Reshaping the Role of a Special Educator into a Collaborative Learning Specialist

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Abstract

This article investigates the practices of effective collaboration and co-teaching among Special and General Educators as it relates to the social justice concept of inclusion. Data was gathered through interviews, faculty surveys, student surveys, and personal journal reflections. The study explores the key components to reshaping the role of a Special Educator into a Collaborative Learning Specialist. Collaboration and co-teaching, done effectively, have the power to improve learning outcomes for all students as well as promote inclusion in schools. Effective collaboration, benefits of collaboration, competing forces of collaboration, flexibility and accountability as agents of change, and resources for collaboration are discussed.

Keywords: Collaboration, Special Education, Inclusion, Co-teaching, and Social Justice

Introduction

A growing body of literature establishes collaborative teamwork as a critical component of quality inclusive schooling. Despite this research, schools still face challenges in the implementation of effective collaboration. Collaboration is not the end itself; it is the means to an end. That end is often improved student learning outcomes, greater job satisfaction, and overall school improvement. If inclusion is the goal of a school, then effective collaboration is a necessity. Friend and Pope (2005) define inclusion as a belief system. "It is the understanding that *all* students-those who are academically gifted, those who are average learners, and those who struggle to learn for any reason-should be fully welcomed members of their school communities and that all professionals in a school share responsibility for their learning" (p. 57). However, very often it is the case that a school claims to be inclusive when it really is not. Many schools are talking the talk, not walking the walk. There needs to be a commitment to collaboration, in all its forms, to truly become an inclusive school.

The researcher in this study has a dual endorsement in both elementary and special education. In the work of a Special Educator, the researcher attempts to bridge the gap between special and general education and overcome the isolation that exists between them. Over the past two years, the researcher has been actively engaged in co-teaching math in both the second and fourth grades and will be co-teaching math with two different classroom teachers in both second and third grade next year. Co-teaching has proven to be an effective use of time and a successful way to ensure successful learning outcomes for not only the students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs), but for all students.

Still much of the time as a Special Educator is exclusory, on an island away from the rest of the teachers and students. This is contradictory to the inclusive experience of co-teaching and other collaborative practices. To undo this tragic exclusion of students and teachers alike, we must implement collaborative practices such as co-teaching and counteract the historic isolation of special education teachers (Pugach & Winn, 2011, p. 45).

As the school has moved towards inclusion, the researcher's role as a Special Educator has evolved into a more collaborative role. The following question has been the focus of inquiry: "What is necessary to reshape the role of a Special Educator into a Collaborative Learning Specialist?" The title "Collaborative Learning Specialist" is not an established job title but is the essence of the new role for the Special Educator, as co-teacher and collaborator. It represents shifting the perspective away from the antiquated, isolated role of the Special Educator. Educators have the ability to lift the stigma associated with Special Education by helping schools shift their mindset to inclusion instead of exclusion and prioritize collaboration as a way to improve student outcomes and overall school progress. Through this transformation from a Special Educator to a Collaborative Learning Specialist, educators may hopefully become more effective and successful in increasing student learning and positive experiences.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature surrounding the topics relevant to collaboration in schools, inclusion, co-teaching, and the role of the Special Educator.

Collaboration in Schools

Friend and Cook (2013) define collaboration with great specificity: "Interpersonal collaboration is a style of direct interaction between at least two equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 6). While there are many definitions offered by experts in the fields of education and collaboration, the common thread is sharing. The key elements of successful collaboration are: "(a) parity, (b) mutual goals, (c) shared responsibility in decision making, (d) shared resources and accountability, and (e) valuing personal opinions and expertise" (p. 483).

Collaboration is not limited to one type of practice. It manifests in various forms: formal meetings, informal meetings, integrated services delivery, co-planning, and co-teaching. "Collaboration, though often represented as synonymous with co-teaching, rather includes co-teaching as one subset of skills needed to effectively and jointly educate students with disabilities in twenty-first century schools" (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014, p. 77). Collaboration, as a practice in schools, has been heavily reviewed and the research repeatedly states the need for more effective collaboration to take place in schools (Friend, 2000).

> No indicators hint that interest in collaboration is on the wane. To the contrary, the increased complexity of educating students with special needs, the deluge of new information being produced and disseminated about teaching and learning, and the ongoing school reform efforts suggest that for professionals to manage their jobs, collaboration will continue to be a necessity. The study of collaboration must keep pace with the increasing demand for its practice (Friend, 2000, p. 130).

Basically, more of it is not necessarily better, especially when most efforts are not truly collaborative but are labeled as such because of team meetings and the need to be interacting. Sometimes it is the most skillfully organized, implemented collaborative efforts which are most successful, and sometimes it is the more informal meetings which are driven by a sincere, mutual desire to improve a student's learning. What makes collaboration successful is the genuineness of the players involved. Recent research on inclusion and collaboration indicates that certain conditions must be in place to yield successful collaboration. Deppeler's (2012) research states that "genuine collaboration is based on common goals, voluntary engagement and parity among the participants and involve shared resources, decision-making, responsibility, and accountability for outcomes" (Friend & Cook, 2013). Deppeler goes on to identify and discuss various forms of successful collaboration in schools. It can take many shapes and forms but to be successful it must have the aforementioned conditions.

Collaboration is socially complex and, when done effectively, contributes to the social capital of the school community as well as to solving complex problems such as maximizing learning outcomes for a diverse student population (Deppeler, 2012). To reach this level of genuine collaboration it requires not only trust and shared responsibility but the "use of evidence based on sound pedagogical principles" (Deppeler, 2012). Lastly, because collaboration is "socially complex" it requires "shared leadership…and structures that create collective action" as well as repeatedly examination to ensure these conditions exist and the school is maximizing the social and academic benefits from the collaborative efforts" (Deppeler, 2012, p. 157).

Inclusion

Inclusion has its roots in U.S. education legislation beginning in 1975 when the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). The EAHCA mandated that all states, which accepted federal special education funding, must provide a "free, appropriate public education" to all children with disabilities (Weber, 2009). The EAHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. IDEA is often referred to as the "backbone of special education law" (Weber, 2009). IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 and now embodies the following basic concepts: inclusion of all children, no matter how severe the disability; the right to a "free, appropriate public education" (FAPE) which requires the adaption of education to meet the needs of students with disabilities; the right to related services outside of the general classroom instruction; the least restrictive environment (LRE) which requires schools to educate students with disabilities with their general education peers to the maximum extent possible; the education is free; and lastly, parental participation and rights which include parents in all decisions about their child's education (Weber, 2009).

Since IDEA many students with disabilities have been increasingly included in the general education classroom which has required the need for highly collaborative efforts among general and Special Educators. Over the past 30 years, Vermont has ranked among the top, out of fifty states, in its rate of inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom 80% or more of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). However, Suter and Giangreco (2009) stated that, "although Vermont's pioneering efforts to include students with disabilities are laudable and worth examining, like in schools everywhere, there is always more work to be done" (p. 81).

Since the 1997 reauthorization of Public Law 94- 142, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school district personnel have been given the charge of ensuring that all students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum. The authors of IDEA established major goals within the law that would influence systemic changes in public schools across the country. Among these major goals, the authors emphasized that students with disabilities in public schools should reach higher levels of achievement specifically with each school district's version of the general education curriculum. (Wischnowski, Salmon, & Eaton, 2004, p.3).

Within this legislation exists the language of the "least restrictive environment" which denotes the setting in which students with disabilities learning will occur. The "least restrictive environment" is often the classroom where the student can have as much access to the general education curriculum and social benefits of the classroom. Inclusion is a model that promotes social justice, advocating for all students with disabilities to have access to the classroom and general education curriculum (Wischnowski, Salmon & Eaton, 2004).

Co-Teaching

Co-teaching is one type of collaboration. Friend and Cook (2013) states that "co-teaching occurs when two or more professionals jointly deliver substantive instruction to a diverse, blended group of learners primarily in a single, physical space" (p. 163). Co-teaching requires effective collaboration and thereby necessitates sharing of responsibility, accountability, shared goals, and mutual respect (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). An important facet of successful co-teaching is flexibility. Klingner and Vaughn (2002) state, "co-teaching and co-planning necessitate (a) communicating frequently and effectively with another professional, (b) sharing

power and control over assessment and instructional decisions, and (c) being flexible" (p. 23).

Co-teaching, however, is not without its challenges. It is fraught with power dynamics and control issues. Friend and Cook (2013) caution "conflict and resistance are natural occurrences in collaboration, but depending on your response to them, they can either enhance collaboration or impede it" (p. 82). Nevertheless, there is good reason to pursue co-teaching as a collaborative practice. Research has identified many benefits to co-teaching as an inclusive practice.   Hang and Rabren (2009) identified these benefits in their research study, stating: "'special educators and general educators'…showed agreement with statements that students with disabilities increased their self-confidence, learned more, had sufficient support, and exhibited better behaviors in co-taught classrooms" (p. 266).

The Role of the Special Educator

In the field of Special Education, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is often referred to as the authority on the changing role of the Special Educator in the 21st century. "According to the Council for Exceptional Children, collaboration as a professional practice includes multiple partners such as parents, teachers, related service providers, and outside community agencies. By working in tandem with these partners in a culturally responsive manner, Special Educators are viewed as specialists by a myriad of people who actively seek their collaboration to effectively include and teach individuals with exceptional learning needs (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014, p.48)." Recent research supports this view and suggests that Special Educators must develop into more effective collaborators with an increased presence in the general education classroom (Robinson, & Buly, 2007).

Special Educators, in the 21st century, should be adept at collaboration and co-teaching. In fact, over time, the law has evolved to require collaboration within the realm of Special Education (Friend & Cooke, 2013). "The indicators of a Special Educator with strong collaboration skills include: a) modeling strategies for consultation and collaboration, b) building respectful and positive relationships with professionals, c) coordinating the inclusion of students with disabilities into a variety of school settings, and d) using co-teaching methods to increase student achievement in the classroom" (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014, p. 78). Klingner & Vaughn (2002) who researched the transformation of a Special Educator into a Learning Disability Specialist over a period of seven years reported that "much of the knowledge and skills she required was a blend of (a) special education assessment and intervention skills, (b) the ability to creatively adapt and accommodate instructional lessons and assignments to meet the needs of students with 'learning disabilities' in a whole-class setting, (c) an understanding of the general education curriculum and goals, (d) the ability to collaborate and co-plan with 'general education' teachers, and (e) commitment and dedication (p. 29)."

Commitment and dedication to collaboration and inclusion has the power to transform the culture of our schools and elevate the performance of both students and teachers alike. Randhare Ashton (2001) profoundly states, "without careful reconsideration and reconfiguration, we will continue to reproduce the inequities of the centuries old education system that has left us in a place where we talk transformative inclusion, yet walk traditional exclusion" (p. 60).

Context

Woodhill School is a rural K-6 elementary school with a population of 160 students located

in a small rural town in Vermont.[1] At Woodhill, 17% of the students are on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and 31% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Woodhill has multiage classrooms and is part of a school district which includes four other elementary schools and one middle/ high school which serves grades 7-12 (Vermont Department of Education, 2014). Woodhill employs two Special Educators, nine General Educators, a part time Guidance Counselor, a part time School Based Clinician, a part-time Speech and Language Pathologist, six Paraeducators, a part time Math Coach, and a Literacy Interventionist. Woodhill also had a new Interim Principal for the 2014-2015 school year, the year in which this study took place. Vermont's Agency of Education recently identified Woodhill as a school for improvement for not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress as mandated by No Child Left Behind (Vermont Department of Education, 2014).

Woodhill is known for being a small school within a community that truly cares about its children and their learning. It has many popular, longstanding traditions and is a very welcoming school. There are many veteran teachers as well as new teachers who are committed to making the school the best it can possibly be for all who come through its doors.

Over the past two years, the Woodhill faculty and staff have been working on improving their school climate. The climate has deteriorated and resulted in issues around trust and communication. Teachers and staff have a deep commitment to and passion for the school and its community and, as a result, worked collaboratively to re-establish group norms and values with the assistance of a professional facilitator as part of their professional development. The work of the school is ongoing and rooted in its dedication to making the school a welcoming and trusting environment for the entire community.   Mutual trust is an essential ingredient to co-teaching and collaboration. One way to improve the school climate is to employ practices such as co-teaching and collaboration. As mentioned above, the researcher in this study has co-taught math in both fourth and second grade over the past two years and will continue to co-teach second and third grade math classes next year. The researcher's relationship with both classroom teachers was positive, but their approaches and personalities were very different. In both years, the school has had the additional challenge of implementing a new math curriculum. The researcher was also a member of the Educational Support Team (EST), a problem-solving team which provides support to classroom teachers for students who demonstrate the need for support in the areas of behavior, social-emotional skills, and/or academics. Lastly, the researcher also engaged in regular collaborative planning time with grade level teams.

In addition to co-teaching, the researcher provided specialized instruction to students both inside and outside the classroom. The researcher has used this mixed approach in the past and practices a careful balance of inclusive and specialized services delivered inside and outside of the classroom. Throughout this year, the researcher intentionally took a collaborative approach to the interactions with General Educators.

Research Design

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[1] To protect the privacy of the school and participants involved, the names of persons and places related to the study have been changed.

This paper was based on a qualitative research project conducted during one full academic year. The problem at the core of the research was how to reshape the role of a Special Educator into a Collaborative Learning Specialist. The primary research question was: "What is necessary to reshape the role of a Special Educator into a Collaborative Learning Specialist?" During the year, the researcher actively participated in the research as an educator and collaborator. The role of a Collaborative Learning Specialist focuses on providing specialized instruction for students, co-teaching and co-planning with educators, and participates in effective collaboration with all professionals. It was important to the researcher to explore this role more deeply to discover what practices were necessary to transform into this new role. Specifically, the following questions were investigated: What are the duties and responsibilities of a Collaborative Learning Specialist? What does effective collaboration look like? What are the benefits of collaboration? The challenges? How does collaboration support inclusion? How does becoming more collaborative improve school climate and culture?

Data Collection

The author performed the research over the course of an academic year at Woodhill School. The Institutional Review Board at Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont sanctioned the research proposal. The Woodhill Principal and Special Education administrator were both informed and consented to the research project. In addition, all participants agreed to informed consent to use the information in a formal research project. The researcher did not use confidential information in the study and changed or omitted names to ensure anonymity of all participants.

Personal Reflection. The researcher used the method of personal reflection to document the journey of collaboration and co-teaching throughout the year (Ferrance, 2000). This form of data collection was intended to be a self-study and field notes were used as self-reflection. Through personal reflection, the researcher conveyed an intimate experience and story about the journey throughout the year. It was a reflection on collaborative efforts on various levels, interrelationships with teachers and administrators, working with students, and how collaboration was tied in with the school's culture.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with several education professionals, two in the school district and one from a local university. The interviewees have over ten years of experience in the field of education with a focus on administration, special education, and collaboration. By gaining access to these experts, common themes and insights emerged, such as how the role of a Special Educator is shifting, and the benefits and challenges of collaboration and co-teaching.

Teacher Feedback. The online survey tool, Survey Monkey, was used for the purposes of collecting faculty feedback. There were 15 open-ended survey responses to ten questions which focused on collaboration and co-teaching. The researcher created the survey questions to gather perspectives on collaboration and co-teaching. The survey included the following questions: What types of collaboration have you been involved in this year? What types of collaboration have you been involved in this year? Which types of collaboration were the most successful? Why? Which types of collaboration were the least successful? Why? How could more effective collaboration with your special educator help you as a teacher? How could it help your students? Are you interested in co-teaching with a special educator or specialist? Why or why not? And, if so, in what subjects? In your opinion, what are the benefits of co-teaching for IEP students?

What are the benefits for non-IEP students? What are the benefits of co-teaching for the staff? In your opinion, what are the challenges of co-teaching for staff? For students? How could we use technology to improve collaboration? How should the responsibility for planning and instruction be shared between the general educator and special educator? The Survey participants were faculty members and included: the Principal, General Educators, Special Educators, and Specialists. Perspectives from all of the professional educators in the building were represented among the survey responses.

Student Survey. Gaining insight into the students' perspectives on the school's collaborative efforts was important to the research. Therefore, students from a second grade co-taught math class were surveyed to gather feedback on their experience in a co-taught classroom. The researcher adapted a sample student survey from the Bureau of Education Research's "Co-Teaching that Works" seminar. The questions included: Do you enjoy having two teachers in your co-taught math class? Do you think your receive more help in your co-taught math class? Were students treated more fairly in your co-taught math class? Do you enjoy the variety of activities in your c-taught math class? Have you learned more in your co-taught math class? Does your class show better behavior in your co-taught math class? Would you like to have two teachers in your other classes? There was also a place for comments. The survey questions had the following options for answers: Yes, No, or Not Sure. The survey data was collected using a hard copy, paper survey and done during a math class that occurred in the Spring of that school year.

Role of the Researcher

My role in the research was active and fully participatory. Throughout the year, I reflected on my experience as a special educator, co-teacher, and collaborator. Periodically throughout the year, I solicited feedback through expert interviews, and faculty and student surveys. In this regard, I learned from the data I collected and actively modified my practice accordingly. Since I used myself as a participant in the study, I took precaution to check my own assumptions and biases to report less with opinion and more with themes in my own reflections. These themes were triangulated with other data sources in the study, to include expert interviews, teacher survey information, and peer reviewed academic research. As an ethnographic researcher, I was a member of the community in which I was studying. As a teacher and researcher, I was also an active participant in my research. My qualitative research approach entailed: observation, thorough documentation, and considerate analysis of people's words and actions (Méndez, 2013). The collection of qualitative data collection included: my regular field notes, personal reflections, teacher survey feedback, student survey feedback, and expert interviews. As the ethnographic researcher, I sought to discover and gain insight into the collaborative experience, process, and perspectives of the people involved. It was my personal engagement with the school community which shepherded a deeper understanding of the school's culture and social climate.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed in its various forms: transcribed expert interviews, written personal

reflections, open-ended survey responses from the professional staff using an online survey tool, and student paper survey. The researcher used thematic analysis to uncover common themes across all four areas of the data collection (Hendricks, 2012). Data was reviewed, one area at a time: survey responses, expert interviews, personal reflections, and student surveys. To avoid any pitfalls of predetermining themes by compartmentalizing data by questions or topic, the data was reviewed as a whole. The faculty's open-ended survey responses were analyzed in conjunction with the personal reflections and expert interviews to uncover common themes in collaboration and co-teaching. Feedback from the student surveys provided the perspectives of students who were in the co-taught second grade math class.

As part of the analysis process, the researcher annotated and assigned codes to each statement (Hendricks, 2012). Then, the data was reviewed several times to look for patterns. As connections were made, themes began to emerge. To help support the analysis and organization of data, the researcher developed a codebook. In the codebook, the researcher sorted each piece of data and placed it under its correlating theme and/or sub-theme. The result of this process was the compilation of the initial findings. In the findings, the researcher triangulated the data in one of two ways: one, data was triangulated within one data source (e.g. in the survey the researcher would look to see if three or more responses were related to a theme); two, the data was using three different sources (e.g. the researcher would look to see if a survey theme was also in interview responses and personal reflections) (Hendricks, 2012). The triangulation process supported the validity and reliability of the findings. However, there were potential limitations to the study.

Findings

Based on the findings, five major themes have emerged. First, the research shows specific characteristics that define Effective Collaboration. Second, Benefits to Collaboration exist for students, teachers, and school-wide. Conversely, the third theme is Competing Forces that function as inhibitors to collaboration. Fourth, Accountability and Flexibility emerged as agents of change in actualizing effective collaboration. Fifth, from the research emerged Resources for Promoting Collaboration and Inclusion in schools.

Effective Collaboration

From the faculty survey, expert interviews, and personal reflections, specific traits were identified that characterize effective collaboration. According to the data collected through faculty survey responses, effective collaboration has a clear, known purpose. One teacher said, "I found that the meetings which had clearly set agendas were the most successful." A Principal stated that effective collaboration occurred when there was a "shared responsibility to meet the learning target." A personal reflection stated that, "very effective collaboration should have goals and objectives predetermined at points during the year, beginning, middle and towards the end." The literature supports this finding: "Collaboration requires commitment on the part of each individual to a shared goal, demands careful attention to communication skills, and obliges participants to maintain parity throughout their interactions" (Friend, 2000, p. 130).

Benefits of Collaboration

The findings show that there are many benefits of collaboration between Special Educators

and General Educators, including: Integrated Services, Quality of Instruction, Happy Kids, and Inclusion.

Integrated Services*.* Integrated services means the cohesive delivery of instructional services inside and outside the classroom. One staff member discussed the benefits of collaboration as, "Having scheduled meetings with the Special Educator and the support staff who are serving the students to discuss students, their progress, and plan of attack. Sometimes I feel there is a disconnect between services given outside the classroom and what is happening inside the classroom." Another teacher said, "I would like to see more overlap…I feel like what the kids get is literally outside the classroom and I don't know how to help them apply their learning within the classroom." In regards to the school wide intervention blocks in the master schedule for next year, my personal journal states, "It would be beneficial to use this time to pre-teach, re-teach, or supplement skills...How can I use this intervention time to ensure math students are getting the skills they need outside of their math class?" Recent literature supports the finding that integrated services delivery is a benefit of collaboration, "Contemporary concepts of teams in education and related services specify their service delivery focus as the overall goal shared by all members of the team. Whether the team's specific purpose is to study and plan a child's program or to deliver specific services or interventions directly, service delivery is fundamental" (Friend & Cook, 2013, p. 113).

Quality of Instruction. In regards to co-teaching and collaboration with a Special Educator, the faculty and experts agreed that a collaborative model benefits students the most. "Co-teaching benefits everyone. Increase the experts in the classroom and you will have a high-level learning environment for all students. All students need highly skilled teachers, not just one group," said one respondent.   In response to the benefits of co-teaching and collaboration, three survey respondents stated that, "two heads are better than one." This notion that "two heads are better than one" denotes a higher quality of instruction for all students. The quality of instruction goes up for all students, not just students with IEPs. The benefit is "for all students, two pathways to learning create a greater chance of engaging and retaining," commented a faculty member. Another faculty member said, "Special Educators have skills and techniques that can be used to help IEP students learn more effectively, especially in large groups. Non-IEP students may benefit from some of these same techniques. It's always helpful to have two adults in a room to pool their knowledge when working with students."

Expert interviews revealed similar insight. A Special Education Director said, co-teaching "is essential. To meet the complex needs of students you need all perspectives to make a rich program." Research demonstrates that the benefits to co-teaching include not only academic achievement but a reduction in stigma associated with pull out services as well as opportunities for positive social interactions (Friend & Cook, 2013).

Happy Kids. Happy kids should always be a priority for teachers, but it's possible to underestimate the social-emotional benefit that a collaborative model such as co-teaching has on students. After surveying 19 second graders in a co-taught math class, and as highlighted in the graph below, 100% of students said they enjoyed having two teachers in their math class this year. The survey also indicated that 18 out of 19 students thought all students were treated fairly

(one was not sure), 18 out of 19 said they enjoyed the variety of activities (one was not sure), and 15 out of 19 said they wanted two teachers in their other classes (three said no and one was not sure).
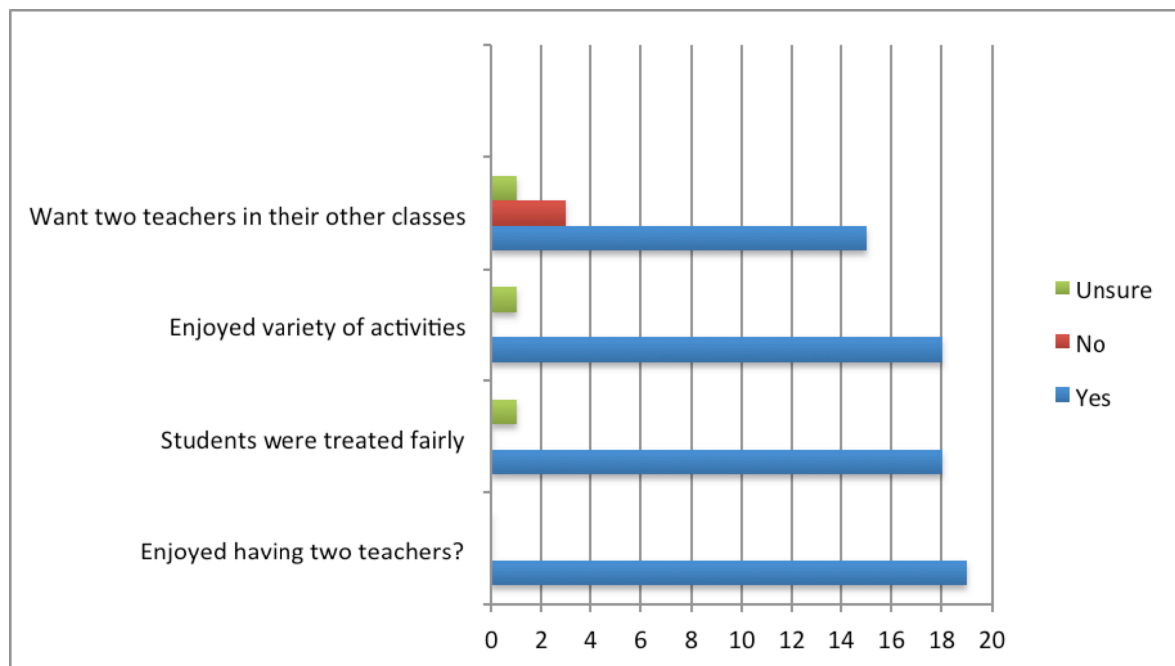
Figure 1:Student Survey Response

When surveying the faculty about the benefits of co-teaching, one teacher responded that it "allows kids to stay happy." Another faculty member responded that co-teaching, "reduces negative stigma associated with pull-out programs, students may feel more connected with their peer group." A local University Professor said that co-teaching is a "win-win-win. It's fiscally responsible, good for kids, and increases the percentage of time that kids have access to Highly Qualified Teachers instead of paraprofessionals." It is fiscally responsible because co-teaching allows for more effective utilization of the Special Educator in the classroom, diminishing the need for additional, less experienced support staff in the building.

Inclusion of All Learners. Among the many benefits of collaboration and co-teaching, is the inclusion of all learners. All learners means exactly that - ALL learners, from the exceptional to the average to the struggling. When asked about the benefits of co-teaching a teacher said, "the benefit is for ALL students. The Special Educator does not only have to be with tier III (IEP) students." One faculty member commented on the benefit of co-teaching by saying, "Special Educators are just like us, and kids would see that; it might reduce the stigma of being special needs kiddos who have special teachers." Another said, "it builds community; the idea of WE."

When interviewed, the University Professor added that educators need to "shift the mentality away from exclusion of the individual student to how to support the classroom teacher with that student in the classroom." In the field of Special Education and Inclusion, research shows that for students with disabilities to obtain higher levels of achievement there is a need for "the roles of general and special educators to change toward more formal collaborative activities and responsibilities" (Wischnowski, Salmon, & Eaton, 2004, p. 3).

Competing Forces

For every positive there is a negative. Competing forces which may hinder collaboration and co-teaching came up repeatedly and included the following: time, control, trust, and personality or teaching style. Twelve out of sixteen faculty members indicated that "time to plan" was a major challenge to co-teaching. One faculty member said, "challenges for staff 'included': time, sharing responsibilities, not stepping on each other's toes, weekly meetings, inequality of leadership roles, 'and' not feeling like a guest in someone else's classroom." Another respondent said, for the faculty, the challenges include: "the time to co-plan, sharing teaching responsibilities… 'and' if the teaching styles are quite different between the 'classroom teacher' and the special educator." A third teacher referred to the challenges of co-teaching as, "Working with someone you may not work well with (different personalities - opinions, work ethic, skill set, etc.), making sure that both are responsible for what they bring to a lesson, or making sure that the work is equitable."

The underlying issue of trust emerged in the survey results as well. One teacher addressed the challenges to co-teaching: "Relying on another person 'is a challenge', 'other challenges include:' possible differences of opinion or values in certain subject areas or in general, always staying up to date with what has happened while the other teacher was there…planning together with all different types of planning styles. 'Challenges' for students 'include', not having the one go-to person, but instead two that can create confusion and miscommunication." Another teacher voiced her concerns around feeling confident that a co-teacher could "wing it" if need be. She says that "winging it is just not great teaching, though often what has to happen given time, tech breakdowns, unexpected schedule changes, etc. With two people teaching, you can't wing it. The two people absolutely must have done their work before hand. They need to be use a high-level of communication skills and conflict resolution skills with each other in order to have a united front."

The journal reflections also addressed the issue of control when it comes to collaboration: "I think it's really important to recognize that when you have full control over something, you feel as if you know it better. Control is comfortable. Co-teaching really forces you to move out of your comfort zone and demands more work from both teachers in some ways - more planning, more sharing." A recent study performed by Hernandez (2013) discusses the issues of control and personality conflicts as it relates to collaboration in professional endeavors. It stated that areas in which professionals faced challenges included: "interpersonal issues and the challenges of working with others because of differences in philosophy and style" (Hernandez, 2013, p. 488).

Data gathered in the teacher survey also addressed challenges to collaboration by soliciting information that identified factors that characterized "ineffective collaboration." Several teachers spoke to Collaborative Planning Time, weekly grade level team meetings, as "… a great idea, but the topics are sometimes assigned to us instead of the teachers making the plan." Ineffective collaboration occurred at "…meetings that were not planned out well or when people came unprepared were not successful." The "…'meetings' which did not stay on topic or did not have a structure to keep them contained and focused 'were ineffective'; our time is too valuable to chit chat or not have a purpose." "Those 'meetings' that felt forced, poorly-planned, obligatory; those with no discernible outcomes" were ineffective attempts at collaboration. Commonalities among the data show that teachers believe that challenges to effective collaboration include: lack of focus, lack of structure, and the absence of a shared investment in a common goal. Deppeler (2012) goes on to discuss the challenges of implementing effective collaborative practices in

schools, "While schools are potential sites for shared practices, they often lack the structures or mechanisms for facilitating the active participation of the various members" (p. 149).

Flexibility and Accountability

Flexibility. When interviewing experts about the role of a Special Educator, the responses were varied. The school Principal commented on the need for more flexibility, stating that she would like to see Special Educators have, "less paperwork, increased classroom time, integrating as much as possible, more shared responsibility of all students, and more flexibility and responsiveness to children's needs." A University Professor said, "the role varies across the country based on a state's categorical license. Vermont is non-categorical- its roles are varied because the state does not have caseload parameters. Vermont is the Wild West 'of Special Education' because the Special Educator determines his or her caseload." He also stated that "there's a glitch in the system that is designed for accountability on IEPs that are so narrowly constrained that limits flexibility to more naturally evolve in the classroom…" As confirmed by Klingner and Vaughn (2002), "co-teaching and co-planning necessitate (a) communicating frequently and effectively with another professional, (b) sharing power and control over assessment and instructional decisions, and (c) being flexible" (p. 23).

Accountability. In all of the data collected, the notion of accountability was referenced a total of 29 times. In journal reflection reflections, it was noted that, "One major challenge is the mind shift towards 'these are all of our students and we are both responsible for teaching everyone,' especially in a co-teaching environment. A Special Educator should want to teach all students, and a classroom teacher should want to teach all students, including the high fliers and the most struggling of learners, and all of those in between." A University Professor referred to the importance of accountability and meeting the needs of all learners as well. He said, "co-teaching is a structure that is very person dependent. If you load up kids by classroom for co-teaching then you violate the principle of natural proportions. We should build systems based on total school populations and use Special Educators more flexibly. The trick is how to maintain accountability. It requires a shift in the general education structure as well."

Faculty feedback also carried the important message of accountability at various levels. Thirteen out of sixteen of the faculty who were surveyed said, co-teaching responsibilities should be equally shared. One teacher said, "Roles should be established at the beginning of the school year. 'The' workload should be divided equally. Teachers should be responsible for gathering materials for their specific portions of the lessons/activities…'and' students should be able to meet regularly with both teachers." Another faculty member said that, "within a co-teaching model, I see planning as a shared responsibility." A benefit to co-teaching, according to another faculty member, is that "… you can play to each other's strengths and it's good to have students to learn to be accountable to more than one adult."

Resources for Collaboration

The data revealed a variety of resources to facilitate collaboration and thereby promote inclusion in schools. Seven out of sixteen staff members suggested using Google Docs to enable effective collaboration. Although technology clearly has many benefits, the data findings and literature also point to face-to-face and "soft skills" as critical to the success of effective collaboration. Soft skills are personal characteristics that allow people to interact in harmony with one another (Greenberg & Nilsen, 2014). Greenberg & Nilsen (2014) stated that, "That

ability to collaborate is perceived as an essential component of education – 95% of those surveyed say that the ability to collaborate is important, just behind those who believe problem solving is essential (96%). These two skills lead the pack of soft skills and are perceived as extremely important to preparing learners for work life" (p. 3).

One faculty member said, "I think the most important part of collaboration is face to face "soft skills"- being able to problem solve and solve conflicts in the moment with a colleague - one of the hardest skills to teach and to learn." Another teacher responded that the following are resources for collaboration: "Adult communication that is on their own schedule vs. having to find a time to sit down each time (although face-to-face shouldn't be eliminated!); student work via technology that allows communication via staff and students on own schedule (for example, using Google Docs -- adults can correct/leave comments on their own schedule and both staff members have equal access to the documents)." Journal reflections noted that, "We would struggle a bit when it came time to effectively planning lessons for the week. To help in this regard, it would be best to have a collaborative planning document that provides a way to communicate, update and share ideas for instruction on an ongoing, flexible basis." When asking experts ways in which we can promote collaboration and inclusion in the school, they had similar notions. The Director of Special Education said, "technology, collaboration across the building, Google hangout, and shared resources."

Discussion

The findings underscore the importance of engaging in collaboration and co-teaching among all educators to promote inclusion in schools. However, inclusion is not the only benefit. The study shows that the cohesion of service delivery is improved, the quality of instruction is enhanced, and the kids are happier. To become effective collaborators may be a challenge, but it is one that educators must take on if there is a commitment to improving learning outcomes for all and advocating for the inclusion of all. Interviews, surveys, and journal reflections reveal that issues of control and style or personality act as competing forces against working collaboratively with one's colleagues. The issue of time to collaborate with colleagues also emerged as a competing force to effective collaboration as well. Therefore, educators must be flexible and use technology such as Google Docs, Google Hang Out, virtual planning and other resources to facilitate co-planning and collaborative work when appropriate.

Technology, however, is not the only friend to collaboration. The research also indicated that face-to-face "soft skills" are critical to the success of effective collaboration. Generally, experts agree that co-teachers must possess strong interpersonal skills, specifically in decision-making and problem solving (Friend & Cook, 2013). The ability to work harmoniously with colleagues is of utmost importance to effective collaboration. Doing so also models professional, social and interpersonal skills that will benefit students in all walks of life.

There are challenges to collaboration to be aware of when headed down the path to inclusion. Those forces competing with effective collaboration such as time, control, teaching style and interpersonal issues should not be underestimated or overlooked. In fact, Deppeler (2012) states, "each collaborative arrangement should be repeatedly and critically examined to ensure 'those' conditions are maintained and…to reap those high-quality educational and social benefits which arise from our efforts" (p. 157). Of exceptional importance to successful collaboration are the challenges educators face related to sharing power and control and differences in teaching style and philosophies. These are complex social and psychological issues that inhibit collaborative practices yet have the potential "to increase student achievement," "change teacher practices",

and "improve teacher's individual and collective self-efficacy" (Deppeler, 2012, p. 147). The findings reveal a common theme of teachers' beliefs that relying on another colleague to reach a shared goal will be more difficult than doing it alone. This mind-set reflects an underlying need to control as well as a lack of trust in professional colleagues to collectively reach a shared goal of improved learning outcomes for all. If teachers do not believe they can effectively navigate social and professional differences and view collaboration as added value instead of an additional burden then implementing successful collaborative practices within a school will be doomed to fail. Keith Topping's (2012) research on inclusion discusses the need for teachers on the ground to believe in the vision of inclusion and value of collaborative practice in their schools.

> New initiatives tend to be seen as additional burdens…. Practitioners are rarely told what to leave out in order to make space for a new initiative. Also, practitioners may be more comfortable doing what they have always done rather than exploring more challenging difficult areas in which they are more likely to make mistakes…Eventually, however, islands of good practice become more numerous, sooner or later more practitioners have contact with at least one and the small islands begin to join up into larger islands (p. 38-39).

To address the challenges, research suggests that the collaborative efforts involve a common goal, voluntary engagement, parity, shared decision-making and resources. In addition, teachers would benefit from professional training around collaboration, specifically, how to manage and ensure that their efforts are yielding positive results. For instance, Joanne Deppeler (2012) discusses several research based collaborative practices that yield positive social and educational outcomes. Such practices include: Professional learning Communities (PLCs), Collaborative Inquiry, Teacher Moderation, Teacher Collaborative Discussion of Quality Practices, Expert Coaching, and Home and School Collaboration.

Collaboration done effectively, with a clear purpose and structure, will yield successful results for both teachers and students. The literature confirms this. Friend (2000) reinforced the need for collaboration and co-teaching to support inclusion, "virtually every treatise on inclusive practices, whether conceptual, anecdotal, qualitative, or quantitative, concludes that inclusion's success in large part relies on collaboration among staff members and with parents and others, and that failures can typically be traced to shortcomings in the collaborative dimension of the services to students" (p. 130). Therefore, it is the ethical duty of professional educators to collaborate with one another.

To engage in more effective collaboration, and thereby promote inclusion in schools, it has become clear that flexibility and accountability are critical to a school's success. In fact, flexibility and accountability are the enzymes which break down the resistance to changing the culture of schools from exclusion and isolation to inclusion and collaboration. Change is constant in the teaching profession: new students, new teaching methods, new curriculum, new philosophies, and new regulations. Special Educators are constantly adapting to change; it is the nature of the field. In addition to adapting to change, Special Educators must also wear many hats: case manager, consultant, co-teacher, collaborator, and provider of specialized instruction. To be adaptable and be many things to many people Special Educators must practice flexibility and encourage colleagues to do the same.

Throughout the data, the theme of accountability emerged as the thread connecting teacher to teacher, teacher to student, student to teacher, and student to student. Repeatedly, faculty, experts, and personal reflections showed that the shared responsibility for all students was at the core of effective collaboration and thereby a driving force behind inclusion.

Teachers are held accountable to one other through the collaborative and co-teaching models; and, they must also work closely with one another to meet the learning targets of their students. Teachers are accountable to all students through the collaborative and co-teaching models. The level of accountability increases in a co-taught classroom. For instance, there are two teachers in the co-taught classroom; therefore, students have more than one professional educator to whom they are accountable. Since there are more teachers in a co-taught classroom, teachers are thereby accountable to more students because two educators can reach more students in a set amount of time. Finally, there is the student to student level of accountability. By including all students in the classroom, the students' level of accountability to one another has increased because the amount of time they are connected to one another as a peer group has increased. Instead of pulling certain students with disabilities out of the classroom, all students are in the classroom learning together. They are seen as equal members of the classroom community and therefore they have a shared responsibility to be respectful and foster a healthy learning environment. By becoming accountable to one another on multiple levels, educators and students alike promote inclusion within their school community. The goal of inclusion is to minimize the marginalization of those students with disabilities and requires the participation of the entire school community (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014).

As seen in Figure 2, the thoughtful and intentional practice of flexibility and accountability by educators should foster effective collaboration. Once effective collaboration becomes a school wide standard of practice, inclusion should follow.

Figure 2: Flexibility & Accountability

Special Educators must become collaborators and leaders in their schools to promote a culture of inclusion.   For effective collaboration to become a standard of practice in schools, educators must lead by example and become accountable for the learning of all students while maintaining flexibility in their roles. It is hard work, but imperative to cultivate a culture of inclusion where all members of the school community are seen as equals and the success of all learners is considered the priority.

Over the past year, Woodhill has done some their own hard work and made the following

changes to improve collaboration: weekly collaborative planning time with grade level teams, increased co-teaching teams, enhanced professional development around co-teaching, and implemented both block scheduling to facilitate co-planning and co-teaching opportunities, as well as school-wide intervention or "skills" blocks. The school-wide intervention or "skills" block is a skill building time scheduled at the same time four days a week where all students get what they need. These blocks could include any of the following examples: enrichment for accelerated math students, social-emotional skill groups, number sense skill groups for struggling math students, and intensive, explicit instruction for students with language based reading disabilities. All of these practices require effective collaboration and support inclusion of all learners in the school community.

To improve collaboration in schools, educators should consider implementing the aforementioned practices. In addition, it may be helpful to ponder the following questions: Am I an inclusive educator or administrator? Is my school truly inclusive? Do I practice effective collaboration? How can I more effectively collaborate to promote inclusion?

As a result of this study, questions that arose for the researcher include: What systemic changes are necessary to promote effective collaboration and inclusion? How does becoming more effective collaborators effect the success of our students? How does an inclusive school improve school climate? How do educators monitor the progress of their collaborative efforts? What evidence determines whether the collaborative efforts have benefitted the students? What evidence determines whether the collaborative efforts have benefitted the participants (i.e. professional learning)?

As education continues to move forward, this study encourages educators to be mindful of effective collaboration and inclusion in their professional practice. Specifically, the research recommends that educators practice *effective* collaboration. When educators engage in collaboration, they need to be mindful that it is done effectively. Effective collaboration has a shared goal, an agenda, and clear purpose. It may occur formally and informally, must be practiced, and thoughtfully and intentionally implemented. Educators should also be mindful of the benefits of collaboration. When faced with the challenges of collaboration such as time, control, and teaching style and personality, remember that the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Through effective collaboration, instructional services being delivered to students inside and outside the classroom become more cohesively integrated, the quality of instruction for all students is increased, the kids are happier, and the school community becomes inclusive of all learners. While practicing collaboration, educators must remember to be flexible and accountable. Flexibility and accountability are catalysts to changing the culture from one of traditional exclusion to one of transformational inclusion (Randhare Ashton, 2014). To help educators reach this level it is important to utilize all resources available. By practicing effective collaboration, educators can achieve a goal that is no longer singular in nature, but a universal goal to create an inclusive community where the success of all learners is the priority. Only when educators make this commitment to collaboration and inclusion will schools be talking the talk and walking the walk.

Limitations

It can be difficult to avoid fitting the data into predetermined categories. Since the data was generated mostly from predetermined questions it was challenging to avert the use of the topical

content of the questions to organize and analyze the data. To mitigate this challenge, the researcher analyzed all of the data as a whole, including all responses and statements. Another possible limitation was using the University Professor as an expert interviewee. This expert's profession and interest was highly relevant to this specific topic and therefore had a much higher degree of relevance and bias to this topic than other possible interviewees. He was selected because he is an expert in this field, both professionally and academically. Lastly, the personal reflections were another possible limitation. Since the researcher is a proponent of collaboration and co-teaching, the bias towards this collaborative model might have affected the data in some way.

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