

Collaboration Practices between Special Education Teachers and Mainstream Teachers in Secondary Education

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Abstract

Teachers' collaboration has been reported as being one of the most important factors for promoting inclusive education. However, the way collaboration is implemented affects students' inclusion. The purpose of this research was to investigate collaboration practices between the two teachers in secondary education. This research used a qualitative approach through questionnaires of twenty four special education teachers and twenty seven mainstream teachers. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with five special education teachers and mainstream teachers were conducted and analyzed. Our findings indicate that only a few practices are classified as inclusive. Most of the other collaboration practices are more an informal conversation rather than scheduling organized activities. Given that the curriculum and examinations are demanding in secondary education, special education and mainstream teachers participate in a system that fosters individualistic efforts, instead of shared goals. We argue for an enhancement in inclusive education, the achievement of which requires both political and practical changes.

Keywords: inclusion, resource rooms, secondary education, collaboration practices.

1. Introduction

The term "collaboration" refers to the interaction of two or more people, which includes some behavioral patterns, such as communication, coordination, and information sharing, negotiation and problem solution strategies. Hence, the term "collaboration between teachers" further encloses parity, mutual goals, shared responsibility in decision making, shared resources and accountability and valuing personal opinions and expertise (Friend, and Cook, 2003). Collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers is voluntary and can take many forms; 'Different and various terms (see Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wehmeyer, 2007) have evolved depending on changes in education, teaching methods and curriculum. For the purposes of this review, collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers is referred to as an interactive process that enables teachers with diverse expertise to work together as equals and engage in shared decision making toward mutually defined goals (Idol, Nevin, and Paolucci-Whitcomb, 2000).

Greek teachers have always collaborated for students' progress, achievement and grades. This kind of collaboration is part of institutionalized meetings throughout the year. However, collaboration between special education teachers and mainstream teachers gets differentiated and nowadays, teachers are summoned to collaborate for some reasons: Firstly, the number of students with disabilities at mainstream school continues to increase (Winn, and Blanton, 2005). Secondly, there is increased pressure for all teachers to meet the needs of all students (Sharpe, and Hawes, 2003). Not to mention, most parents demand their children to attend mainstream schools. Thirdly, the legislation has noted both the importance of supporting access to general education curriculum for students with disabilities and the use of prevention - based approaches (Thousand, Villa, and Nevin, 2007). In Greece, most students with disabilities attend mainstream schools (4-18 years old).

Some of the students attend co-taught classrooms (mainstream and special education teachers co-teach in the same classroom). Others spend up to 10 hours per week in resource rooms, where they receive group learning support from special education teachers. Then, they remain in their classroom with classmates and are taught by a mainstream teacher. Only a few students with disabilities attend special schools, such as children with medium to low functioning autism, severe mental retardation and physical disability. However, teaching students with disabilities in secondary education involves challenges and obstacles, different to those met in primary education because of the curriculum's content, secondary teachers' features (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2001). Furthermore, mainstream education syllabus range and content are overloaded resulting to the rate of syllabus teaching being extremely quick. Students are taught more lessons, while they must assimilate new meanings and syllabus. Teachers' studies are restricted to their main subject and not to pedagogy and teaching, not to mention Special Education training, while the combination of syllabus range with exams make studying and learning for students with disabilities almost impossible. Thus, resource rooms have played a vital role both in learning and in promoting the implementation of more inclusive practices in mainstream schools. Although legislation promotes collaboration, the kind and the context of collaborative practices is not modulated and not well known if the two teachers work together or not. If they do, what do they discuss about, what kind of collaboration practices do they implement, if any at all, when they meet each other? Are they engaged in shared decision making toward mutually defined goals?

2. Objectives

Although education reforms and law are calling for increased collaboration, the actual collaboration practices remain unclear. The aim of the present study is to explore collaboration practices between mainstream and special education teachers, in secondary education schools where a resource room exists. Namely, the collaboration context is the focus of this study between the two groups of teachers in secondary education.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Twenty four special education teachers (N=24) with the average age being 32 years old (80% females, 20% males) and twenty seven mainstream teachers (N=27), with the average age being 41 years old (74% females, 26% males) participated in this study. All of them were teaching at secondary education schools with an existing resource room in both Crete and Northern Greece. The special education teachers from first group (G1) work in a resource rooms in secondary mainstream schools. The mainstream teachers from second group (G2) work in the classrooms of the same school. Both groups teach the same students with disabilities at mainstream schools. It is pointed out that most schools in secondary education do not have a resource room.

3.2. Procedure and Instruments

Special education teachers were asked to describe the context of collaboration with mainstream teachers and mainstream teachers were asked to describe the context of collaboration with special education teachers.

A qualitative approach was used to explore the context of collaboration between them through questionnaires. All teachers completed the questionnaires which included closed-ended and open-ended questions. These questions explored the collaboration practices between the two teachers. Teachers' answers were coded into categories concerning collaboration practices and the frequency of answers was recorded. Each answer from the questionnaires was compared, in order to establish common categories. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with five special education teachers and five mainstream teachers were conducted and analyzed. These semi-structured interviews used probes for answer clarification and for further analysis, penetrating each theme (Creswell, 2008). We extracted sentence units from the answers in order to support the created categories. We paid significant attention to teachers' answers and interviews in order to interpret data.

4. Results

Both groups shared similar collaboration practices and therefore, we present the results for both groups together. Hence, the proportion of collaboration practices between the two groups is different (see table 1). Thus, we export percentages for each group.

A. Collaboration absence. This category includes all answers of the participants contains two subcategories: i) Communication absence and ii) Discussion at a rudimentary level. 49% of the two groups mentioned that collaboration either does not exist or is at a rudimentary level.

First subcategory: Communication absence. 25% from group 1 (G1) and 37% from group 2 (G2) stated that there is no collaboration or any kind of conversation at all. "... *No dialog or collaboration between us...*". (G1, G2). The probes from the interviews featured two main reasons for collaboration absence: (a) unawareness of collaboration context (b) administrative factors.

(a). Answers were absolute, without knowing the reason:"*No dialog or collaboration between us*"...."*What for?*"(G1, G2)..."*I teach all students ... she teaches students with disabilities*" (G1).

(b).The explanation of collaboration scarcity was revealing. Teachers usually teach in different schools throughout the day. Thus, the two teachers never meet each other, because there is no projected time for meeting each other. Schools often lack staff, such as special education teachers from the beginning of the year and not every year: "*I would like to discuss with the special education teacher, but I never see her. She is always busy and sharing time at another school. When I have time, she is at another school*".... (G1) ... "*Last year there was no special education teacher at our school*" (G1).

Second subcategory: Rudimentary discussion: 25% from G1 and 11% from G2 stated that collaboration exists (in term of discussion) when they need to visit other schools or organizations, or at school events. In some other cases, they discuss the exams, when they take place. It is an informal talk –not a collaboration-only about the exams without any disposition for collaboration.

B. Focus only on syllabus and exams. 29% from G1 and 30% of G2 reported that their collaboration is restricted to information sharing about syllabus and exams, with some reports to learning problems without penetrating the meaning of collaboration. This information sharing about a student is not utilized to better plan an appropriate educational program. Their collaboration is more an informal conversation about syllabus, exams learning and behavior problems rather than an attempt for collaboration in a very real sense. "...*we discuss the syllabus and exams, behavior and behavior problems*" (G1, G2). "*We talk about the grades and the exams*" (G1, G2).The probes from the interviews revealed the same administrative factor related to no projected time for more: "*Sessions every three months are projected by the legislation. There is time in these sessions to talk about the syllabus the exams, the students and their needs*". (G1, G2). In addition, information is given by the special education teacher to the mainstream teacher about the students with disability, because they have the responsibility and knowledge concerning their progress. "... *As I know about the students with disabilities, I give this information to my colleagues for both students' and teachers' benefit* (G1)..." *I ask them what kind of problems (students) exhibit in the classroom...*" (G1)

C. Inclusive practices. Both the two groups reported a set of good practices (G1:21% and G2:22%), which promote inclusive education. It makes sense that all of them report more than one; that's why we set them under the same category describing them. All these practices are considered ideal practices which promote inclusive education.

a. A joint effort in planning and sharing knowledge; common goal determination; teaching approach. *We define goals and look for appropriate teaching methods* (G1, G2) *for all students with learning difficulties*"..."*We try applied education programs at the resource room to mesh well in the classroom*" (G1, G2). "...*We compare notes for the academic achievement, the behavior...*" ... "*We highlight the sections of the syllabus which the students must focus on...*" (G1)

b.Cooperation with other colleagues or services. Both of the teachers who collaborate with each other, try to include more colleagues or other services. Furthermore, they try to cooperate with other colleagues in the same school or with the Department of Public Center of Diagnosis and Support of Children with Special Needs (KE.D.D.Y). "...*we try, with other colleagues to find a common attitude for learning and behavior problems ...we collect data from different fields in order to construct global knowledge* (G1)..." "*I cooperate with other special education teachers...*" (G1). "...*we discuss problems... teaching methods ... we cooperate with the KEDDY, talk with its experts. We advise all teachers at school and students' parents about the progress...*"(G1).

c. Trying to find a solution. Trying to find a solution indicates that they take care of the students with disabilities, discuss students' behavior and learning problems. This effort demands time, collaboration disposition and is not restricted only to the syllabus and exams.

"*we interchange experiences in order to better understand the personality of these adolescents... We try to find alternative solutions to their problems*" (G1) "... *we discuss in order to find solutions for learning and behavior problems with other colleagues*" (G2)"...*we analyze each student's learning profile.*

There is a cooperation with the families. We have an agreement to face learning and behavior problems...we discuss his development and suggest to each other how to motivate him and approach him (G2).

The probes from the interviews featured exactly what they do, when working together. "... We interchange experiences with all colleagues at school. We discussed students' learning difficulties... suggested alternative teaching methods... discussed intervention for behavior problems... alternative assessment methods...disposition for parents involvement." (G1, G2).

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore collaborative practices between special and mainstream teachers in secondary education. The results showed the existence of a variety of practices, but also collaboration absence. Some of the practices are restricted to teachers' collaboration regarding syllabus and exams, while some others are classified as more inclusive.

Collaboration absence: Half of the participants stated that there is no collaboration between the two teachers, even if they teach the same students. The unawareness of collaboration context between mainstream and special education teachers is mentioned in other Greek studies (for example Vlachou, Didaskalou, Beliou, 2004; Venianaki, and Doulia, 2013), because preparation for collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers is not a part of sessions' program in all universities. However, it is not easy to set up collaborative practices. Obstacles are plentiful, such as declination for collaboration (Venianaki, and Doulia, 2013), emphasis on content area knowledge, need for independent study skills, the faster pacing of instruction, high-stakes testing, high school competency exams, less positive attitudes of teachers (Mastropieri, and Scruggs, 2001). This finding is very important because teachers' attitude towards collaboration is significant for students' with disabilities "inclusion" in mainstream schools. It will not succeed, if teachers deny accepting it (D' Alonzo, Giordano, and Vanleeuwen, 1997). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions and attitudes in secondary education have a vital role in inclusion success (Mastropieri, and Scruggs, 2001).

Collaboration on syllabus and exams: This kind of collaboration concerns only the interchange of information about syllabus and exams. The probe's findings about the kind of discussion revealed the traditional perception about teaching, which has been characterized as a "lonely" profession (Sarason, Levine, Godenberg, Cherlin, and Bennet, 1966, p.74), and the segregation of traditional special and general education programs. This means that special education teachers typically have skills and dispositions focusing on individualizing curriculum and instruction, based on children's needs (Dettmer, Thurston, and Dyck, 2005; Volonino, and Zigmond, 2007), while mainstream teachers tend to have knowledge of the curriculum, standards, and desired outcomes for the group.

Collaborative practices promoting inclusion: The set of collaborative practices that has been found in this study, such as good sharing of planning, common - goal determination of teaching approach, problem solving and individuals' cooperation in more informal ways, is well known as the facets of successful collaboration (see for example Friend, and Cook, 2003). All these practices promote inclusion and enhance the likelihood of its success (Turnbull et al., 2007). Particularly, collaboration can improve the delivery of the curriculum so that the knowledge possessed by special education teachers is integrated in the class curriculum. These new relationships promote changes in their role within the mainstream school, with important implications for their professional development and an important shift in their identity (Beauchamp, and Thomas, 2009). The collaboration is a fundamental issue, since inclusion is impossible to be achieved, if the two teachers do not collaborate (Klinger, and Vaughn, 2002). For the success of the inclusion purpose, it is necessary to have collaboration beyond institutionalized meetings for syllabus and exams. It is essential that teachers' schedule have time notably for collaboration, such as information interchange, activities and lessons planning for all students in the same class.

5. Conclusion

All considered, radical changes must take place in schools for more effective function. These include changes of attitude, behavioral patterns, teaching approaches and scheduling. Even more, a great obstacle is the gap between legislation and teachers' preparation for "inclusion" at schools (Zoniou-Sideri, and Deropoulou-Derou, 2008). Preparation must be part of sessions' program in all universities, so that university students receive adequate training or education (D' Alonzo et al., 1997). For this reason, changes in the Greek educational system have to occur, as well as changes in the way the education system has been structured.

However, all these changes cannot be answered outside the context of what the future of inclusion is in a world, where students' needs are constantly changing, as new financial and social patterns are being formed.

Collaboration practices: Categories and percentages	Collaboration Absence		Collaboration on syllabus /exams	Collaboration practices (inclusive practices)
	Communication absence	Rudimentary discussion	Conversation about syllabus, exams learning and behavior problems (disposition for collaboration)	a. Good sharing of planning, common goal determination and teaching approach. b. Cooperation with other colleagues or services c. Trying to find a solution.
G1	25%	25%	29%	21%
G2	37%	11%	30%	22%
Total	49%		29,5%	21,5%

Table1: Percentages of collaboration practices from mainstream teachers (G1) and special education teachers (G2).

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