   The response

to PL 94-142's "least restrictive environment" was that of a

facility containing only the students who qualified for special

education services.   The idea behind a segregated area was that

the least restrictive environment could then be achieved.   The

area was inclusive for those students with significant

disabilities who may have been excluded from any public

education before.

In 1975, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act was

declared. As an advocate to increase the inclusion of children

with disabilities into the regular classroom, the law was

amended in 1989 (Villa & Thousand, 1995). The amendment, PL

101-476, changed the name of the Act to Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a reflection of Congress's

wishes for all students to be educated in the regular classroom.

The amendment was created to ensure students with disabilities

are removed from the environment of the regular classroom only

when the complexity of the disability warrants additional

assistance (Villa & Thousand, 1995). Amendments to the IDEA

added in 1997 further restructured, clarified, and extended the

law. The purpose of the IDEA is to assure that all students

having disabilities are allowed a free appropriate education,

emphasizing special education and related services designed to

meet their individual needs (Yell, 1998).

Even though PL 94-142, PL 101-476, and the IDEA were

beginnings toward the creation of the most suitable learning

environment for children, research and practice findings since

1975 have continually shown effectiveness in the integration of

students labeled "Learning Disabled" into regular classrooms

(Lapp & Flood, 1996). Holly and Josh spend so much time

receiving instruction in the special education classroom that it's difficult for them to connect to activities in the regular classroom, such as writing, reading, and sharing experiences. Traditional pull-out programs have lost popularity among educators because they have not produced encouraging results (Spiegel, 1995).

<div style="text-align:center">Collaboration</div>

One alternative to students receiving special education services outside of the regular classroom would be for the special education and regular classroom teachers to join forces and teach together. The initial catalyst for collaboration was found in Section 121 a. 532 (e) of PL 94-142, which required student evaluation by a *multidisciplinary* team. This law shifted the primary decision-making role in special education placements from the school psychologist to a team of persons that included parents, teachers, administrators, medical personnel, social workers, and counselors (Kaiser & Woodman, 1985). Collaboration was further strengthened with the passage of Public Laws 99-457 and 101-476, amendments to PL 94-142. Each of these laws addressed issues that called for increased collaboration and involvement of families and a range of professionals in program design and implementation for students with disabilities.

As a result of the extensive literature documenting its effectiveness, as well as legislative support, collaboration has become an extremely viable service delivery option" (Coben, Thomas, Sattler, Morsink, 1997. p.427). Collaboration involves two professionals (the regular classroom teacher and the special education teacher) working together with the goal of educating a student (or students) with learning difficulties within the regular classroom walls. Collaboration offers the opportunity to capitalize on the diverse and specialized knowledge of general and special educators who have had different training and experience (Wood, 1998).

Consultation and collaboration are two ways the needs of struggling learners are being met. To define consultation, three persons are involved in the model: the consultant, the mediator, and the target. The mediator is the professional educator attempting to bring about a change in the behavior of the target individual, whereas the consultant is the professional who has the expertise regarding strategies to change the behavior (Brown, Wyne, Blackburn, and Powell, 1979).

The goals behind collaborative teaching would include a least restrictive environment for the student(s), one that would allow for special education implications, as well as a common curriculum with those students in the regular classroom. The professionals involved would then be responsible for creating

effective objectives and lesson plans focusing on those objectives.

Regardless of what we call it, this approach to serving students with disabilities continues to gain momentum as many parents and educators advocate for the least restrictive program option that includes full-time placement in general education classrooms (Hudson and Glomb, 1997). The general idea of collaboration is that struggling students can be assisted in the regular classroom by persons working together with student learning as the primary goal.

Difficulties in Collaboration

One of the objections to collaboration is that its key players may find it difficult to team up when they are trained to focus on their professional responsibilities in their own classrooms (Wood, 1998). For teachers who have been in a familiar teaching situation for an extended period of time, the idea of collaboration may be threatening to their levels of comfort. Collaboration could be perceived as simply more work for professionals who already feel stretched thinly with the many responsibilities teachers have. But what promise collaboration has for students who struggle!

Another question that teachers or parents may ask is, "What about students who seem to perform better in the smaller, less distracting setting?" It's true, the primary goal of special

education is to offer the least restrictive environment to those who need it, but collaborative teaching offers opportunities for grouping in the classroom setting. This is where planning becomes such a crucial issue. When an activity is planned that may be seen as something that may not be beneficial to a special needs child, there is nothing saying that a small group or one-on-one situation couldn't be used to provide the adequate setting for any given student. The flexibility available in a collaborative teaching context allows teachers to better accommodate all children.

Fortunately, I was able to observe a collaborative setting in an elementary school as well as talk with some of the teachers involved with this practice. Mrs. Kim Miller, special education teacher at Malcolm Price Laboratory School in Cedar Falls, has taught collaboratively for approximately eight years. She is the adamant in doing what's best for the student, which may not always be a large group or even small group setting. Within her working schedule, students' needs are discussed and planned for frequently. Mrs. Miller's instruction techniques vary to include all types of learning settings for students who require resource assistance.

Success Agents

By planning and working together, teachers can find ways to help all learners achieve success in the regular classroom.

While the demands of collaboration are great, there are strategies that can help. The most important components for a teacher are those including patience, commitment, communication, resources, and time.

Patience.

With anything new, patience is essential in riding out the initial "waves" that could arise. One will need patience with his/her colleague, the target pupil(s), as well as him/herself. Keeping expectations in check will make things easier on all involved. Especially when the program is in its fledgling stage, patience will be crucial in troubleshooting and guiding one another along the pathway of success. Mrs. Miller, from the Price Laboratory School, exhibited patience throughout each lesson I observed. It's a natural part of teaching, but is crucial due to the many demands of collaborating.

Commitment.

To make the idea of collaboration successful, all parties need to make a commitment to the program, its goals, one another, and the pupils involved. A commitment toward collaboration helps keep the key players focused and on track. It certainly seems easier to be committed to a program when you believe in it and know it's benefiting students. Mrs. Miller mentioned the importance of committing to meetings, objectives,

and other responsibilities related to collaborative teaching which need to take professional priority.

Communication.

Communication, when present in a collaborative program, helps the right hand know what the left hand is doing. Being open with your partners can make conflict less of an issue. When Mrs. Miller, the resource teacher, sees a better way to teach a skill on the "magic e", why not share her idea with the regular classroom teacher? If one party in the team has opinions and ideals without expressing them, there is no hope that they will be targeted. How could they be? Building rapport with colleagues involved with collaborative teaching does take time, but it's well worth it when objectives are met.

Resources.

With an abundance of resources available, collaborative team members can more successfully find the answers to their questions. There are materials and experienced people willing to lend themselves to the assistance of a collaborative team, be it through content area information, integrating ways of presenting content area material, or professional development on a variety of topics. Knowledge is power, and without it any program could flounder.

Staff development is a key concept in launching successful collaboration (Friend & Cook, 1996). "Teachers are more likely

to modify their behavior and practices if they believe that change is needed." (p. 57). Staff development is an active way to assist professionals in gaining tools needed to initiate and utilize a collaboration program. Researchers have found strong connections between staff development, innovation, and pupil achievement (Friend & Cook, 1996).

Time.

Time, of course, will be the hardest element of all to come by. Whether a district sets aside time for a collaborative team to meet or whether the planning must be done on their own, time is by far one of the most valuable components of the program. Friend and Good (1996) suggest the following to create time to plan: early release/late arrival, use of substitute teachers, and instructional strategies that facilitate planning time (pp.79-82). During meetings, teachers define objectives, create lessons, and gather materials. Time will also need to be spent evaluating lessons and activities to determine whether the objectives were met.

Models

Of the wide variety of collaboration models in existence today, I chose five most suitable to the focus of this paper. Cook and Friend have recognized these five approaches to delivering co-teaching: one teaching one assisting, station

teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and team

teaching.

One Teaching/One Assisting.

Providing basic student support, one teacher clearly takes

the role of lead teacher in the classroom. The other teacher is

patroling and assisting students throughout the room. This

approach is simple and limited teacher planning time is

required.

Station Teaching.

In this style of collaborating, each teacher works with a

smaller group instructing one part of the lesson. The material

is presented to the students at separate locations in the

classroom. A jigsaw is created when the students switch

teachers to receive the other portion of the content. The lower

teacher-pupil ratio is beneficial to students. Students with

disabilities can be fully included into the group setting as

opposed to being singled out.

Parallel Teaching.

Heterogeneous groups are used when each teacher takes half

of the pupils to teach a lesson to them. Projects, discussions,

and drill-and-practice activities are among those successful

with this model. Teachers plan collaboratively, but deliver

instruction separately.

Alternative Teaching.

With one teacher focusing on smaller groups for instruction, alternative teaching allows students with exceptional needs to receive more specialized attention. The other teacher instructs the same lesson to the remaining large group of students. By teaching with this style, all children can have the benefit, at one time or another, to interact in a small group with the teacher.

Team Teaching.

Both teachers take turns teaching in this collaborative approach. Each shares the responsibilities of modeling, role playing, gathering materials, or whatever is necessary as the other is actively teaching. The two teachers may also want to present a lesson together, each inserting important parts as the lesson progresses. A vast amount of mutual trust and commitment is necessary between the resource and regular classroom teachers to create effective team teaching.

These five models can be used interchangeably to keep the classroom environment fresh. The approaches to collaborative teaching should be chosen on the basis of student characteristics and needs, teacher preferences, demands of curriculum and various other educational components (Cook and Friend, 1995).

A major challenge for teachers may lie in their comfort levels in the situation of working so closely together. Not only can sharing a common philosophy of teaching be helpful, but using the tools of communication and commitment allow teachers to find ways to combat this problem.

Benefits of Collaboration

The persons benefiting most from teacher collaboration are the students involved. Academically, they potentially will be exposed to a more student-centered curriculum, offering a variety of activities and instruction aimed toward student success.

The material taught to students in this setting will be grade-level appropriate for each student in the classroom, thanks to the helpful planning and creativity of the teachers involved. When conference time rolls around, the two teachers will not be scrambling around trying to meet regarding what a particular student is learning and doing in each other's class; a simple summary that can easily be recounted by either teacher can be shared at a conference with parents.

Think of the possibilities when two persons of such talent come together for the benefit of educating children! The special education teacher offers more training in meeting specific needs and in assessment or observation of specific needs. The classroom teachers can offer more knowledge of the

total child within the context of all learners.   The adage

"together everyone achieves more" can be brought to life through

collaborative teaching practices.

Socially, students are more likely to bloom than wilt in

this type of classroom.   No longer will there be labeled

children like Holly trudging in and out of the classrooms,

crushed at missing the opportunities that the regular classroom

students will experience.   The class students often consider to

be the "dumb reading class" will be obsolete, as the new and

improved collaborative model strives to make learning meaningful

to each child in the classroom.   Think of Josh and his candy

bar.   Wouldn't it be nice for him to receive the benefits and

opportunities intrinsic motivation could offer within the walls

of the regular education classroom?

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Students with special needs will finally be able to have a

comfort level with their learning styles and abilities, thanks

to the ideal setting which offers the best of both worlds: the

collaborative teaching model.   In the collaborative in-class

model, children at a variety of developmental levels will

collaborate as peers in the same setting, offering an

immeasurable boost of self confidence for those previously

hindered by a label.

As a classroom teacher, I see collaborative teaching as a breath of fresh air from the stale communication that has existed between special education and the regular classroom. "Collaboration is emergent and grows from trust, respect, and belief in the value of collaboration" (Friend & Cook, p.10). What a leap for educators!

So often the only time I really hear what's going on with special needs children who receive assistance out of the classroom is when we're preparing for an Individual Education Plan meeting or a parent-teacher conference. Only then is the air temporarily cleared of the limbo existing for the child who knows two different teachers and their two different sets of expectations for him/her. I would appreciate the professional teamwork that is a product of collaboration and would welcome it as a new and helpful twist in educating tomorrow's adults.

Why not bridge the gap between the worlds of special education and the regular classroom? The products of this collaborative effort can be found among the smiling faces of children, the more complete knowledge professional peers share regarding curriculum and student learning, and an all-around oneness within a school system. "All teachers need the skills and attitudes that will facilitate collaboration. Furthermore, they need the experience of collaborating so that they can

realize the benefits for themselves and for their students."
(Hudson and Glomb, 1997. P. 447).

I would love to have Josh and Holly feel like included members of our class. I can only imagine how they'd beam if they got the chance to present their ideas in stories shared during Authors' Circle.

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