



Collaboration DISES Professional Learning Gallery Module Research Brief

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Collaboration in special education is increasingly recognized as essential for providing equitable, inclusive, and effective education to students with disabilities around the world (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014). As educational systems strive to meet the demands of international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education for all), collaboration among stakeholders has become central (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2020). From a global perspective, entities like the *Global Action on Disability (GLAD)* network foster policy dialogue and innovation across countries to increase support for youth with disabilities. These types of cross-cultural and international collaboration strengthen the capacity of families/caregivers, educators, and other support personnel. Furthermore, international partnerships can foster mutual learning, policy innovation, and educator training. For example, the Division for International Special Education and Services (DISES) aims to create international knowledge exchange within its journal, conferences, publications, and events (DISES, 2024). Programs supported by UNESCO, the World Bank, and regional education networks have contributed significantly to inclusive education development, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2020; GPE, 2018). Although global initiatives are essential for beginning conversations related to supporting youth with disabilities, each government should develop unified strategies linking education with health, social protection, and disability services to foster policy coherence across sectors. Local communities access and adapt technical assistance materials, such as the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) manual on high-leverage practices (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

Definition of Terms

The following are definition of terms related to collaboration:

Collaboration: “a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (Friend & Cook, 2013, p.6).

Co-teaching: Co-teaching is defined as the co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing of students by two professionals in a single classroom (Murawski, 2003). This requires that teachers

collaborate to create a structure that effectively utilizes each teacher's expertise to educate a diverse population of students (Bauler & Kang, 2020). A co-teaching framework aims to increase inclusionary practices to accommodate a range of student skill levels in general education classrooms.

Culturally Responsive Engagement: Culturally responsive engagement refers to the intentional practice of creating inclusive, respectful, and equitable environments where the cultural identities, communication styles, and lived experiences of all participants—students, families/caregivers, and professionals—are acknowledged, valued, and actively integrated into the decision-making process.

Conflict resolution/effective communication: Conflict resolution and effective communication are the processes of addressing and resolving disagreements in a constructive manner, often through negotiation, mediation, or dialogue.

Individual Learning Plans: Individual learning plans are a personalized educational plan tailored to a student's unique strengths, needs, goals, and learning preferences. It is designed to support self-directed learning, goal setting, and continuous progress monitoring.

Trans-disciplinary teams: teams that work and learn in conjunction with families/caregivers and across disciplines to work, support, learn, and teach from each of the members on the team (Friend & Cook, 2013) using assessment, planning, and implementation collaboratively across the disciplines.

Partners: Partners in education or community engagement are individuals, organizations, or institutions that collaborate with schools to support student learning and well-being. These partnerships are built on mutual respect, shared goals, and reciprocal benefits. Partners may include: learners, family/caregiver, educators, administrators, school support personnel, community members, community organizations, medical support personnel, etc.

Challenges with Collaboration

Youth, families/caregivers, educators, administrators, and school and community support personnel report challenges when working towards increasing collaboration in schools. Fragmented policy environments can limit cross-sector service delivery. In some countries, promising efforts involve inter-ministerial task forces or disability councils to coordinate education, health, and social services (UNICEF, 2013; World Bank, 2021). At the school level, there are inequities in access to resources, particularly time for collaboration, as well as the differing perspectives of the collaborating professionals (Solone et al., 2019). Schools across the globe often report a lack of funding, time, materials, and trained personnel to effectively implement collaborative practices (Alnasser, 2021; Jez, Osborne, & Hauth, 2021; Peters, 2003). Although technology can support communication related to collaboration, schools that lack online platforms and/or internet access can be impacted (UNESCO, 2021). In some countries, people may have cultural beliefs or stigmas concerning disabilities that can hinder engagement and inclusion (Avoke, 2002). Research (Jez, Hauth, & Ramers, 2022; Sharma et al., 2012) identifies gaps in educator professional development and training, leading to teachers and service providers who feel unprepared to support youth in inclusive settings by working collaboratively

with other educators, families, and community members. Finally, communication barriers due to a lack of linguistic diversity and/or lack of translated resources can lead to marginalization of families/caregivers and limit cross-professional understanding (Truong & Hall, 2015).

Promising Evidence-Based Strategies and Practices

Effective collaboration is built on trusting relationships, empowering others to share their perspectives, knowledge, and experience, and following through on our collective responsibility, and using reflection to improve and grow (Anderson, 2019). Four steps for effective collaboration are to: (1) create a transdisciplinary team, (2) build relationships, (3) identify goals and responsibilities for each team member, and (4) implement and continually reflect on progress and make improvements as needed.

Create Transdisciplinary Team

Transdisciplinary teams are professionals who work collaboratively across the disciplines and in conjunction with families and caregivers (Friend & Cook, 2013). Professionals on transdisciplinary teams often work outside the traditional definitions of their roles. Moreover, professionals must be willing to relinquish their traditional role of being an expert in one area and share aspects related to their domain with the team members (Rausch et al., 2021). This may look like the occupational therapist training the speech therapist on sensory and regulatory activities that can be implemented during speech therapy. Thus, a transdisciplinary approach to services necessitates a higher level of collaboration and planning, as team members may be working on multiple goals with a student or family/caregiver across many settings. Families and caregivers are also critical to providing therapies in a transdisciplinary model. Therefore, this model results in all team members working on all student goals.

Across countries, effective inclusion is often driven by transdisciplinary teams comprising general and special educators, therapists, administrators, and families. In Finland, collaboration within student welfare teams ensures early and individualized support (Sahlberg, 2015). In Kenya, schools partner with NGOs to provide assistive technologies in resource-limited areas (Njoka et al., 2012). One such organization, the Kenyan Institute of Special Education (KISE), trains families and caregivers to provide therapies to their children. Families can access therapy centers and work on goals independent of the therapist.

Cultural stigma, linguistic diversity, and lack of accessible communication can inhibit family-school collaboration in many global contexts (Singal, 2010; Florian & Pantić, 2017). Successful collaborative programs use culturally responsive strategies to include families in planning and decision-making. Schools should build communication strategies that reflect the cultural and linguistic contexts of their communities. Locally grounded approaches in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia show that involving religious leaders, NGOs, and community members enhances sustainability (Stubbs, 2008). Special attention must be paid to underrepresented and underserved populations to ensure equity in access and quality.

Build Relationships

Building trust in collaborative relationships is paramount to student success. We build trusting relationships when we commit to learning about and from others. A commitment to building trust through purposeful interactions is key to effective and sustainable collaborative teams (Franz et al. 2022). Some important insights into building trusting relationships with colleagues and families/caregivers may include giving others your full attention when meeting,

using active listening skills, focusing on the topic at hand, asking clarifying questions when there are misunderstandings, and using cultural humility/reciprocity by acknowledging different perspectives (Kalyanpur, 2017; Urbani et al., 2024). Another critical way to build trust in teams is to schedule meetings at times that accommodate all members (Kalyanpur, 2017; Meda, Jez, & Mosito, 2022). Also, creating norms for meetings, collaborations, communication, and problem-solving (Larsson & Berg, 2023). With trust, teams can maintain respect and give their full attention to the needs of students in their schools and classrooms.

Identify Goals and Responsibilities

There are several key members of the transdisciplinary team as described above. Each member of the team should be included for their unique input and expertise. Strength-based role identification should be used to create a list of required team members and meeting invitations to ensure that the child will receive a comprehensive plan for support. It is important to match team member responsibilities to the specific expertise they offer and train each other to ensure support is consistent in various settings (Rausch et al., 2021). Additionally, evidence shows that assigning roles based on strengths increases collaboration and reduces role ambiguity (Friend, 2021).

Families/caregivers provide insight into the child's strengths, needs, and history (IDEA, 2004). They advocate for their child's best interests and help make decisions about supports and services. The general educator or classroom teacher can provide details on student progress, classroom expectations, and curriculum. The special educator has background and experience with individualized strategies, accommodations, and specialized supports. If the child requires additional services such as speech, physical, or occupational therapy, professionals representing those specialties can address communication, therapies, and functional needs. If the student is of a chronological or emotional age deemed appropriate for attending, they should participate in some or all of the collaborative meetings. In this case, the student's role is to express their hopes and dreams, triumphs, and challenges, practice self-advocacy, and have a voice in their education.

Blue-Banning and colleagues (2004) conducted a qualitative study using focus groups and interviews in the pursuit of professional behaviors that facilitate collaborative partnerships between home and school. They identified six broad indicators: "(a) communication, (b) commitment, (c) equality, (d) skills, (e) trust, and (f) respect. The study participants emphasized that partnership requires equality or reciprocity between families and service providers. An equal partnership includes a sense of harmony or ease in the relationship" (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p 176). Ideally, transdisciplinary meetings are a partnership between school and home in the best interest of the child. A strengths-based approach to role identification and the transdisciplinary team meeting overall imbues fairness, collaboration, and a greater likelihood for conflict resolution in the event disagreements were to occur (Weishaar, 2010).

Praxis

Paulo Freire (2000) describes praxis as a conscious and "authentic union of action and reflection" (p. 61). Once there is a shared plan for supporting youth with disabilities success, praxis can ensure the student-centered goals are effective and the appropriate supports are in place (Cloninger, 2017; Rashid & Wong, 2023; Ryndak et al., 2021; Sisti & Robledo, 2021). An important aspect of this step includes establishing consistent and prompt communication (Garcia et al., 2022). This may be done by using formal assessment measures, the school's established

online learning platform, email, texts/digital messages, or letters sent to the team members. The team also needs to set up time to share progress monitoring information in an accessible manner (see DISES Assessment module). Once the team has received the information about the youth's progress, there needs to be a way for each member to critically reflect on progress, concerns, successes, and possible impacts to growth (Kim & Hardy, 2024). If the youth is making progress, the team can celebrate, or if challenges regarding implementation, assessment, or other factors seem to be impacting the learner's success, the team needs an established time and place to discuss refining the goal (Garcia-Melgar et al., 2022). This process should be repeated regularly. Partnerships and platforms that enable transdisciplinary input should be prioritized and adequately resourced (van Drooge & Spaapen, 2022).

Co-teaching is a collaborative teaching model that increases inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom. Co-teaching involves two professionals co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing as a team (Lochner et al., 2019). It increases the involvement of the general education teacher in the planning, instruction, and assessment of special education students, thus increasing collaboration among team members (Szumski et al., 2025). By working together, the transdisciplinary teams can ensure instruction is differentiated and scaffolded. The Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center provides high-leverage practices for a framework to guide transdisciplinary teams in collaboration, data-driven planning, instruction in behavior and academics, and intensifying and intervening as needed (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024). Research in North America and Australia indicates improved outcomes when teachers work collaboratively in inclusive classrooms (DuFour et al., 2016; Friend et al., 2010; Lehane & Senior, 2020). An example template of the Collaborative Team Lesson Planning and Meetings.

Conclusion

Collaboration is not a secondary consideration—it is the backbone of effective special education and inclusive practice globally. While significant barriers remain, particularly in resource-constrained settings, the growing body of international evidence underscores that intentional, well-supported collaboration within schools, families, and communities leads to better outcomes for children with disabilities. This narrative calls on governments, institutions, and global networks to prioritize collaborative mechanisms as they strive to fulfill the promise of inclusive education for all. All members of educational institutions would benefit from an investment in professional development to learn skills related to identifying transdisciplinary teams, building relationships, collaboratively identifying goals, and instituting praxis to meet said goals.

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