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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Implications of Collaboration in Education

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There are many examples of collaboration in education. Superintendents must collaborate with department heads, principals, teacher associations, and state agencies. Principals must collaborate with teachers, parents, student organizations, and local agencies. Teacher educators must collaborate within the University as well as with local education agencies and pre-service teachers. Special educators must collaborate with parents, agencies, regular education teachers, school psychologists, etc. While these examples in no way encompass the myriad forms of collaboration necessary in education, they bring clarity to the fact that no level of education is immune to collaboration.

Collaboration is not static but evolves from the focused common goal of the group, team, or committee. If collaboration could be described as a living breathing life form, the most likely choice would be the chameleon. Just as the chameleon must change its color to adapt to its environment, so must educational leaders and educators change their strategies and mind sets to adapt to changes in education through collaboration. As stated in the Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association (Strike, et al, 2002), "Education, by its very nature, is aimed at the improvement of individual lives and societies" (p. 1). Only by adapting, changing, and collaborating can educational leaders and educators make improvements in student lives and thus society.

Creating a collaborative environment is no small task. Collaboration is site based and therefore schools must determine how to establish and integrate such a major undertaking. People must work together to support and mutually benefit students. Because it is site based, the possibilities and different configurations for collaboration are "truly endless" (Knackendoffel, 2007). So in essence, in order to establish a collaborative environment, people must begin by collaborating.

There are many definitions of collaboration and collaborative leadership. Dodd (2002) states, "Collaboration is the means by which leaders use their relationships with others to influence them to work toward a shared goal" (p. 79). Dodd (2002) also cites Rubin as stating, "Tyrants bend systems, forcing people to follow. Collaborative leaders align the will and the work of people, causing systems to follow" (p. 79).

Additionally, Anfara, et al (2008) defines collaborative leadership as relating to inclusiveness, whereby teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders participate in decision making related to organizational goals. Russell (2008) defines collaborative leadership in order to "depict a leadership style within an organization where the formal leadership emphasizes working with the faculty/teachers/staff in an empowering, participatory fashion, as opposed to a more traditional, hierarchical, top-down model of 'command and control'" (p. 85).

There are however, key features contained within the myriad definitions and diversity of collaboration. Friend and Cook (1992) as cited by Knackendoffel (2007, p. 2) list the following key features:

- *Collaboration is voluntary.* Education agencies can mandate administrative arrangements that require the staff to work in close proximity, but only the individuals involved can decide if their interactions will be truly collaborative.
- *Collaboration requires parity among participants.* Each person's contribution to an interaction is valued equally, and each person has equal power in decision making. If one individual is perceived by others as having more power or more valuable knowledge or information, collaboration cannot occur.
- *Collaboration is based on mutual goals.* To collaborate, professionals do not have to share many or all goals, just one that is specific and important enough to maintain their shared attention.
- *Collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making.* Equal participation in the decision making is important, but shared participation in task completion does not mean that tasks must be divided equally among involved individuals or that each must participate fully in all tasks. Participation in the activity often involves a convenient division of labor.
- *Individuals who collaborate share their resources.* Each person engaged in a collaborative activity has resources to contribute that will be valuable for reaching the shared goal. The type of resources professionals have depends on their roles and the specific activity. Example resources include time and availability to carry out tasks, knowledge of a specialized technique, and access to other individuals or agencies that could assist in attaining the goal.
- *Individuals who collaborate share accountability for outcomes.* Whether the results of collaboration are positive or negative, all the participating individuals are accountable for outcomes.

With such a large variety of definitions and types of collaboration to choose from, this paper focuses on three areas of collaboration in education: Teachers as leaders or teacher leaders, special education teams, and pre-service teacher collaborative experience. These areas are perceived from the literature to be either the most common collaborative areas experiencing growth, as in the case of teacher leaders and pre-service teachers, or the area where a significant amount of collaboration is required to meet student needs, as in special education.

### **Teacher Leaders**

Teachers are emerging as an untapped resource when it comes to leadership. While most teachers exhibit some degree of leadership either in their classrooms or among colleagues, many are being propelled into leadership roles substantially different from the traditional classroom by administrators who recognize that the increased demands of local, state, and federal education agencies are insurmountable if tackled alone. "In today's world, trying to accomplish goals as a solitary being is difficult without the assistance of others and their abilities" (Todd, 2008, p. 185).

Similarly, according to Angelle (2007), "Collaborative leaders recognize that in today's schools, one

person cannot adequately address the needs of all members of the school community. Empowering others to lead alongside the principal builds collegiality and shares opportunities for active participation in the improvement of the school” (p. 56). This coincides with Davidhizar, Shelton, & Headley’s (2006) statement that “The ability of a principal to encourage and motivate leadership capacities in the building is critical for educational reform and collaboration” (p. 88).

Through the recruitment of teacher leaders, administrators are investing in “...leadership practices that promote and empower teachers to contribute to school improvement and through their leadership create an organization where all stakeholders can learn and grow. This type of learning organization is built upon collaboration, professional relationships, high expectations, and continual learning” (Angelle, 2007, p. 57). Additionally, teacher leadership and collaboration encourages trust between teachers and principals while helping to lead schools toward higher performance (Davidhizar, Shelton, & Headley, 2006).

### **Special Education Collaboration**

The past decade has seen an increase in the number of special education students being served in the regular education classroom. Arthaud, et al (2007) cites statistics from the United States Department of Education report for 2003, in which 48% of all children with disabilities were placed in regular education classes 79% of the time. This is a dramatic increase from 1999, in which students with disabilities were in regular education classes 46% of the time.

With the greater shift toward inclusion and mainstreaming, educators began to recognize co-teaching or team teaching as a viable method for service delivery. Programs such as team teaching or co-teaching began to emerge as a means to integrate students receiving special education services within regular education classes. Many current collaborative situations have evolved from two educators being willing to work together to improve the academic or behavior performance of a student. For the purposes of this paper the terms co-teaching and team teaching will be used synonymously.

Co-teaching typically combines a general education teacher and a special education teacher collaborating together to serve students with special needs. This combination occurs within a general education classroom which serves students with special education needs as well as general education students. Inclusion classes can provide the best learning environment for many children with special needs, however it requires specialized instruction, well-designed curriculum, and effective instructional models in order to be successful (Least Restrictive Environment Coalition, 2001).

Arthaud, et al, (2007) cites Boudah, Schumacher, & Deshler (1997), that collaborative teaching “Refers to an educational approach in which general and special educators work in a coactive and coordinated fashion to jointly teach academically and behaviorally heterogeneous groups of students in educationally integrated settings (i.e. general education classrooms)... Specifically in cooperative teaching both general and special educators are simultaneously present in the classroom, maintaining joint responsibility for specified instruction that is to occur within that setting” (p. 2). In addition, by creating a team teaching environment, special education becomes a component in the system rather than the primary avenue of service delivery for students with disabilities, (Education Development Center, 2001).

Some schools have begun to shift to more involved forms of collaborative teamwork. This shift has taken many forms including collaborative relationships between general education, special education, and related services (i.e. speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and vision or audiology services). Additionally, this has expanded, in some cases, to include interagency collaboration. The interagency form of collaboration contains not only the various departments and service providers involved in day to day student services; it also includes many state and local agencies such as Department of Child Welfare, community mental health agencies, juvenile justice, and substance abuse treatment providers.

These collaborative arrangements may focus not only on the needs of the student, but on the needs of the family as well. Many students who are labeled as “special needs” or “at risk” often come from families with other factors which need to be taken into consideration. These factors may include health issues, mental health issues, poverty, substance abuse, and juvenile justice or legal involvement. “In attempts to meet the needs of these students, educators have combined research, resources, and creativity to restructure programs, including special education services. Faced with depleting financial and human resources, new models must be both fiscally and philosophically sound” (Braaten, et al, 1992, p. 10). Options such as full service schools, collaborative practices among service providers, and partnerships between schools and agencies have become more prevalent and indicate a positive impact on student learning through providing services to students and their families (Education Development Center, 2001).

Common indicators for success utilizing collaboration were found by reviewing studies such as Hunt, et al (2004), Knackendoffel (2007), and Arthaud, et al (2007) which utilized information gained from teachers with team teaching experience or teachers involved in collaborative programs. Most of these studies have agreed that the primary requirement of collaboration is that a shared vision or goal must be held by the participants in a co-teaching relationship. Additionally, communication was considered a critical factor in achieving a successful co-teaching partnership. Co-teaching participants also agreed that support from administrative staff in the pretext of scheduling and shared planning time was a crucial factor to successful collaborative experiences.

A collection of seven case studies by Schrag, et al (1998) demonstrated the effectiveness of a team approach across a variety of educational settings within the United States of America. The common elements included addressing student needs within the context of restructuring general education, interagency collaboration, coordinated service planning, parent involvement, reduction of student behavior problems, and an increase in academic abilities. Researchers found that all of the programs reflected an overriding philosophy of the provision of integrated and coordinated, intra-and inter-agency supports for children and families (Schrag, et al, 1998).

Roadblocks to successful co-teaching have also been documented in studies by Hunt, et al, (2004) and Utley & Rapport (2002). These obstacles included disruption of regular classroom routines by having additional personnel in the classroom, teacher tardiness or absence, attitude, personality, and lack of rapport. Inequities in classroom responsibilities, lack of clarity in defining teacher roles, increased special education teacher work load, and ineffective grouping of students were also noted as barriers to effective co-teaching.

Other negative connotations of unsuccessful collaboration include findings by Howell, et al (2004) which cited Rousch (1996) as stating the rigidity of current systems are too crisis oriented, narrow in

classification of problems, too specialized, too isolated from other services, too inflexible to craft comprehensive solutions, lack funding, and are mismanaged.

A study by Gerber and the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (1996) noted the life span of such programs across grade levels as a significant hurdle. Also the primary keys to successful co-teaching were conversely noted in a study by Akins, et al (2002) as hindrances to co-teaching. These included differences in philosophies, lack of collaborative planning time, and lack of communication.

### **Pre-Service Teacher Education**

Another major shift in the expansion of collaborative services is the development of pre-service teachers and their ability to collaborate. Teacher preparation institutions recognize the value of collaborative abilities and have implemented programs designed to foster those skills. A report by Hibbard (1998) recognized that an approach based on strengths in which families work as partners with professionals to identify needs, set goals, and ways to meet those goals was necessary in order to help pre-service teachers gain the necessary collaborative skills.

Tieg (1993) reported that pre-service and in-service training should coincide with collaborative trends as well as prepare teachers and future teachers to evaluate trends at the building level. Arthaud, et al, (2007) recommended that teacher candidates increase their collaboration skills through role play, examining case studies, simulations, problem solving, and apprenticeships.

According to Nevin, Thousand, & Villa (2009) "Researchers such as Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) and Darling-Hammond (1996, 2005) contend that to be effective in collaborative work, future teachers need opportunities to practice and learn about shared decision making, communication, and planning. This implies that those who prepare future teachers should model the collaboration that teachers are expected to acquire. However, Miller and Stayton (1999) argued that university collegial structures must change substantially because current structures prevent the cross-disciplinary collaboration that would yield the most benefit to teacher education reform" (p. 570).

### **Conclusion**

Collaboration is gaining support and momentum in many areas of education. Educators, administrators, parents, service providers, universities, and various agencies have all recognized the importance of collaboration. While many types of collaboration such as co-teaching have been in existence for several years, the need to provide effective leadership in order to enact positive collaborative experiences remains a significant hurdle. Additionally, the general mind set of would be collaborators must include a willingness to be flexible and work together toward a common goal.

While special education has often led the way in forming collaborative teams or groups, there exists a need to further develop the relationships between parents, teachers, school psychologists, speech pathologists, agencies, and other service providers in order to access the knowledge necessary to increase student achievement. There is no end to the vast amount of information available if the contributing collaborators are willing to focus on what is important for each student.

Finally, the need to include pre-service teachers in the collaborative process is a significant hurdle. However, many institutions of higher learning have recognized the necessity of overcoming this issue.

In doing so, these institutions are providing many collaborative experiences for pre-service teachers along with the professors who supervise them.

With so many areas for collaboration, there is no end in sight for collaborative opportunities in education. Additionally, the many facets of collaboration allow it to become a solution that can be customized to almost any situation that may arise within an educational setting.

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