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Collaboration between Special Education Teachers and Regular Education Teachers: Implications for Professional Development

Abstract

It is essential that special education teachers help and support regular education teachers so that they can work effectively with special needs students in their classes. Students with disabilities need modified lesson plans and methods of teaching in order to succeed and since the majority of teachers in regular education are not trained to work with special needs students, it becomes important that they collaborate with special education to provide the needed support for those students. Hence, the current study aimed at identifying the level of practicing collaboration between special education teachers and regular education teachers in Abu Dhabi school district. The study sample consisted of 135 teachers; 75 regular education teachers and 60 special education teachers. A researcher designed questionnaire based on extensive review of literature was used and the final version of the questionnaire consisted of ten items. Analysis of data revealed that the level of collaboration between special education teachers and regular education teachers was medium; also no significant differences were found between teachers based on gender, however a significant difference was found between teachers based on the level of education being better for those with higher education.

Keywords: Special Education, Regular Education, Collaboration, Effective Teaching.

Introduction

It is the focus of many schools nowadays on inclusive models that concentrate on special needs students to be included with their peers in the regular classroom and thus higher expectations and increased teacher accountability is in demand. This means that there are more responsibilities on both regular education teachers and special education teachers for educating such diverse learners. Developing skills of collaboration take time to develop and many barriers exist that prevent such collaboration between teachers which can

limit the outcomes of successful teamwork. (Da Fonte, & Barton-Arwood, 2017).

With more students are commonly being integrated in regular education classrooms, this has emphasized the fact that teachers must gain more knowledge to accommodate students who are being educated with their regular education peers within the same classroom. One of the most effective ways to gain knowledge is by teamwork between regular education teachers and special education teachers and the gain of this teamwork is for both teachers since students

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with disabilities are being educated by both teachers.

Collaboration plays a major role in helping both teachers to make appropriate and essential modification to better meet the needs of special needs students and therefore have a positive impact of the students learning. Collaboration has also been found to play a major role in motivating special education teachers to stay in the profession (McCoy, 2007)

Research suggest that collaboration is extremely important between both regular and special education teachers in order to provide effective teaching for all students (Beaton, 2007; Bauwens, & Hourcade, 1996; Blanton, & Pugach, 2007; Sledge, and Pazey, 2013; Sokal, & Sharma, 2014; Tziviniou, & Papoutsaki, 2014; Vlachou, Didaskalou and Mpeliou, 2004; Strogilos, Lacey, Xanthacou & Kaila, 2011). Inclusive education has become the trend of educating all students; in the same classroom, especially those with academic difficulties, this trend of inclusive schools was especially adopted after the UNESCO's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNESCO, 2006). Currently, the philosophy of education is mainstreaming all students in the same classroom, which in turn brought in both regular and special education teachers who are required to collaborate together in order for the process to be successful, thus what once was thought to be an individual task, has now become a requirement for teachers to communicate with regards to goals, decision, instruction, being responsible for students and teaching collaboratively (Bauwens, Hourcade & Friend, 1989:36).

In today's educational settings, where inclusion is being implemented in almost all schools, collaboration has become essential specially with the increased percentage of special needs students being included in regular education environments (Winn, and Blanton, 2005), in addition teachers are required to accommodate all students needs including special needs students (Sharpe, and Hawes, 2003).

One of the most important elements in collaboration is effective communication and in order for teachers to communicate positively with one another they must have positive attitudes, which in turn will create a better environment for all teachers and be more productive (kritikos and Birnbaum, 2003). Having such a positive environment will foster collaboration among teachers (Smith and Leonard, 2005).

One of the most important factors that help in creating positive communication and therefore collaboration between teachers is professional development. In reviewing previous studies, it

has been noted that teachers felt that professional development will play a major role in contributing to their effective collaboration with other teachers in inclusive classrooms and hence be able to modify the instruction and curriculum to accommodate for their students (Idol, 2006). In addition, professional development for teachers will help them acquire skills in problem solving, gain methods on how to reflect on their own practices and finding solutions for problems they might encounter (Weiner, 2003).

The strategy of teacher collaboration that has been proven as a successful method in classrooms especially inclusive classrooms and the method is not new in the field of special education. It is considered as an exemplary model in inclusive environments since it concentrates on teacher's talents and various skills of teachers. It is essential that all participating teachers believe that all students can learn in order for collaboration to be effective, also teachers must be competent of skills such as communication and problem solving (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). All teachers must be flexible when collaborating in terms of designing lesson plans and implementation of strategies in the classroom. When models of collaboration are used in the school system, they must be well planned where teachers understand the roles and responsibilities and methods of class interaction (Buli-Holmberg, & Jeyaprabhan, 2016).

Research indicates clearly that collaboration can provide student with special needs a wide range of instructional options, in addition it helps improve the academic outcomes of those students (Hang and Rabren, 2009). Collaboration increases interaction between students which leads to more confidence in one's self and self-esteem and lowers behavioral problems of students (Murawski, 2010). It also benefits teachers in that it fosters an environment where inclusion can be implemented easily, also it encourages professional development in seeking knowledge with regards to educating students with disabilities (Horn and Little, 2010; Forlin, 2010). Because of the importance of educating and including students with disabilities, collaboration between teachers and its impact on students must be well organized instead of being random (Boyle et al., 2011a; Moolenaar, Slegers and Daly, 2012).

Collaboration practices vary between teachers depending on factors such as the context and individual differences, where some teachers will adapt collaborative strategies more than others. The research suggests that barriers that prevented teacher collaboration include

paradox and a misunderstanding of the role of teachers (Takala et al., 2009; Damore and Murray, 2008), in addition to teachers not being able to plan accurately as a team and the lack of administrative support and not receiving enough professional development with regards to collaboration (Sharma et al., 2012; Murawski, 2010).

A study conducted by Radiæ-Šestic, M., Radovanovic, V., Milanovic-Dobrota, B., Slavkovic, S., & Langoviae-Milicvic, A. (2013) to find out the relationship between special and regular education teachers within the context of teamwork and to define socio-economic issues that affected collaboration found that no significant differences existed in teacher's views of all the dimensions of collaboration. Teachers were aware of the environment in which collaboration works well, in addition both groups of teachers had similar behavior and abilities and had respect for the values of collaboration, however moving from traditional methods of teaching and learning to an inclusive environment was a problem of the identity of the regular education teachers.

The findings of the research by Aikaterini, V & Stylianos, Z (2015) which was to investigate practices of collaboration between special and regular education teachers in secondary education, found that teachers indicated very few practices that are classified as being collaborative, however the majority of the activities were informal conversations rather than organized activities.

Khairul, Kerry, and Judith (2016) in their study report on the views of special education teachers towards collaboration with their regular education peers in Malaysia. The finding of their study indicated that there were good relations between the two types of teachers, however limited collaboration between teachers with regards to planning for inclusion of students in regular education classrooms were found.

Collaboration is usually practiced to support special needs students in mainstream classrooms, yet a gap is often found between the potential effectiveness of collaboration and real practices in the classroom. The current study seeks to examine in service teachers' collaboration so that a better understanding of such practice can be identified which can help improve teacher training and service delivery.

Moreover, the objective of the current research is to identify the level practicing collaboration between special and regular education teachers. More specifically, the study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What is the level of practicing collaboration between special and regular

education teachers in Abu Dhabi school district?

2. Does the level of collaboration differ between teachers based on gender and level of education?

Method

Participants

Participants were 75 regular education teachers and 60 special education teachers who were purposefully chosen due to limited number of special needs teachers. From the 75 regular education teachers, 39 were males and 36 were females. In addition, 35 of them had a degree higher than bachelor and 40 had a degree less than a bachelor. Of the 60 special education teachers, 32 were males and 28 were females, in addition 27 of them had a degree higher than bachelor and 33 had a degree less than a bachelor.

Instrument

After extensive review of literature (Tzivinikou, & Papoutsaki, 2014; Vlachou, Didaskalou and Mpeliou, 2004; Strogilos, Lacey, Xanthacou & Kaila, 2011) the researchers designed the instrument which consisted of 10 items. The instrument is a self-report method that asks individuals to report on each item by choosing one of the five answers (1= happens very little, 2= happens little, 3= happens in a medium degree, 4= happens much, and 5= happens very much).

Validity and reliability of the tool: the validity of the instrument was verified using the method of veracity of the vocabulary on a sample of (20) general education teachers and (10) special education teachers by calculating the correlation coefficient between the degree of each individual and the total score of the dimension. The values of correlation coefficients ranged from 0.77 to 0.82, all of which are high, positive and functional, indicating that the list of items on the survey has a high degree of validity. Reliability was verified by using the Cronbach's alpha method and reapplication interval of (13) days from a sample number of (35) teachers. Table 1 shows the reliability coefficients that the two researchers reached.

Table 1.

Correlation coefficient of collaboration survey

Component	# of items	Type of Repetition		
		Repetition	Half Repetition	Cronbach Alpha
Collaboration	10	0.78	0.77	0.80

Procedures

Survey instrument was administered with the authority and guidance of the principles of regular education schools in the United Arab Emirates. Two hundred seventy-five surveys were sent to schools accompanied by a letter assuring teachers confidentiality and anonymity. The completed surveys were returned during four consecutive weeks. One hundred and ninety-six surveys were returned, and 61 of them were not used because of missing information. The final sample included surveys from 135

participants which represented about 49% of those distributed.

Results

To answer the first question, what is the level of practicing collaboration between special and regular education teachers in Abu Dhabi school district? Means and standard deviations were calculated for the items on the collaboration survey in a descending order. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2.

Means and standard deviations on the consultation survey in a descending order

Item #	Item	Means	Standard Deviation
1	Working together to help students with learning disabilities to gain and develop effective learning strategies.	3.39	1.25
2	Collaborative teaching in the regular education classroom.	3.34	1.35
3	Working together to solve problems that face students with learning disabilities and their individualized education programs.	3.32	1.13
4	Collaborating with regular education teachers in developing the individualized education plan.	3.26	1.07
5	Planning to help students transfer their learning strategies to the regular education classroom.	3.21	1.22
6	Meeting with regular education teachers to prepare and organize plans and teaching strategies.	3.19	1.27
7	Meeting with parents of students with learning disabilities with presence of the regular education teacher.	3.11	1.34
8	Guiding the planning of small group teaching in the regular education classroom.	3.11	1.10
9	Working together with regular education teachers regarding teaching with the help of peers.	3.09	1.26
10	Regular education teachers teach some lessons in the resource room.	3.07	0.98
Total		3.21	0.93

Table 2 shows that all items on the collaboration survey were medium. Item number 1 had the highest mean (3.39) whereas item number 10 had the lowest mean (3.07). The reason of such results could be because both regular and special education teachers realize that collaboration is important and it plays a major role in getting the job done in an accurate and timely manner. The Ministry of education at the United Arab Emirates is highly active in preparing teachers for diverse classrooms. They conduct workshops and seminars throughout the country on regular basis to help teachers realize that students have different needs and that the existence of special education teachers in

schools is help facilitate the learning process for those students who are considered exceptional (Students with disabilities). Even though the results indicate a fairly good collaboration is happening in schools, yet there is a need for more effective collaboration.

In order to answer the second question; Does the level of collaboration differ between teachers based on gender and level of education?

Means and standard deviations were calculated, in addition, two-way variance of analysis and two way Anova was used to answer this question. Table 3 and 4 shows the results.

Table 3.

Means and standard deviation based on gender and level of education of both special education and regular education teachers

Type	Variable		Means	Standard deviation
Regular education Teachers	Gender	Male	3.23	0.535
		Female	3.26	0.553
	Education level	Higher than BA	3.27	0.449
		Lower than BA	3.20	0.629
Special Education teachers	Gender	Male	3.24	0.623
		Female	3.22	0.633
	Education level	Higher than BA	3.30	0.441
		Lower than BA	3.15	0.651

Table 3 shows differences in means and standard deviations between groups. To further investigate if there were significant statistical

differences between the variables, two way Anova was used for further analysis (table 4).

Table 4.

Analysis of two way Anova for the effect of gender and level of education for regular and special education teachers

Type	Source of variance	Sum of squares	Df.	Means of squares	f	Sig.
Regular education teachers	Gender	0.742	1	0.742	2.238	0.131
	Level of education	9.889	1	9.889	31.245	0.234
	Error	554.312	132	4.20		
	Total	713.325	135			
Special Education teachers	Gender	0.832	1	0.832	2.538	0.111
	Level of education	11.789	1	11.789	35.958	0.000
	Error	654.410	1996	0.328		
	Total	713.325	199			
	Corrected					

Table 4 shows no significant differences between both categories of teachers based on gender. This could be due to the fact that the job description of both genders are the same, in addition they are all given same and equal duties regardless of their gender.

However, significant differences were found between teachers based on the level of education being better for teachers with higher degrees. An explanation of this finding can be due to the fact that teachers with a bachelor degree or higher were exposed to more learning about the importance of collaboration and had more time to practice during their preservice teaching, however teachers with degrees less than a bachelor most likely had less time to learn

about collaboration and its importance and less time to practice during their preservice teaching.

Conclusion

Even though the findings of the current study suggest that both regular and special education teachers collaborate to deliver effective instruction to special needs students, yet more concentration should be focused on spreading the culture of collaboration during teacher education programs for both general and special education teachers as well as through professional development. Collaboration is important so that regular education teachers and special education teachers can benefit from one

another and be able to deliver instruction tailored towards the needs of individual students who are included in general education classrooms (Murawski and Hughes, 2009).

The findings of the current research indicated that teachers practice the concept of collaboration in school to an extent. Results also indicated that no significant differences were found between male and female teachers in their collaboration efforts, however significant differences were found between teachers based on their education level being better for those with a Bachelor degree or higher. This implies that during preparation programs student teachers are being exposed to the usefulness of collaboration and in many teacher education programs in the United Arab Emirates, preservice regular education teachers take several courses related to the education of students with special needs. And in many elective courses at the college level both preservice special education teachers and preservice regular education teachers take classes together and collaborate in projects required by those course. This can be a pathway towards spreading the culture of collaboration among those preservice teachers and once they graduate and go to schools they carry this culture with them to their schools.

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