**Collaboration among General Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers**

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Collaboration among educators is vital to educating all students. Collaboration can take place among educators, families, and other faculty. Collaboration among educators includes learning about new perspectives, engaging in new learning experiences, discovering new skills in behavior management, and developing a deeper understanding of school policies and procedures. The definition of collaboration differs from individual to individual. However, the basic meaning of collaboration is educators sharing ideas, information and strategies to enhance effective teaching. This paper will review several studies in which collaboration was a central issue and describes how it may be defined and assessed. The discussion will also address the importance of collaboration in inclusion.

**Teachers’ Voices Concerning Collaborative Teams within an Inclusive Elementary School.**

**Jane Leatherman**

Leatherman conducted a study to examine the aspects of an elementary school’s (K-5) implementation of a school-wide inclusion program. The study was conducted over a two year period using qualitative methods. The study investigated teachers’ insights and interpretations through focus groups, interviews and personal observations of the teachers in their respective classrooms. The study included eight general education teachers, three special educators, two special education instructional assistants, and the principal. The program consisted of including students with identified disabilities within the general education classroom along with peers of their respective grade level. Collaboration was defined through consultations with SPED and general teachers about IEP’s, and team teaching. General education teachers stated that they learned a great deal from observing SPED teachers teaching learning experiences within the general education setting. They were able to see how they modified learning experiences. SPED and general education teachers, when team teaching, were better able to assist all students rather than ones primarily on IEP’s.

The focus of the study was primarily collaboration. Leatherman focused her interviews for the first year around the following questions:

“How have you grown professionally since the implementation of the inclusion program? Describe an incident that you have experienced this year. Give details. Include everyone who was involved. How did this incident impact your learning and teaching?” (p.192).

During the second year participants were also asked to compare and contrast their experiences over the past two years.

The questions asked during focus sessions were designed to be open-ended and to promote reflection on their practice. “They were asked to share positives and challenges of the inclusive program and resources to make the program more successful” (p.193).

Nineteen 30-45 minute classroom observations took place; so that Leatherman could clearly see the program benefits and challenges first hand. She took time after the observation to discuss her findings with the teacher and she recorded her field notes to be able to later identify the thoughts and feelings about the observations.

Leatherman organized the data into categories according to content and then examined the data for similar themes within each teacher’s statements and/or behaviors. She found three themes that were consistent throughout in response to collaboration. The three themes were “scheduling challenges, team-teaching characteristics, and modeling/support within inclusive classrooms” (p.194).

There are three areas which are important to the success of a school and inclusive classrooms. First, teachers must find the time in their schedules to collaborate with others; if they do not make time to collaborate, it will not happen and the benefits will not be realized. Second, team teaching characteristics must be similar so that the teachers and the students feel that everyone is going in the same direction. Last, the teachers must have the support from their leaders/role models within the system who can demonstrate collaborative practices

**Despite best intentions: When inclusion fails**

**Nancy Mamlin**

The goal of Mamlin’s study was to determine what inclusion looked like and what participants associated the meaning of inclusion with. Mamlin assessed the quality of the study through interviews and observations. Unfortunately Mamlin’s study was not successful in including more special education students in the general education classroom. Mamlin states “The importance of a strong leader who provides for collaboration among the staff in a school cannot be overlooked” (p.47). Leaders in schools need to be adequately informed on the changes happening in the school. A good leader guides the staff and makes sure they understand the changes and the reasons behind the changes. This will promote cohesiveness among the educators and willingness to accept the changes. Mamlin discusses the positive benefit of collaborating with schools on new ideas and not thrusting them upon them.

It is imperative that the leaders as well as all teachers and aides understand what collaboration is and why it is important to the success of the school and the students. The benefits need to be stressed. The leaders need to be able to guide the staff toward change and must not dictate what is to be done.

Mamlin’s study was unsuccessful for multiple reasons. One was that special education was still seen as a segregated department. Segregated department is defined as once a child is deemed eligible for special education classroom teachers take less responsibility for the education and well being of these children and feel that they are now the special educator’s responsibility. An issue that is alarming is that the special educators were required to modify the curriculum for SPED students however, they had little to no access to the grade level curriculum. Another downfall of Mamlin’s study, thus making it unsuccessful, was the type of leadership that was implemented. The principal lead through putting others down which did not encourage the teachers to collaborate with one another, it merely made them suspicious of her.

One of the things to consider when discussing this study was that it took place at one school and therefore the results should only be used to compare and contrast with other schools similar in nature and to help determine a hypothesis as one looks at other schools.

**Urban Elementary School Teachers’ Perspectives Regarding Collaborative Teaching Practices.**

**Sharon J. Damore and Christopher Murray**

Over the years, “students with disabilities have been increasingly moved to general education classrooms” (p.234). Damore and Murray’s investigation surveyed twenty urban elementary schools regarding their perceptions of collaborative teaching. The survey included questions to determine teacher perceptions regarding collaboration, inclusion and what was needed to ensure collaboration. Teachers were asked about their feelings towards collaboration and if they thought that collaboration was happening within their school. Among the findings were, 92% of the teachers surveyed thought that collaboration was occurring within their school. However, merely 57% reported they practiced collaboration within their own classroom.

A weakness of the study was that Damore and Murray chose to select schools using convenience sample method. The twenty schools were selected because they met various geographical location requirements. The schools represented various ethnic and socioeconomic statuses.

The teachers involved in the study believe that collaboration is going on in theireducation facility. However, not all actually felt that they practiced collaboration. As the sample was small and only fit certain requirements, once again this study is not representative of all schools in a wide geographical area.

This study suffered from a few limitations, one being that the teachers represented were merely a ‘snap shot’ of teacher perceptions (p.241). The study was at a disadvantage because they only conducted data based on convenience. The findings they found may not match other schools. The data for the study was based on perceptions and not on observations therefore this study is subjected to biases. This study was conducted in one school district which means the findings may or may not coincide with other school districts.

**Students with disabilities in teacher education: Changes in faculty attitudes toward accommodations’ over ten years.**

**Yona Leyser, Lori Greenberger, Varda Sharoni, and Gila Vogel**

Within higher education the amount of students with disabilities is increasing. Leyser, Greenberger, Sharoni, and Vogel conducted a study that examines the changes in faculty knowledge, attitudes, and willingness to make accommodations for students with disabilities (p.162). The study was conducted at a local college in Israel during 1996-1997 and again in 2006-2007. Faculty members responded through questionnaires which included questions that touched upon knowledge, attitudes, and adaptations. In the first study it noted some differences in knowledge of disabilities. In the later study, the results determined faculty had more knowledge of disabilities as well as more contact with support systems.

“No significant group differences were found in faculty willingness to provide instructional, technological and testing adaptations. Attitudes toward students with disabilities in teacher education were positive in both studies, although faculty in the 2006/7 study was more stringent in their admission requirements” (Leyser et al.,2011).

Leyser created a survey that addressed the following areas: background information, faculty contact and knowledge regarding individuals with disabilities, willingness to provide specific accommodations, attitudes toward teacher certification, candidates with learning disabilities, and faculty training needs. The questionnaire consisted of a four point scale 1 = low level of support or willingness to accommodate and 4 = high level of support. The survey also consisted of many multiple choice questions and open-ended questions regarding specific accommodations that the faculty made.

“The proportion of faculty with doctoral degrees has grown, reflecting the growing demand for academization in teacher training colleges in Israel. The data is also an indication of the impact of economic hardships and policies which have resulted in a reduction in the recruitment of new faculty members. This has led to an increase in the number of older faculty, with more years of experience and of more faculties being employed on a part-time basis.” (Leyser et al. 2011)

Leyser describes positive results from teachers who are more experienced with students with disabilities which is directly related to experience and training of the educators. The more experience one has in the teaching profession would indicate that they have had more training opportunities. Within the later studies the data revealed that the faculty was more apt to assist students with disabilities. “They had the necessary knowledge and skills to make accommodations’” (Leyser et al. 2011). Also in the later study, faculty used support services more often (Leyser et al. 2011).

Through this study, it is apparent that the more experienced educators are better equipped to teach students with disabilities. It is also apparent that there has been a greater willingness among educators to assist students with disabilities. This may be a product of a better understanding among educators of students with disabilities and how to address each one individually. This has been learned through education of the teachers as well as collaboration among peers and support from the leaders in the education facility.

Within each of the articles reviewed for this paper the authors describe their successes and their conclusions. They describe why they were not successful and after reviewing the literature one can draw the conclusion that the success of a study could be directly related to collaboration already going on in the school. Mamlin described the benefit of having a strong leader, who encourages and supports staff while implementing change instead of forcing change upon staff. Another conclusion one can draw from the literature is that whatever the study may be, collaboration is vital to the success of the educational program in any given school.

Through reading these studies, it was apparent that researchers must first define collaboration. Once this is done, they must collaborate on what they are interested in, decide how they are planning on retrieving the data to support their claims, set parameters for the sampling and determine what criteria will be reported on. The researchers then have to collaborate with participants to gain the data they need to answer their research questions. After researchers have gathered the data they then have to interpret the data. However, if the data is qualitative, different perceptions of data must be considered. To conclude, collaboration is happening everywhere in various forms. However, with no one clear definition, it is difficult to research and come up with one specific result. The studies cited above were very different due to there being no specific definition of collaboration, no defined sampling so that the results could truly be compared and no defined sampling criteria.

In order for schools to be more effective and consistent, collaboration needs to be clearly defined and philosophies as a whole need to shift. Collaboration may mean one thing at one school and something else at another school. Teacher and other staff philosophies may hinder collaboration in schools if they do not believe in collaboration and inclusion. Historically SPED students were segregated from the general education setting; now there is more inclusion of these students into the primary classroom. To improve the aspect of inclusion and collaboration, we need to move away from the thought process of ‘your children and my children’ (children on IEP’s); we need to work toward a model that all teaching staff collaborate to support the children whether they are on an IEP or not.

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