Can General Education Teachers and Inclusive Teachers Collaborate and Teach Effectively For the Services of Their Students With Disabilities?

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Can General Education Teachers and Inclusive Teachers Collaborate and Teach Effectively For the Services of Their Students With Disabilities?

by

Shanna Delores Rae

May 15, 2004

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the State University of New York College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education
Can General Education Teachers and Inclusive Teachers Collaborate and Teach Effectively For the Services of Their Students With Disabilities?

by

Shanna Rae

APPROVED BY:

[Signatures and dates]

Advisor

2nd Reader

Director, Graduate Studies
Dedication

This research study is dedicated to my family. Thank you for allowing me to pursue my dreams and encouraging me to continue to grow in my professional career development.
Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction ................................................................. 1
Chapter Two: Review Literature ......................................................... 5
   Attitudes ...................................................................................... 5
   Inclusion Success .......................................................................... 7
   FAPA Provisions .......................................................................... 9
   Conclusion .................................................................................. 11
Chapter Three: Methods ................................................................. 12
   Instruments .................................................................................. 12
   Subjects ....................................................................................... 12
   Procedures .................................................................................. 12
Chapter Four: Results ................................................................. 14
Chapter Five: Conclusion ............................................................... 18
   Limitations .................................................................................. 18
   Implementations .......................................................................... 18
   Significance ................................................................................. 18
   Recommendations ...................................................................... 19
   Summary .................................................................................... 20
References ................................................................. 22
   Table 1 ....................................................................................... 23
   Table 2 ....................................................................................... 24
Vita ............................................................................................... 27
Resume ........................................................................................... 27
List of Illustrations

Table 1: Focus Group Questions.................................................................23

Table 2: Written Qualitative Responses.........................................................24
Abstract

This paper describes a study conducted in a suburban school district. A focus group session was established and consisted of four participants. Two participants are certified special education teachers; the other two participants are certified general education teachers. The researcher and one observer conducted the research. During the focus group session, the four educators discussed five questions amongst each other. The researcher asked the questions and wrote down the responses. The observer wrote down the responses as well to ensure accurate analysis of the responses.

The research questions focused on collaboration efforts between general and special education teachers, and how collaboration is necessary in order for students with disabilities to be successful academically and socially. The purpose of this study was to provide the general feelings of general and special education teachers regarding collaboration. The results of the study found that both general and special education teachers see a need for positive collaboration. The themes that emerged throughout the focus group session was the need for planning time, the need for common goals and for all teachers to be able to chose their own model of collaboration. This study is important because it helps teachers identify some issues with collaboration and the effect that poor collaboration may have on the academic and social success of students with disabilities.
Introduction

This paper reports the findings regarding collaboration between special educators and general educators for the benefit of students who are disabled. Inclusion is the practice of having identified special education students spend all, or as much of the school day as possible, in regular classrooms. While there is a great deal of support for the idea, it has been very challenging for regular education teachers to implement this practice. This paper will review some of the strategies that are successful in inclusive classrooms. This paper will explore the differences in the relationship between general and special educators.

Many problems can occur when educators do not collaborate effectively. Students with disabilities will not learn as much as they should in an inclusive setting without full support from both the inclusive and the general education teachers. In my internship placement, I see evidence of students who have disabilities, but are not receiving an appropriate education due to the lack of collaboration between their teachers. A problem that I see within the inclusive setting is the lack of socialization between disabled and non-disabled students. Appropriate socialization skills are not being facilitated; this creates problems within and outside of the school setting.

Throughout the special education cohort program, we have learned about teaching collaboratively in an inclusive setting. In the internship, there were situations that I personally witnessed where teachers were not modifying
assignments for students who have disabilities. Many of these students were not prepared for tests or classroom work in general. I believe that if the teachers were to collaborate and come up with different ways of modifying instruction for those students, the students could be successful academically and socially. The bottom line is that all students learn differently, and teachers have to teach according to each student's needs. Even though this is time consuming, if all teachers were to practice this, we could see a higher success rate especially for students who have disabilities.

In my professional experience, I have observed what some would consider segregation between special educators and general educators. Many of the relationships between the educators are not successful. If there were no successful relationship between the two, there would be very little success for the students who have disabilities. In the schools, I have seen teachers who are supposed to team teach, but then go separate ways. These teachers do not have meetings to talk about the progress of the program, and they do not sit down and complete lesson plans together. They appear to be in two different worlds. I have concluded that there must be unity between special and general educators. Many of the students' success are at stake. If these teachers do not interact with each other according to the students needs, there will be a high failure rate.

My research question is a controversial one. Can general education teachers
and inclusive teachers collaborate and teach effectively for the services of their students with disabilities? I chose to write about this research question because in becoming an inclusive teacher, I need to know the dos and the don’ts. Teaching can be easy, but teaching inclusively can be challenging. While conducting this research, I found out a lot about my character as an individual and as a future inclusive teacher. I believe that this research paper will provide some evidence about how inclusion works and can be successful with appropriate implementation. Overall, I believe that appropriate collaboration between special and general education teachers will determine the ultimate success of all students in the classroom environment.

In a recent study of collaboration (Barnes, 1999) found that collaboration is needed between teachers in the classroom to meet the needs of all students. In this article, the writer interviewed three other teachers about their developed collaborative strategies in their inclusion model. They were able to share the risks, successes, and responsibilities of inclusion. All three of the teachers believed that in their collaborative efforts, having consistency and providing extra support ensured success for all of their students.

The researcher will investigate three major issues. First, teachers must have a positive attitude about inclusion. Secondly, the academic and social successes of students with disabilities depend heavily on the teachers' attitudes. By success, I
mean the students’ achievements, self-motivation and positive self-esteem. Thirdly, students who receive special education services are not receiving a free and appropriate public education. By this, I mean the implementation of Individualized Educational Plan’s are not successful. This paper will discuss each of these topics in full detail to demonstrate that inclusion does work if implemented appropriately.
Review of the Literature

Attitudes

The literature review indicates many researchers have found inclusion can be successful if implemented ideally. According to researchers’ Miller and Monahan (1996), inclusion is a top discussion among teachers throughout South Carolina. The researchers distributed a survey schedule, asking teachers throughout South Carolina’s school district a series of questions. Three hundred and sixty-four surveys were randomly distributed. The return rate was an impressive, ninety-four percent. The surveys consisted of twenty-five statements; the rating scale was on a strongly agree to a strongly disagree scale. These were the areas of concern: regular education teacher’s role, attitudes and knowledge, collaboration and team teaching, special education teachers’ role, students’ rights, and the perceptions of the families of students with disabilities.

According to the survey, fifty-one percent of the teachers believe that the regular educator in the classroom has the primary responsibility for all of the students in the classroom setting. Eighty-four percent of the respondents indicated that special education and regular education teachers should demonstrate collaboration with all students in the classroom. Sixty-two percent of the respondents stated that a student with special needs benefit from inclusion. Sixty-eight percent believe that students with special needs improve their social skills when placed in a regular education classroom.
Certified special and general educators answered the surveys. The researchers alluded to the fact that teachers should model positive attitudes toward inclusion. While reading this information I believe that the researchers would like to see more workshops on providing teachers with the necessary tools they need for teaching. I agree, and I believe that with more input from educators the educational system can only enhance its academic and nonacademic curriculum for all students. What was missing from the research article was the parental input; it would have been interesting to see what parents may have felt about the inclusive practices.

Another important study focuses on how teachers need to have positive attitudes when working with students who have disabilities. It is essential for all students to have positive teachers around them at all times. According to Richard Shade and Roger Stewart (2001), teachers’ attitudes are critical. The authors believe those pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion needs continual assessing. The researchers have found that inclusive practices may be defeated if general education teachers do not have positive attitudes toward these practices. The writers believe that one way to help teachers enhance their well-rounded teaching skills would be to provide these teachers with proper training. Training in different areas such as exceptionalities and children’s learning problems will help these teachers teach children despite their disabilities. I agree with the authors about the collaborative efforts that need addressing by both special and general educators. If teachers have the necessary
tools to teach children with disabilities, many of the students’ problems can be alleviated. I am not saying that there would not be any problems; I just believe that many problems or issues these students’ have today could be avoided with the use of simple tactics the writers of this paper have mentioned. What the article lacked was what was the appropriate training period and how much training should there be?

Inclusion Success

A student’s academic and social success depends on the inclusive setting in which he/she is placed. Many different strategies can be useful in an inclusive setting where teachers collaborate. With appropriate and effective teaching practices, a classroom such as the author of the next article have described, can occur. Mary Kathleen Barnes (1999) decided to write about her inclusive classroom that demonstrated what good collaboration skills could do for the teachers and the students involved. Mary Kathleen and three other teachers used different strategies to ensure that the inclusive setting would work for all students in the classroom. First, all four of the teachers sat down and agreed upon an inclusive model that they would use throughout the year. "Inclusion is the fundamental belief that all children have strengths and abilities and can make a valuable contribution to the learning community." (Barnes, 1999) What a powerful statement to make; this statement sums up this research paper; if I were asked to define inclusion, I would use this statement. The word ‘community’ occurs throughout this research paper. When I looked up the
word 'community' in the dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 1997) the following descriptors showed up. A group of people, a society, cooperation and similarity. I felt that it was important for me to look up the word community and realize how dedicated these people were to the students in their classroom.

In the research written by (Barnes, 1999) she believed that inclusion is the fundamental belief that all children have strengths and abilities. Throughout the special education program, we were determining if inclusion was a service or a place. The author of the research article believes that inclusion is not a service or a place, that it is a way of thinking or believing. The author did an excellent job of expressing how people who collaborate for one common goal can have a successful partnership. Ultimately, the students will receive positive responses and the outcome will be positive as well. What was missing were the examples of their classroom environment, such as the set up of their community.

Another article that I felt was necessary to discuss was a research paper written by Debbie Staub (1995). This research paper was about an inclusive classroom setting and the establishment of the community. She actually conducted a three-year research study with her colleagues. They followed thirty-five children with mild to severe disabilities in an inclusive setting. Her findings were that inclusion does work if appropriately implemented. The social and academic aspects were mentioned in the research. Many of the disabled students worked along side a peer who was not
disabled. According to the author, some of the disabled students were the leaders, which in turn increased their self-esteem. For students who were not disabled, Debbie Staub was able to understand her students with disabilities behaviors better due to the pairings. This model also allowed many students with disabilities to become leaders within their relationship setting. Academically, students with abilities and without abilities help one another and therefore there is a higher success rate in academics. This research study shows how inclusion works, by building communities, friendships, and trust among the students in the classroom setting. What is missing is how an inclusive environment would work if there were no community. This study focused on the community and the environment that the inclusive educators had provided. What happens if inclusive teachers do not provide these opportunities for students; will inclusion be as successful?

FAPE Provisions

The last area that I will briefly be reviewing will be about students receiving a free and appropriate public education. Public Law 94-142 (Reith, J. H., Sindelar, T. P., Sorrells, M.A., 2004) discusses the, “Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which guarantees the right for all students with a disability to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment; it was renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990.” (Reith, J. H., Sindelar, T. P., Sorrells, M.A., 2004). In 1997, IDEA was amended, these amendments made several changes to the
original law. IDEA is a federal law containing mandates to promote fair assessment practices and due process procedures.

In my opinion, many students who are supposed to receive services are not receiving a free and appropriate public education. While in my internship placement, I took notes about a few concerned areas that I have witnessed. I have seen several students’ Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and it clearly states that Assistive Technology is mandatory in the classroom setting for these students. Many of the students are supposed to have Alpha Smarts, certain software programs and certain services on a weekly basis. I thought, at first, that the beginning of the school year was difficult for everyone, and so I actually figured that many of the services would not start until mid-school year. Well, nothing has changed. These students are not receiving the free and appropriate public education as stated in the IDEA. Now, either the school will get away with breaking the law or parents will step in and voice their concerns. Either way, the students are at a loss. Teachers and staff members are violating the students’ rights. A solution to this problem would be for teachers to do their jobs by collaborating with parents. Teachers and the administrative staff have ensure that they are not violating students’ rights. There is no reading between the laws. The law clearly states that teachers have to be following the goals and objectives written for students who have disabilities. Training and implementation should begin as soon as the IEP is written.
Conclusion

Several studies (Barnes, 1999; Miller, 1996; Shade & Stewart, 2001 and Staub, 1995) have indicated that inclusion can work, given certain qualities and attitudes on the part of the teachers. In conducting my own research and examining others, I have found that ‘great minds think alike.’ The belief in inclusion is a strong belief that many inclusive educators and others who are compassionate about inclusion share. In every district, schools face different challenges when it comes to the development of inclusive education; however, through the challenges many districts find a means of organizing the problem, and using different strategies to overcome it. With good leadership skills, trained teachers, resources, collaboration, partnership and appropriate placements, inclusion will and can be successful for all involved. I have learned so much in such a little time, and I believe that a change can occur for the better. That change will be in the way that many of us view inclusion. With successful inclusion, relationships among teachers will be more positive and children with special needs will have the opportunity to receive an appropriate education. I believe that inclusion is bigger than just you and I, because it starts inside the classroom; but the results reach far beyond the classroom experience. I do believe that we have come far, but we have a long journey ahead of us.
Methods

This study intends to find out how special education and general education teachers feel about the effectiveness of collaboration. The research question is: Can general education teachers and inclusive teachers collaborate and teach effectively for the services of their students with disabilities?

Subjects

All of the participants (N=4) involved in this research study are teachers in a suburban district (Spencerport school district). Two of the participants hold certification in special education and the other two teachers hold certification in general education. All of the participants are of Caucasian ethnicity.

Instruments

I will measure the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers with a list of questions answered in a focus group session. Participants will briefly discuss these questions amongst each other. The questions are in Table 1. This is an unpublished instrument developed by the researcher for the purpose of this study.

Procedures

The researcher will be conducting a focus group session with volunteers who are available from the day-to-day work setting. There will be four participants, one observer and the researcher in the room. The researcher will be asking five questions,
and the participants will answer the questions amongst each other. The researcher will be there to clarify any concerns, but will not participate in the discussion, nor will the other observer in the room be a participant. The researcher will report and analyze the responses given by the participants. The researcher will share the results with the participants and the building principal of Bernaby elementary school.

In order to review the subjects' responses for patterns or trends the researcher will use the qualitative research design with a descriptive planned statistical analysis, such as percentages mean and standard deviation. The researcher will be using a computer database to organize and interpret the data collected from the focus group session. The database is the Statistical Package of Social Sciences, (SPSS) and the version that the researcher will be using is 12.0.

This research study's intent is to find a correlation of general and special education teachers' collaboration efforts and the impact that their efforts may have on the academic and social aspects of students with disabilities. Therefore, if conducted again, the instrument used in this study should show reliability and validity.

These are the subjects, instruments and procedures for this research study. Any change that may occur will be addressed in the results section.
Results

The researcher conducted a study to investigate if general education teachers and inclusive teachers collaborate and teach effectively for the services of their students with disabilities. The researcher planned to qualitatively identify the patterns and trends of special and general education teachers' collaboration efforts.

The researcher had planned to use the Statistical Package of Social Sciences, (SPSS) version 12.0. After reviewing the data, the researcher decided that using SPSS to compute the qualitative research was not appropriate. The researcher manually created a qualitative table of the responses of each member of the focus group for each comment (see Table 2).

The following themes emerged for the purpose of this research. The first question that the researcher asked was, “What does collaboration mean to you?” Subjects A, and B are special education teachers who are females and of Caucasian ethnicity. Both teachers agree that when two teachers team-teach collaboration should be a part of the working relationship. When working collaboratively one teacher takes the lead and the other teacher is more of a supporter. Subject B believes that having the opportunity to plan together with general education teachers will help meet the needs of all of the students. Subject C is a general education teacher who is a male of Caucasian ethnicity and subject D is a general education teacher who is a female of Caucasian ethnicity. These teachers agree with the special
education teachers. They both also believe that: flexibility, respecting people, personally and professionally, are a part of good collaboration.

The second question that the researcher asked was, “In what ways do you believe general education and special education teachers collaborate effectively to better service students with disabilities?” Subject A believes that it is difficult for special education teachers to effectively collaborate with general education teachers. She believes that the little steps that students with special needs make are grand to special education teachers, and might not be so grand to general education teachers. Subject B believes that general education teachers need to know the curricular knowledge and special education teachers need to know how to modify the curriculum. Subject C believes that it takes a team approach to teach in an inclusive setting. Subject D believes that flexibility, openness, and listening to the special education teacher are good ways for the two teachers to collaborate effectively in order to better service students with disabilities.

The third question that the researcher asked was, “Do you believe that teachers who collaborate should have the same goals?” Subjects A, B, C, and D all agree with each other and their responses were yes. They all stated that two people have to have the same overall goals. Subject A believes that goals are important and that the teachers involved need to have the same goals no matter what. Subject B stated that goals and objectives help students meet the teachers’ goals. In addition, that the
overall goals for the teachers should be the same but the way to get there can be different. Subject C responded by saying “yes” and “no.” This subject believes that the social, emotional and academic goals should be the same, but teachers might have individual goals set for certain students. Subject D believes that two people who work together should have the same goals.

The fourth question that the researcher asked was, “What do you believe the roles of general and special education teachers are?” Subject A answered by saying that it is difficult for students to treat special education teachers the same as general education teachers, because sometimes special education teachers are only in the classroom on a part time basis. Subject B believes that the best model is whatever the team decides the model should be. Subject C believes that being a special education teacher is harder than being a general education teacher due to the different tasks the special educator takes on. Therefore, it would be hard to designate certain roles to the special education teacher. Subject D believes that planning time is crucial and switching roles is very important. She believes that the two teachers working together should create the model that they would like to use.

The fifth question that the researcher asked was, “Do you believe that poor collaboration between general and special educators can have a direct impact on students with disabilities?” Subject A believes that if two teachers do not agree on what they both are looking for, students start believing that there is always going to
be one good and one bad teacher. Subject B believes that if both teachers do not have the same goals, their students' will experience stress. Subject C agreed and compared teaching to parenting. This subject believes that teaching is just like parenting. Both teachers must agree and be on the same page just as parents. Students will experience emotional effects when teachers or parents are not on the same page. Subject D believes that the curriculum is a good way for general and special education teachers to collaborate positively.

The results will be discussed in the discussion section.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the collaboration efforts between special and general education teachers and the effect that collaboration can have on students with disabilities.

Limitations

When interpreting the results, the readers need to consider several limitations to this study. Everyone who participated in this study was of Caucasian ethnicity and three out of the four participants were females. Therefore, the responses might be different if this study was conducted again due to the ethnicity and gender of the participants. Another limitation of this research study was the small sample size of the participants in this study. To receive a broader perception from general and special education teachers the sample size has to be larger than the four participants in the focus group session.

Implementations

Not all planned statistical analysis was carried out. Upon review of the raw data, the researcher decided that using Statistical Package of Social Sciences, (SPSS) to conduct the qualitative research was not appropriate. All of the other plans in the methods section were carried out successfully without any concerns.

Significance

The data that I received from this study concurred with the review of the
literature. There were many patterns found in this research study. Both general and special education teachers see a need for positive collaboration; this finding is consistent with the other research. Another issue that did emerge, as the researcher predicted was that students with disabilities are not receiving appropriate services due to general and special educators collaboration skills. The themes that emerged throughout the focus group session was the need for planning time, the need for common goals and for all teachers to be able to choose their own model of collaboration.

To the researcher’s surprise, the special education teachers who participated in this study agreed that in a classroom setting, one teacher should be a leader and the other teacher should be more of a supporter. Although not a definitive finding, a possible explanation is that some special education teachers may not know of any other models of teaching that are effective.

**Recommendations**

Future research is needed to determine the extent to which students with disabilities are affected by poor or sufficient collaboration between general and special education teachers. In addition, given the small sample size of this focus group, replication of this study would be important. The next step for this study should be for anyone interested in this study to change the research design in the future. Instead of using a focus group session, maybe surveys would be more
appropriate.

The findings of this study also suggest that there is a significant problem between where the participants in this study are in their collaboration efforts and where they would like to be. Further research is needed to determine different strategies to help special and general education teachers reach their goals in their collaborative efforts.

Summary

Conducting this research study allowed me to become more knowledgeable about research, investigate different strategies for positive collaboration skills, see the immediate need that students with disabilities may have and ultimately have the opportunity to share my research with other people who are interested in this study. When conducting the focus group session I thought about the students who were affected by this research study. I hope that some of the ideas that the teachers shared were implemented into their classroom settings.

The purpose of this study was to explore the feelings of general and special education teachers regarding collaboration. The results of the study provided information that is similar to those presented in current literature. Many teachers are trying to make positive collaboration efforts. With the proper training and professional development, I believe that we will one day be able to see significant changes with collaboration. These significant changes will ultimately have a positive
affect academically and socially on students with disabilities.
References


22
**Table 1: Focus Group Format & Questions**

**Directions**: I will be asking you a series of questions about collaboration. I would like you to direct your responses to one another rather than direct your answers to me or the other observer in the room. We will be listening to your responses and recording them.

1. What does collaboration mean to you?
2. In what ways do you believe general and special education teachers collaborate effectively to better service students with disabilities?
3. Do you believe that teachers who collaborate should have the same goals?
4. What do you believe the roles of general and special education teachers are?
5. Do you believe that poor collaboration between general and special educators can have a direct impact on students with disabilities? Explain.
Table 2: Written Qualitative Responses for the Focus Group Session

1. What does collaboration mean to you?

Subject A: Collaboration is when two teachers teach off one another.

Subject B: When working collaboratively one teacher takes the lead and the other is more of a supporter.

Subject C: When teachers have the opportunity to plan together.

Subject D: Flexibility and respecting people, personally and professionally, are a part of collaboration.

2. In what ways do you believe general and special education teachers collaborate effectively to better service students with disabilities?

Subject A: It is very difficult for special education teachers to effectively collaborate with general education teachers due to planning time and differences of opinions.

Subject B: General education teachers need to know the curricular knowledge and special education teachers need to know how to modify the curriculum.

Subject C: Using a team approach.

Subject D: Openness and listening to the special education teacher are good ways for the two teachers to collaborate effectively.

3. Do you believe general and special education teachers collaborate?

Subject A: Yes, two people have to have the same goals overall.
Yes, two teachers working together will have to have the same goals.

**Subject C:** Yes and no, the social and emotional goals should be the same.

However, teachers may have different goals that they would like for their class to work on, that the other teacher might not necessarily agree with.

**Subject D:** Yes, two people who are working together will need to have the same goals.

4. **What do you believe the roles of general and special education teachers are?**

**Subject A:** It would be difficult to determine, since some special education teachers are only in the classrooms for part of the day.

**Subject B:** The best model that the teachers who are teaching think they should use.

**Subject C:** Very difficult to determine, due to the different tasks that each teacher has to perform.

**Subject D:** The two teachers working together should create their own teaching model.

5. **Do you believe that poor collaboration between general and special educators can have a direct impact on students with disabilities?**

**Subject A:** Yes, because if teachers do not agree on what they both are looking for, students start to pin point the bad teacher vs. the good teacher.

**Subject B:** Yes and both teachers need to have the same goals in order for
collaboration to work.

Subject C: Yes, teaching is just like parenting. Both teachers must agree and be on the same page just as parents should agree with each other when making decisions regarding their children.

Subject D: Yes, and using the curriculum is a good way for general and special education teachers to collaborate positively.

(Note: The comments depicted are written exactly as stated by the subjects.)