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Teacher-Teacher Collaboration

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Abstract

Although much literature calls for teachers to be collaborative, and there is abundant literature expressing recommendations about collaboration, there is little data-based description of what actually occurs in collaboration. The ideas of preservice teachers about collaboration in schools informs their views and acts as a guide for the knowledge and skills they need.

Teacher-Teacher Collaboration

One finds much of the current literature in both special and general education recommending a *collaborative* approach to the work of those involved in the profession. Friend (2000) asserts that calls for collaboration in the education literature are ubiquitous. Although one finds numerous texts and articles describing both recommended practices and approaches to collaboration, there is surprisingly little data describing what collaboration actually is. Many of the calls for collaboration are directed to special educators working with classroom teachers, but there is little literature describing data-based practices (Miller, 2005). One can find literature describing teachers' own impression of the benefits of

collaboration (Welch, Brownell, & Sheridan, 1999), and the impressions of parents (Gerber & Popp, 1999), but there is little which shows, which practices in collaboration most effectively lead to student progress.

Instead, one does find, in the substantive reviews, which have been conducted, the lament that little is known about the specific practices of collaboration. When teachers are being effectively collaborative, what are they actually *doing*? Representative citations from these reviews show the lack of descriptive research describing the elements, which actually occur during teacher-teacher collaboration:

- “Despite the growing popularity of collaborative instruction, the research base for such an endeavor is virtually nonexistent” (Boudah, Schumacher, & Deshler, 1997, p. 294).
- “Of the... reports, none has provided a data-based description of what the general and special education teachers actually did when they were providing instruction together in inclusive classrooms” (Boudah, Schumacher, & Deshler, 1997, p. 294).
- “Unfortunately, although much support for collaboration exists in the special education literature, little published research informs us about... the process itself” (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997, p. 341).
- “What passes for collaboration in schools appears to be guided more by popular belief than by careful inquiry.... It is worrisome that so much writing about school collaboration focuses on professionals’ satisfaction with working together and so little on what they actually did” (Friend, 2000, p. 130).
- “Few studies reported what the special educators actually did—the instructional actions they took—in the co-taught classroom” (Weiss & Brigham, 2000, p. 220).
- “We do not know what teachers do in the co-taught class on a daily basis” (Weiss & Brigham, 2000, p. 243).

- “Because a collaborative model is both recommended and used in inclusive classrooms, one might infer that the interaction of co-teachers has been examined extensively and that the criteria for an ideal model have been defined. However, this assumption is unsupported” (Austin, 2001, p. 246).
- “Although numerous authors currently espouse co-teaching as an effective alternative to service delivery for students with disabilities within the general education setting, very few provide experimental data: (Murawski & Swanson, 2001, p. 264).

Further, there is the assumption that putting collaboration into place is relatively easy: one just needs to put individuals together and say, “Work together.” However, that also seems to be not the case. Friend points out that teachers, themselves, remark on “how difficult collaboration is, how little attention was paid to collaboration in their professional preparation, and how few staff development opportunities are offered related to it” (2000, p. 133). And, when asked to demonstrate their collaboration knowledge and skills, “They frequently flounder” (Friend, 2000, p. 133). Teachers need specific training and practice in knowing “how to work, communicate, and collaborate with other adults” (McCormick, Noonan, Ogata, & Heck, 2001, p. 130). Teachers may not have learned this, because the most common practice for teachers is to work in relative isolation (McManus & Kauffman, 1991), and they are used to making decisions alone (Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995). Those who have attempted to institute more collaborative practices have found that formulating and maintaining these teaching approaches are difficult to put into place (Niles & Marcellino, 2004). Others have found that specific training and monitoring are needed, or it just doesn’t happen. (Schumm, Vaughn, Haager, McDowell, Rothlein, & Saumell, 1995). Using other descriptive terms for collaborator, Gersten, Darch, Davis, and George state that, “Although an individual may be a skilled or experienced teacher, he or she will not automatically become a skilled consultant, advisor, and coach” (1991, p. 235).

Thus, it is clear that, although collaboration among teachers is both strongly recommended and even supported by IDEA legislation, specifics of collaboration can be categorized more as recommendations than as being evidence-based. Schumm et al. (1995) highlight the need for training, but the *what* of training remains uncertain. Yet, those who are preparing to be teachers have their own experience backgrounds, as well as their observations in the schools during field experiences, which they can reference as satisfying or unsatisfactory collaborations among teachers. These develop into their own background knowledge for what collaboration could, or should, be.

There continues to be a need, though, for research to specify just what the elements are that are included when teacher educators claim that teachers should collaborate. We cannot depend on existing data. Wood (1991) even complains that, “Most literature on school consultation and collaborative teaming of it is theoretical, focusing on why consultation should occur rather than on how it is conducted.” (p. 182). The one review, which appears to come closest to specifying specific competencies, is that by Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, and Riley (1997). They conducted a thorough review of research in literature of all “general education teachers because of the dearth of research on collaboration between special education and general education teachers”(p. 341). Results of this review suggest that collaboration among school professionals can be developed and sustained, and positive outcomes are shown both for students and for teachers. Through their review, they determined that there are five fundamental characteristics of effective teacher-teacher collaboration:

- A shared vision for student learning and teaching,
- Common commitment to collaboration,
- Communities of care,
- Frequent, extended, positive interactions between school faculty and leaders, and
- Administrative leadership and power sharing.

While their review then describes what they found related to each of these factors, their findings are still too broad to be delineated as specific competencies or elements to prepare teachers to do (Miller, 2005). Extant literature does not provide a databased set of skills for collaboration. Whatever those skills are, it is not evident that pre-service teachers are being prepared in them (Hasazi, Johnston, Liggett, & Schattman, 1994).

To determine perspectives of those who are to become teachers, we completed an activity with undergraduate students who are majoring in special education and elementary education. These students have completed most of their coursework preparing them to be teachers, and they have had many experiences in their courses seeing and discussing examples, observing practices, and contributing to collaborative activities in their courses. They have observed school practices both in field experiences during their teacher preparation and recalling their own school experiences.

Method

Subjects and Procedures. Participants included undergraduate students, dual majoring in special education and elementary education, in courses prior to student teaching. They first discussed the topic of teacher-teacher collaboration and provided examples of instances. Collaboration was presented as not just between special education and general education classroom teachers but also as it is likely to be observed throughout the school among teachers, administrators, staff, and parents and community. Students then were given tables summarizing the Brownell, et al. (1997) study, 3 X 5 sticky notes and large felt-tipped pens. Taking each characteristic separately, they were asked to work together to generate specific examples of what could occur to show that characteristic and to write these examples on the sticky notes. These were collected, read aloud, and placed on large flip charts for all to see.

Results

These preservice teaching students eagerly and creatively responded, generating 273 responses about what collaboration behaviors look like. Students generated numerous examples for each for

the five characteristics, from 34 for A shared vision of student learning and interaction, to 75 for Communities of care. Representative examples of collaboration, as perceived by these preservice teachers, are presented in Table 1. This list was culled by the authors to 135 responses that dealt directly with teacher-teacher collaboration. The authors then used qualitative analysis procedures to identify common themes that could apply to the examples that were generated. Themes included:

- Teacher Interaction-Formal
- Teacher Interaction-Informal
- School Wide/Community Wide
- Special Event
- In-service/Professional Development
- Administration.

Discussion

After the initial presentation and discussion of collaboration and collaboration topics, students were able to quickly respond and generate examples of collaboration to answer questions of: “What does it look like?” and “How would you know it if you saw it?” The students involved in this activity would soon be student teaching. Thus, the student’s responses were based on what they had observed in their early field experiences, recollection of their own school experiences, plus their own ideas. Given these parameters, the authors were impressed by the insights of the students as well as their ability to indicate quite specific indicators of collaboration. The indicators they generated also demonstrate the students’ vision that collaboration is not limited just to that which occurs between a general and special education teacher but involves all school personnel.

The ideas generated as these participants deliberated what they knew about collaboration can be used as elements in the preparation of teachers for collaboration. AS he first characteristic listed by Brownell, et. al. (1997), Shared Vision for Student Learning and Interaction resulted in several items. As

students work together to generate lesson plans for children during field experiences, they can share ideas of what each is trying to develop. The lesson plan ideas can be taken by another to attempt to teach for a second opinion of the workability of that lesson plan. Or, students can share with each other the ideas they are trying to develop, and the second student can attempt to generate complementary lesson plans and ideas for the first student. They can try these with children of different learning characteristics and then analyze the ways the different ideas work with different students. To team teach, they can teach these lessons together. This gives them the shared experience, and they can then evaluate and discuss the shared teaching experience. Since the literature indicates this is an unusual experience, students can experiment with and analyze different aspects of the teaming experience. Chats between lessons give them the opportunity to consider ideas and experiences and to generate new ideas. Certainly, some of the affective aspects of this experience also need to be considered. Thus, encouragement is a part of this, as is finding ways to positively offer constructive feedback.

The level of engagement in this encouragement and constructive feedback shows commitment to Collaboration. The way a student accepts comments from others and then uses this to consider their own teaching is an indicator of their commitment to collaboration. Finding “safe” ways to share ideas and teach others also shows the student's ability and willingness to do this kind of collaboration. Along with this, willingness to change time allotted, material, or approach is an indicator of willingness to listen and accept ideas from others. As entire classes go into field experiences, they can share ideas across the entire class—if they are all going into the same school class or different classes. They can each gather to share the results of their experience and consider possible changes—again, listening to others and accept ideas others offer. Thus, they can work to come up with ideas shared between pairs of students as they teach, groups of students, or entire classes. The course instructor can brainstorm with students about things that they might find as incentives for collaboration. While counting toward credit and course grade can be part of the incentive, students might not think that to be personally

rewarding. It may be that these collaborative experiences are such new experiences for the students that additional incentives are needed to encourage the students to more willingly engage them.

Some of these incentives may come from the students as they find ways to encourage each other in the Community of Care. Acknowledgement of birthdays, or small gifts or tokens of appreciation, may be things that some students find reinforcing. Compliments, or statements reflecting respect may also be useful. Such statements may also be so new and unusual to students that they need to practice saying these statements in the college class or during the field experience.

Frequent Extended and Positive Interactions can be demonstrated through the time that students commit to working with each other. They need to learn about each other's thoughts about teaching by discussing this during their professional experiences together or by getting to know each other in other times together. They should be encouraged to just have coffee together or otherwise spend some other-than-professional time to get to know each other. Further, finding they should be encouraged to find ways to communicate comments and appreciation should be explored—notes slipped to each other, e-mail messages, or comments to yet others showing appreciation for their partner could be useful.

It may be useful to expand the generation of ideas about collaboration beyond students who are preparing to be teachers to others preparing for professional roles, such as principals or other school leaders. These individuals need to learn not only administrative roles but also ways to engage teachers specifically about their classroom teaching activities. They, too, need to learn ways to encourage, and participate in, teacher-teacher collaboration. They can observe and encourage teachers teaming and exploring new roles, and they can also participate in this role sharing to make their own discoveries. They, too, need to spend time with students in other-than-professional times to learn about the ways teachers think about their teaching and experiences. These leaders need to learn what teachers expect

about their times leaders spend observing and participating in their teaching experiences so that they do understand and can support these new ways of going about teaching that the teachers are learning.

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Table 1. Specific Collaboration Examples

Shared Vision for Student Learning and Interaction	
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Teacher Interaction-Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teachers trade classes to teach •Team teaching
Teacher Interaction-Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Short chats between lessons •Encouraging each other when things don't go well
School Wide/Community Wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Tie into other subjects •Common theme throughout the school
Special Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teachers planning a field trip for an entire grade level
Inservice/Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inservices
Administration	
Commitment to Collaboration	
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Teacher Interaction-Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teachers collaborate on what works and what doesn't •Teachers teaching teachers
Teacher Interaction-Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Present ideas to others without fear •Willing to alter schedule for other teacher's needs
School Wide/Community Wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •School wide collaboration •School wide goal which everyone works toward
Special Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teachers work together on a project

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Classrooms combined for a project
Inservice/Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inservices
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Incentive to collaborate •Reward for collaboration team of the month

Community of Care

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Teacher Interaction-Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Celebrate faculty birthdays
Teacher Interaction-Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teachers treat each other with respect •Talk positively about each other
School Wide/Community Wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Open communication between teachers and parents
Special Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •First day of school BBQ •Teachers' night at sporting events
Inservice/Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inservices
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Principal talks to teachers about things they are doing in their classes •Letters to parents (about teacher collaboration)

Frequent Extended and Positive Interactions

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Teacher Interaction-Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Prep periods •Blocking time out for planning
Teacher Interaction-Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Smiles
School Wide/Community Wide	
Special Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Teachers get together days outside of school
Inservice/Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inservices
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Slipping Post-It notes in faculty mailboxes •Catching teachers being good collaborators

Administrative Leadership and Power Sharing

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Teacher Interaction-Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Switching lead teacher roles during team teaching •Grade level collaborative leaders
Teacher Interaction-Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Principal knows teachers and their families
School Wide/Community Wide	
Special Event	
Inservice/Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inservices

Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Principal walks halls to talk to teachers between classes•Principal supports teacher decisions instead of overpowering them	
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