

# We Need to Talk

## Communication Strategies for Effective Collaboration

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The field of education is experiencing a paradigm shift from providing isolated services for students with special needs to collaborating within schools to include all students. . . . Simultaneously, teaching is evolving from an isolated act to one requiring increased interaction. (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000, p. 113)

Put simply, teachers today are opening their doors to collaborate and teach together (see box, “What Does the Literature Say?”, p. 6). To meet the needs of all students and promote inclusive services, special and general educators must communicate with colleagues in school settings. This article outlines a variety of communication strategies for effective collaboration in school settings. These strategies include conducting a needs assessment, providing professional development, producing newsletters, forming study groups, and conducting small-group dialogues. But what do people in inclusive schools need to talk about?

### Topics for Communication

In a study by Bradley and West (1994), teachers involved in inclusion expressed a need for professional development on

- Academic and behavioral adjustments to the general educational program.
- Use of adaptive technology.
- Clarification of teacher roles and academic expectations.
- Features of model programs: “What successful programs looked like” (p. 123).

**Teacher dialogues are effective as follow-up activities after teachers return from attending professional conferences.**

To meet the needs of all students in inclusive classrooms, educators need to provide others in the school setting with information about academic goals, effective instructional methods, behavior management, and standardized testing. To comply with students’ individualized education programs (IEPs), special education teachers need to make certain that other educators who work with students with disabilities understand the IEP components and processes. These include accommodations and modifications, IEP team members, time frames, and identification of the local specialists and program supervisors. Finally, special and general educators involved in inclusion should communi-

cate successes of collaborative efforts. This communication could involve the sharing of student social gains and academic successes using grades, test scores, or portfolios. Teachers can share how collaboration has influenced their professional growth. For example, individual teachers may gain broader repertoires of teaching strategies as a result of co-teaching relationships.

### Communication Networks

Special educators, in particular, need to communicate with general education teachers, who have usually not had special education preparation. Walther-Thomas and colleagues (2000) listed other stakeholders in inclusive programs, such as administrators, support staff, and families, who can also benefit from frequent communication. During the school day, many students may have contact with art, music, computer lab, physical education, and foreign language teachers, paraprofessionals, media specialists, administrators, support staff (cafeteria staff and custodians), and related services providers (including speech language pathologists and occupational and physical thera-

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**Methods of data collection may include questionnaires, focus groups, checklists, telephone interviews, observations, and document reviews.**

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## Teachers in inclusive schools need to communicate with one another regarding features of model programs.

pists). All these people need to be aware of how best to meet the needs of students with disabilities or other special needs. Although this article focuses on relationships within school settings, communication networks should also include families.

### Ways to Communicate Effectively

#### Needs Assessment

Every school has its own personnel and its own students. Every school is unique in terms of teacher education and experience, as well as degree of collaborative culture. A needs assessment allows educators to determine which topics to address when communicating with adults in the school setting. Collaborative teaching teams and school improvement teams may collect data regarding

- Teachers' experience and comfort level in teaching students with disabilities and other special needs.
- Teachers' educational background.
- Areas of concern regarding inclusion.
- Instructional strategies used frequently.
- Topics on which stakeholders request staff development.
- Preferred methods of professional learning (such as workshops, written materials, audiovisual presentations, or college courses).

See Figure 1 for sample needs-assessment items.

Methods of data collection may include questionnaires, focus groups, checklists, telephone interviews, observations, and document reviews (Boyd, 1992; Friend & Cook, 2000). Questionnaires allow quick and confidential collection of data (Salend, 1999) from a large number of respondents. Focus-group interviews allow teams to collect data of a more qualitative nature. According to Bradley and West (1994), focus groups are a useful way to collect information about "the training needs of a particular school faculty" (p. 126; see boxes, "Tips for Using Questionnaires" and "Tips for Using Focus Groups"). After the team has conducted a needs assessment, team members and administrators use the information to select

### Tips for Using Questionnaires

- ✓ Inform respondents of the purpose of the questionnaire.
- ✓ Provide incentives to encourage respondents to complete the questionnaire (pens, stickers, tea bags, or candy).
- ✓ Tell respondents approximately how long it will take to complete the questionnaire.
- ✓ Be brief (Friend & Cook, 2000).
- ✓ Use questions that may be answered by circling a number on a 4-point scale.
- ✓ List topics for communication and ask respondents to number them in order of their need for information.
- ✓ Allow anonymous responses.
- ✓ Thank respondents individually or as a group.

### Tips for Using Focus Groups

The following suggestions may be helpful in conducting focus groups (Bradley & West, 1994; Krueger, 1988):

- ✓ Decide whom to include (allow for viewpoints from a variety of personnel).
- ✓ Limit the number of participants (5-7 people).
- ✓ Set a time limit and adhere to it (60-90 minutes).
- ✓ Prepare questions ahead of time (approximately 5 questions).
- ✓ Use open-ended questions.
- ✓ Begin with a statement of purpose and rules for participation.
- ✓ Take notes and tape record the focus groups.
- ✓ End with a summary and thank the participants.

**Figure 1. Sample Needs Assessment Items**

For how much of your teaching career have you had students with disabilities in your classroom?

Never                  A few times                  Almost every year                  Every year

What is your comfort level in working with students with learning disabilities?

1	2	3	4
Uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Fairly comfortable	Very comfortable

Please rank the following professional development topics. Write 1 next to the topic that would be most helpful to you, 2 next to the topic that would be the next most helpful, and so on.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Differentiating instruction for students with disabilities
- \_\_\_\_\_ Instructional groupings in inclusive classrooms
- \_\_\_\_\_ The IEP: Components and procedures
- \_\_\_\_\_ Co-teaching strategies
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

*Note:* IEP = individualized education program.

appropriate resources, activities, and professional development opportunities for those within the school setting.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development based on needs-assessment data is an effective way to communicate, meets the training needs of the school, and lets members of the school community know that the team values their input (Bradley & West, 1994). Research suggests that ongoing professional development is critical for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities (Malarz, 1996; Pankake & Palmer, 1996; Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996). Professional development may take many forms, including workshops, newsletters, study groups, and small-group dialogues (Sanacore, 1997).

Professional development workshops may involve the entire school or a small group. Workshops may last for more than one school day or for only an hour. Long workshops should allow for numerous breaks and for participant involvement through small-group activities. Professional development workshops are most effective when based on expressed need, when teachers lead them, and when the workshops provide practical strategies that teachers can use immediately (Pankake & Palmer, 1996; Sanacore, 1997). Administrators may devote portions of regularly scheduled faculty meetings to workshops on issues related to inclusion. If administrators do not provide this support, teachers involved in collaboration may request time on professional development days or after school to present workshops, or may ask to provide collaborative perspectives following already scheduled workshops.

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### **What Does the Literature Say About Collaboration?**

Many teachers are accustomed to planning and teaching behind closed doors. Fullan (1993) suggests that professional isolation is detrimental in that it limits teachers' exposure to new ideas and solutions to problems. Teachers who are not exposed to a variety of instructional methods are less likely to practice new strategies and acquire skills in differentiating instruction for students with special needs. Collaboration is a style of interaction between professionals with equal decision-making power in which people share resources and responsibilities in working toward a common goal (Friend & Cook, 2000).

**Opening Doors.** Co-teaching and consultation are possible formats that facilitate ongoing collaboration. Co-teachers teach together and share responsibility for the students in their class. In the consultative relationship, professionals meet for problem-solving purposes. Through collaboration, teachers can expand their professional repertoires and provide more effective services for *all* students, including students with disabilities, students who are gifted, students with other special needs, and students without disabilities or special needs. As schools become more inclusive, teachers find themselves in more collaborative environments that depend on effective communication (Friend & Cook, 2000; Price, 1991).

**Special Educators.** The literature suggests that special educators in particular have a role in facilitating collaboration by communicating with colleagues outside of special education. According to Friend and Cook (2000), special educators need to (a) increase their own knowledge of the general education curriculum, and (b) increase general educators' knowledge of how to meet the needs of students with a wide range of exceptionalities. One of the themes emerging from the research of Bassett and colleagues (1996) was "the need for special educators to become more purposefully involved in general education reform" (p. 355). Special education teachers can share their expertise in instructional strategies and in advocating for students with special needs. Purcell and Leppien (1998) found that, in many cases, it was teachers of gifted students who initiated and sustained the collaboration process with general education co-workers. Moreover, Purcell and Leppien suggest that given the myriad demands facing general education teachers, it is the responsibility of specialists to "communicate effectively so that classroom teachers will want to listen to what we have to offer" (p. 179).

**General Educators.** General education teachers involved in inclusion also have a role in communicating within school settings. General educators have experiences and information to share with special and general education teachers. Many general educators identify more closely with their cohorts than with special educators. Solomon, Murphy, and Wethington (1996) found that general education practitioners were often more responsive to information presented by general education colleagues than by special educators. Thus, the general educator in a collaborative team may be the most effective spokesperson when communicating with colleagues on issues related to inclusion.

### **Newsletters**

Newsletters are an effective way to communicate with a large number of people in a short amount of time. Based on the data reported in the needs assessment, special educators can prepare brief newsletters and place them in the mailboxes of those who require or request information on specific topics. News-

letters may also be e-mailed to readers. Recipients may then read the newsletters at their convenience. Newsletters can be used to increase staff awareness of specific topics such as accommodations on standardized testing for students with disabilities, or can be used as a follow-up tool to address questions

raised in recent professional development workshops.

Newsletters can also be an effective way to communicate with families regarding activities and opportunities for involvement in inclusive schools. At the end of the newsletter, ask for reader comments regarding the helpfulness of the newsletter and topics readers would like addressed in subsequent editions. Readers are more likely to complete reply cards when attached separately than when they are part of one of the pages of the newsletter (Dorsheimer, 1994; see box, "Tips for Using Newsletters").

### Study Groups

Special and general educators involved in inclusion can communicate within school settings through study groups. Study groups allow educators to meet for problem-solving purposes and to improve instructional skills (Murphy, 1999; Sugai, 1983). These groups may be optional or may be considered part of the professional development program required for teachers and other members of the school community. Murphy suggested that study groups involving the entire school faculty be organized according to prioritized categories of student needs. Furthermore, Murphy advocated teacher involvement in determining these categories and teacher choice as to which study group to join. In Sugai's research on teacher study groups, participating educators followed a specific meeting format to allow for productive use of their time. An appointed leader was responsible for

- Keeping members focused on the topic.
- Keeping a record of meeting content.
- Making sure participants adhered to time limits.
- Assigning follow-up responsibilities.

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**Study groups allow educators to meet for problem-solving purposes and to improve instructional skills.**

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### Tips for Using Newsletters

- ✓ Keep newsletters brief (1-2 pages).
- ✓ Use colored paper.
- ✓ Use bullets or lists of numbered items.
- ✓ Use 12-point or larger text in an easily readable font.
- ✓ Include clip art to attract readers' attention, but don't overdo clip art.
- ✓ Begin newsletters with a topical case study (Dorsheimer, 1994).
- ✓ Address topics of relevance to the audience (based on the needs assessment).
- ✓ Ask for reader feedback and use it in future issues.

- Setting a time and date for the next group meeting.

### Small-Group Dialogues

Teachers may address topics of specific interest or concern in small-group dialogues. For example, special and general education teachers may host a dialogue session to share ideas about effective co-teaching strategies and to answer colleagues' questions about co-teaching. In another small-group dialogue, educators may discuss effective behavior management strategies for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Arnold (1995) suggested that teacher dialogues are effective as follow-up activities after teachers engage in professional development opportunities, such as conferences. Team members, administrators, or staff developers should encourage all members of the school community who are interested in the topic to attend the dialogue session (see box, "Tips for Hosting Small-Group Dialogues," for ways to encourage busy teachers to participate in dialogues).

### Final Thoughts

As schools move to more collaborative service delivery for students with exceptionalities, it is important for educators to communicate within school settings

### Tips for Hosting Small-Group Dialogues

- ✓ Issue letters of invitation stating the topic ahead of time.
- ✓ Address topics of relevance to those in the school setting.
- ✓ Provide refreshments.
- ✓ Draw names at random to award a limited number of door prizes, such as school supplies.
- ✓ Be prepared to provide information and answer questions on the topic, but don't monopolize discussions.
- ✓ Keep records of the content of discussions.
- ✓ Adhere to set time limits and end by thanking participants for their time and contributions to discussions.
- ✓ Provide follow-up information requested by participants after the dialogues.

on a variety of topics related to meeting student needs. Let's keep talking!

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