Effective Inclusion Strategies for Professionals Working with Students with Disabilities

Kathleen A. Hogan, PhD.
Augusta State University

Marla Lohmann, MEd.
University of North Texas

Rose Champion, MEd.
Augusta State University

Abstract

Inclusive classrooms are now the norm in many K-12 public schools across the United States. General education teachers have a difficult job making sure all their students are meeting state standards. With the addition of special education students in the classroom, their job becomes even more difficult due to meeting the needs of the general education students, as well as meeting the academic and behavioral needs of special education students. A student’s general and special education teacher need to learn effective collaboration strategies with other educational professionals and parents. The purpose of the article is to provide collaboration strategies to help make the general education teachers’ job a little less difficult.

Effective Inclusion Strategies for Professionals Working with Students with Disabilities

There are approximately six million special education students in the United States (United States Department of Education, 2011). Many of these students are currently being educated in inclusive classrooms. With so many special needs students, it is imperative that special education teachers are collaborating and consulting effectively with general educators. Collaboration is best used in inclusive classrooms where the general and special education teacher team-teach together to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. According to Friend and Cook (1990) “collaboration is a style of interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 72).

Collaboration is important for several reasons and can be beneficial for all students. First, schools are legally required to utilize collaboration for inclusion; IDEIA (2004) states that students with disabilities must be educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Furthermore, collaboration assists in bridging the gap between special education and general education programming and practices (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Gallagher, Vail, & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Graden & Bauer, 1996; Sage, 1997; Snell & Janney, 2000; USDE, 2000).

While collaboration is necessary and beneficial, it is not easy to accomplish. The main issues facing educators in today’s inclusive classrooms are that (a) special educators are unfamiliar with general education curriculum (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009), (b) general educators
have limited knowledge of inclusion strategies (Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009), and (c) there is often infrequent communication between general and special education teachers (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Haynes & Jenkins, 1986). This article will provide strategies for collaboration between both general and special education teachers, as well as collaboration strategies for paraprofessionals and parents. These strategies have been identified either through research or through teaching experiences and have been helpful in meeting the needs of both teachers and students.

**Collaborating with General Educators**

The use of collaboration strategies for general and special education professionals need to be addressed by teacher educators, administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, and parents. Table 1 provides as list of strategies and who is responsible.

Table 1

*General Education Collaboration Strategies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Responsible Party</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a school-wide vision to bridge special and general education</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Baker &amp; Zigmond, 1990; Gravois &amp; Rosenfield, 2006; Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, &amp; Otis-Wilborn, 2008; Kovaleski &amp; Glew, 2006; McLaren, Bausch, &amp; Ault 2007; McNamara &amp; Hollinger, 2003; Meadan &amp; Monda-Amaya, 2008; Santangelo, 2009; Snyder, Garriott, &amp; Aylor, 2001; Welch, Brownell, &amp; Sheridan, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide training during pre and in-service experiences</td>
<td>Administration, teacher educators</td>
<td>Conderman &amp; Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Fuchs, Fuchs, Harris, &amp; Roberts, 1996; Griffin et al., 2008; Murawski &amp; Hughes, 2009; Welch et al., 1999; White &amp; Mason, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know and understand your personal collaboration style as well as the collaboration styles of the professionals with which you work</td>
<td>Counselor, special education teacher, general education teacher, administration, parent</td>
<td>Bos &amp; Vaughn, 2006; Gallagher, Vail, &amp; Monda-Amaya, 2008; Snell &amp; Janney, 2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A daily or weekly progress monitoring report was a strategy the authors used to communicate with general education teachers. The report can be done either on paper or via e-mail. At the end of each day or week, the general education teacher briefly describes the students’ progress towards both academic and behavior goals, as well as any concerns that need to be addressed. See Figure 1 for an example of one author’s weekly progress report.
Figure 1: Weekly Progress Report

Student Name: __________________ Date: __________

Please complete this report for the above-mentioned student and return to me by Monday morning.

1. _____ Does not use class time wisely.
2. _____ Does not come to class prepared.
3. _____ Does not control body and comments.
4. _____ Does not have a positive attitude.
5. _____ Student accepts criticism without argument.
6. _____ Student is disruptive and/or disrespectful to teachers and/or peers.
7. _____ Student acts aggressively towards teachers and/or peers.

Comments: ___________________________________________________________

Teacher Signature: ___________________________ Date: _____________________
Another effective strategy was to schedule regular meetings between the general and special education teachers. One author had a scheduled, weekly meeting with each general education teacher. The meeting was short (generally about 20 minutes long) and the teachers discussed upcoming lessons and modifications, as well as the students’ progress toward his/her IEP goals. Finally, one author found it to be beneficial for both teachers to have an open-door policy and encourage other teachers and professionals to call, email or stop by at any time.

A second beneficial strategy is for the general and special education professionals to occasionally reverse roles in the classroom (Meadan et al., 2008; Snyder et al., 2001). This can be accomplished when one teacher leads the class while the other teacher assists. Each teacher has the opportunity to teach the class on a regular basis. Therefore, both teachers take turns leading and assisting and the students view both teachers as equal partners in the classroom instruction.

Collaborating with Paraeducators

Paraeducators play a large role in the education of students with special needs, both in the general education classroom and in special education classrooms. The problems with paraeducators occur when they are not provided training. This often occurs when the supervising teacher has not been trained on how to appropriately supervise individuals. Table 2 provides strategies that can be used when collaborating with paraprofessionals.

Table 2
Paraeducator Collaboration Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Responsible Party</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutual respect and trust</td>
<td>Special education teacher, general education teacher</td>
<td>Griffin et al., 2008; McLaren et al., 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match the paraeducators’ duties to his/her interests and strengths</td>
<td>Special education teacher; general education teacher</td>
<td>Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, &amp; Oliver, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remember that paraeducators are eager to learn new skills and strategies</td>
<td>Special education teacher, general education teacher</td>
<td>French, 2001; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, &amp; Stahl, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify roles, responsibilities, classroom routines, and expectations for students at the beginning of the school year</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher, paraprofessional</td>
<td>Bos et al., 2006; French, 2001; Griffin et al., 2008; Maggin et al., 2009; Salzberg &amp; Morgan, 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly define paraeducator roles</td>
<td>Special education teacher, general education teacher, administrators</td>
<td>French, 2001; Maggin et al., 2009; Salzberg et al., 1995; Wallace et al., 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be specific when giving tasks to paraeducators</td>
<td>Special education teacher, general education teacher</td>
<td>French, 2001; Wallace et al., 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing mutual respect and trust between yourself and your paraeducator is an integral part of collaboration. This can be accomplished in many ways. One strategy is to get to know your paraeducator and his/her strengths and weaknesses as well as his/her likes and dislikes. There are several types of interest inventories that can be used to accomplish this. Additionally, setting up a breakfast or lunch meeting with your paraprofessional to get to know him/her is a non-threatening way to find out more about your paraprofessional. One author occasionally wrote notes to her paraeducators telling them why she appreciated them and often included a small treat (a candy bar, a can of Coke, etc.) with the note. Additionally, the authors found it beneficial to ask their paraeducators for ideas about how to approach classroom problems or modifications for particular students.

A second strategy is to define paraeducator roles and responsibilities. It was noted during the authors’ time teaching that some paraeducators needed to have explicit directions on what needs to be accomplished. It is important that the classroom teacher explicitly describe classroom responsibilities for the paraeducator to perform and provide those responsibilities in verbal and written instructions. Additionally, teachers must be sure to clearly articulate roles for the following areas (1) lesson planning, (2) instruction delivery, (3) proactive and reactive responses to students’ behaviors, and (4) strategies to promote communication, and methods of student evaluation (Malian & Nevin, 2008).

Additionally, the authors provided their paraeducators with either a 3-ring binder or expandable binder. One author taught in a self-contained emotional and behavioral classroom and used the 3-ring binder method. In this binder she included (a) roles and responsibilities of the paraeducator (see Figure 2), (b) the teacher schedule (see Figure 3), (c) paraprofessional roles throughout the day, (d) notebook paper for documentation, (e) student behavior intervention plans (BIP), (f) student individual education plans (IEP), and (g) accommodations page. A second author taught in a self-contained classroom for students with autism and intellectual disabilities and incorporated the expandable notebook method, which included, (a) the paraprofessionals’ daily schedule, (b) copies of the students’ IEPs, (c) a spiral notebook for daily, written communication between the teacher and the paraprofessional, (d) daily assignments for the students while in the inclusive classroom, and (e) forms for documentation of student’s progress toward IEP goals, and (f) accommodation materials, such as a visual timer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarity</th>
<th>Encourage professional training for paraeducators</th>
<th>Administrators, special education teacher, general education teachers</th>
<th>French, 2001; Maggin et al., 2009; Telzrow, McNamara, &amp; Hollinger, 2000; Salzberg et al., 1995; Wallace et al., 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate paraeducators on a regular basis and provide feedback on the evaluation</td>
<td>Administrators, special education teachers, general education teacher</td>
<td>Maggin et al., 2009; Salzberg et al., 1995; Wallace et al., 2001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule time weekly or monthly to meet and discuss classroom plans and any problems</td>
<td>Special education teacher, general education teacher</td>
<td>French, 2001; Maggin et al., 2009; McLaren et al., 2007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share your goals for the day, month, lesson, students, etc.</td>
<td>Special education teacher, general education teacher</td>
<td>Wallace et al., 2001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: Paraeducator Roles/Responsibilities

**SEAC Responsibilities**
- Escort students to and from the special education busses
- Help with filing
- Work with students as a group or individually (I will give you their assignment and then you execute…If you have more information about the subject and you feel comfortable giving them more detail please do)
- CPI as needed
- Working with students in outclasses
- Filling out point sheets
- Help with keeping track of levels, points, etc.

**Inclusion Responsibilities**
- Work with SEAC student to make sure BIP, IEPs and modifications are being followed
- Work with other students that need help
- Help the classroom teacher as needed
- If a student needs a modification that the teacher has not modified, ask the teacher how they want it or do it yourself and then tell them what you are doing.
- Keep a close eye on SEAC students’ behavior, if they start having a problem do what you feel is necessary to get the behavior under control before sending them back to SEAC (this can include taking a walk with them, taking them out to the hall to calm down, moving them to a different seat, etc.)

**Floater Responsibilities**
- As of right now we have a low number of students and many of which don’t need constant supervision. With this comes some down time that I am going to have a floater.
- You will go to different classrooms to check up on SEAC students.
- Monitor behavior…If student is not doing what they are supposed to be doing, then step in…give that teacher a break from our student…Take student out in hall and talk to him/her if the need presents itself.
- Help teacher/students if needed (wanted).
- You can come and go out of your assigned classes as you feel fit. If the student is doing well and you want to go and check on another room and then go back do so.
- I want this to be a visual for our students so they know we will be checking up on them and a visual for the teachers so they know we are there to help.

Figure 3: Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>1st Period</th>
<th>2nd Period</th>
<th>3rd Period</th>
<th>4th Period</th>
<th>5th Period</th>
<th>6th Period</th>
<th>7th Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher #1</td>
<td>SEAC</td>
<td>SEAC</td>
<td>SEAC</td>
<td>SEAC</td>
<td>Work w/LP</td>
<td>SEAC (AD)</td>
<td>SEAC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher #2</td>
<td>SEAC</td>
<td>SEAC w/AR</td>
<td>Jones (1007)</td>
<td>Wallac (1007)</td>
<td>SEAC PE</td>
<td>SEAC</td>
<td>SEAC (CV)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Encouraging professional development among paraeducators is another strategy that can be used to prepare them for future challenges in the classroom. There are several school districts that now require paraeducators to attend district training. The authors also provided both formal and informal training when they worked with paraeducators. One of the easiest ways to accomplish this, according to the authors, was to provide them with the notes from any relevant professional learning they attended. Also, you can provide information to the administrators when you find a training that may benefit both you and your paraprofessional. In one author’s school district, the teachers and paraeducators participated together in a book club, where they read and discussed books on topics relevant to education and child development.

Evaluating paraprofessional performance should be a collaborative effort among administrators and the teachers that work closely with the paraeducator. Scheduling time to meet with your paraprofessional can be done several ways. Some ways the authors accomplished this was to meet every day after school, just for a few minutes, to rehash the day. Another example is that once a month they would all meet to go out to lunch or meet before school for breakfast provided by the teacher.

**Collaborating with Parents**

Parent collaboration is also very important in both general and special education settings for all students. The research has identified several strategies that can assist with this process to make this sometimes daunting task a reality (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*Parent Collaboration Strategies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Responsible Party</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide information early on, before the parents have to ask</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher, administrator</td>
<td>Fish, 2008; Kirmani, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to the parents’ concerns</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher, administrator</td>
<td>Center for Family Involvement in Schools, 2011; Coots, 2007; Fish, 2008; Hobbs &amp; Westling, 1998; Kirmani, 2007; Orozco, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce parents to everyone at IEP meetings</td>
<td>Administrator, special education teacher</td>
<td>Fish, 2008; Kirmani, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to put yourself in the parents’ shoes</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher, administrator</td>
<td>Coots, 2007; Kirmani, 2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One strategy to use when working with parents of a child with special needs is to find out more about the child and family, as well as the family’s goals for their child. The authors provided a questionnaire to their students’ parents at the beginning of each school year (see Figure 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete home visits</td>
<td>Administrator, special education teacher</td>
<td>Kirmani, 2007; Orozco, 2008; Wang, McCart, &amp; Turnbull, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite parents into your classroom/school</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher, administrator</td>
<td>Center for Family Involvement in Schools, 2011; Fish, 2008; Kirmani, 2007; Orozco, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include parents in transition planning – “change can be difficult for parents and their child”</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td>Sheehey &amp; Sheehey, 2007,p. 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the child’s strengths instead of comparing him/her with typically developing peers</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td>Fish, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realize that parents may need the school day as a time for respite</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td>Coots, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realize that families are different</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td>Coots, 2007; Murray &amp; Curran, 2008; Orozco, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct IEP meetings at convenient times</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td>Fish, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek parents’ input</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td>Coots, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on family’s unique characteristics</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td>Kirmani, 2007; Murray &amp; Curran, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find out the family’s goals for the child</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick one day a week to call parents</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide communication forms</td>
<td>General education teacher, special education teacher,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5: Family Questionnaire I

Contact Name #1 _________________________________
Email/Phone#: _________________________________
When is the best time to contact you regarding your child? -
_________________________________________________________________________

Contact Name #2 _________________________________
Email/Phone#: _________________________________
When is the best time to contact you regarding your child? -
_________________________________________________________________________

There are times that as a consequence, your child could be asked to stay after school. Would this be possible for your child? _________

1. What do you feel the needs of your child are?
2. What do you feel are your child’s strengths?
3. What do you feel are your child’s weaknesses?
4. What do you see as your child’s interests?
5. What are your expectations of your child?
6. What are your expectations of your child’s teachers?
7. What do you feel your child needs to be successful at school?
8. Is there any other information you would like your child’s teachers to know?
Another strategy used by the authors was to pick one day a week to call the parents, for both positive and negative reasons. One teacher also sent one or two short emails to each student’s family on a weekly basis. The teachers found, though, that parents are often more receptive to hearing the negative when the majority of interactions are positive; therefore, it is important to contact parents on a regular basis about a child’s progress. Figures 8 and 9 are examples of the communication logs the authors used to track telephone calls, e-mails, and meetings.

**Figure 8: Communication Log I**

**A Note from Mrs. XXXX**

Today’s Date:

**Today, we worked on the following things:**

**Language Arts:**

**Math:**

**Science:**

**Social Studies:**

**Functional Skills:**

**Specials:**

Notes about the day:
Your child did well with…

and with…

Your child struggled when…

Other notes:

**Figure 9: Communication Log II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date and Time</th>
<th>Form of Contact</th>
<th>Who Initiated Contact?</th>
<th>What was Discussed?</th>
<th>Notes from Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 10: Daily Communication Sheet

**Joe’s Daily Communication Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Science/Social Studies</th>
<th>Specials</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
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<tr>
<td>😊</td>
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<tr>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
<td>😊</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes from Mrs. XXXX:

The authors also used two other types of communication forms such as a daily communication form (see Figure 10) and an assignment sheet (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Assignment Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment #1</th>
<th>Completed (Yes or No)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Homework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignment #2</td>
<td>Completed (Yes or No)</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment #3</td>
<td>Completed (Yes or No)</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Homework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Due to both the legal requirements and the benefits to the students and education professionals, collaboration is essential in the inclusive classroom. Special educators must become proficient at collaborating with other teachers, with paraeducators, and with parents. By using the strategies outlined in this article, teachers can increase their collaborative skills and improve the education of all students in their classroom.

References


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**About the Authors**

**Dr. Kathleen Hogan** is currently an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Augusta State University. Previously she taught in a self-contained classroom for students with emotional and behavioral disorders at both the elementary and secondary levels. Her research interests include professional collaboration in schools and meeting diversity standards in higher education.

**Marla Lohmann, MEd.** is a former teacher of students with autism, ED, and MR at the early childhood, elementary, and junior high levels. She is currently a doctoral student in Special Education at the University of North Texas and her research interests include professional collaboration in education and preschool behavior management.
Rose Champion, MEd., is a graduate of Augusta State University in the School Counseling program. She is currently residing in Baton Rouge, LA. Her research interests include professional collaboration in education and meeting CACREP standards in higher education.