Contribution of Research

# Improving Inclusive Education: A Synthesis of Collaboration Models and Implementation Strategies

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**Abstract**

*Inclusive classrooms continue to face challenges in providing effective inclusion for all students. Teachers often report feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, which leads to a disconnect between general and special education practices. While research supports the benefits of collaboration, the sheer number of models can be overwhelming: Systematic Support Planning Process, Universal Design for Learning, Inclusion Consultation Model, Professional Learning Communities, Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs, Project-Based Learning, and Learner-Centered Classrooms. This article synthesizes these collaboration models and identifies key strategies and common elements that contribute to successful implementation in diverse educational settings. By examining the underlying principles and practical applications of each model, this article provides a framework for educators and administrators to select and adapt collaborative approaches that best meet the needs of their students, parents, and educators, ultimately ensuring a higher quality of inclusive education.*

Keywords: inclusion, collaboration, inclusive education, collaborative models, implementation strategies, special education, general education, Universal Design for Learning, Professional Learning Communities, Project Based Learning, Systematic Support Planning Process, Learner-Centered Classrooms, Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs

Inclusive education seeks to provide equitable and effective learning opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities. Despite federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the implementation of inclusive practices in general education classrooms remains inconsistent and often inadequate. Research shows that while fewer than 1% of students with disabilities require alternate assessments, only 64% of these students are educated in general education classrooms for at least 80% of the school day (Cole et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2018). This discrepancy indicates a significant gap between policy and practice. Addressing this gap requires intentional efforts, including adopting collaborative models that support meaningful inclusion (Bridges, 2024).

Bloom and Conant conclude that every student has the potential to be successful, and it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the students are provided with what they need to attain their goals. In addition, Washburne deems every child can achieve mastery of a subject, but the length of time, amount of practice, and learning materials would vary according to each student's needs. This aligns with the Learner-Centered Ideology, which emphasizes student growth and positions learners' needs and interests as central to shaping the curriculum and educational experience (Schiro, 2012). The learner is the focus of the curriculum, where they are provided opportunities to ask questions, explore what interests them, and simply experience reality through experiences. Knowledge is less of the focus because growth is how organic learning is achieved; obtaining knowledge is the byproduct of growth, which must be initiated and the learners must engage with the learning. For learners, knowledge is constructed, repeated, becomes personal meaning due to its significance, and forms idiosyncratic personal meanings relating directly to them from what they already know. Because Learner-Centered educators keep the learners at the heart of the classrooms, designing curriculum to meet the needs and interests of the learners, and recording their growth, it can be used to support effective instruction in inclusive classrooms (Schiro, 2012).


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While the benefits of collaboration in inclusive settings are seen in research, educators are often faced with a wide array of collaborative models, including Systematic Support Planning Process, Universal Design for Learning, Inclusion Consultation Model (ICM), Professional Learning Communities, Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs , Project-Based Learning, and Learner-Centered Classrooms. The challenge lies not only in selecting the most appropriate model but also in effectively implementing it within the unique context of each school and classroom. This article addresses this challenge by synthesizing these prominent collaboration models, identifying key strategies and common elements that contribute to successful implementation in diverse educational settings. By examining the underlying principles and practical applications of each model, this article provides a framework for educators and administrators to select and adapt collaborative approaches that best meet the needs of their students, parents, and educators.

**Academic and Instruction Barriers in Inclusion**

Inclusive education continues to lack in several areas, which creates barriers for students with disabilities to be able to succeed in that type of environment. Less than 1% of students with extensive support needs are in general education because of the severity of their disabilities. Often, these students may also need self-care or have other needs, which can make it more difficult to be in the general education classroom as they are also needing specific instructional needs, social-communication skills, positive behavior support, and special education collaboration between teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service provides. This small percentage of students are the only ones in special education who truly qualify for alternative state assessments, which could place them in a more restrictive environment. (Clausen et al., 2023). If a student is placed in a more restrictive environment, that does not mean that less effective instruction or services are being provided and should not be seen as less desirable (Cole et al., 2023). This just means that they will be receiving the instruction and support agreed upon by the Admission, Review, and Dismissal committee, which includes the parent/guardian, general education teacher, special education teacher, and administrator.

On the other hand, research in another study found that teachers preferred students with more severe disabilities because they felt they would receive more support. If the student had a mild disability, they felt as if more work would be placed on them with less support. 93% of teachers stated that a student with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) causes extra work for them, and because of the lack of support they receive to help educate this student, 70% of teachers recommend students with ADHD to a special, more restrictive classroom. In comparison, if the student had Cerebral Palsy or Intellectual Disabilities, teachers felt as if they caused less work on them because they will get more support, such as a paraprofessional, but an average of 78% still agree they should be in a special setting due to their lack of skills for teaching (Saloviita, 2019).

The Universal Design for Learning framework in inclusive classrooms allows students with disabilities to have a sense of belonging in the classroom and feel comfortable with the other students through the development of trust (peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher). However, because of their disabilities, students with disabilities still feel different or outcasted, as if they did not truly belong in the classroom. They also had different tasks than other students that seemed lower or minor, which degrades their sense of belonging (Lowrey et al., 2017).

Because of a disconnect in the activities and lessons being provided to students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, the achievement gap between students with disabilities and general education students poses a concern, especially when test scores are at the forefront (Thompson et al., 2020). Students with disabilities have also shown little proficiency on state assessments, which is a main issue with being in secondary general education classrooms. Achievement gaps in reading and mathematics are the lowest among general education and special education students, and they pose the most instructional challenges for educators to tailor instruction: “Closing the gap feels further and further out of reach for our most disadvantaged students” (Friziellie et al., 2016, p. 7). Our education system has greater potential for improvement than many educators believe, as every child has the capacity to learn and grow when provided with the appropriate support (Adler, 2017). Despite common misconceptions, every child is capable of learning, as each individual possesses the potential for personal growth and development (Schrio, 2012). However, general education teachers often feel unprepared to teach students with disabilities, and successful inclusion requires that they feel confident and adequately equipped to support diverse learners. When providing an introduction to a special education course to teachers of students with disabilities, if a teacher did not have prior knowledge of students with disabilities, the content was only covered at a basic level, not supporting the general education teachers (Clausen et al., 2023). The courses only somewhat prepared general education teachers with the knowledge to support students with disabilities, which needs to be addressed and changed for the future.


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In addition to feeling unprepared, teachers who have inclusive classrooms typically do not have positive attitudes because they feel as if their role is demeaning (specifically for special education teachers), the student's disability impacts the entire classroom negatively affecting the learning of the other students, and they feel as if there is a lack of resources to help inclusive classrooms (Saloviita, 2019). Teachers also do not fully understand how to support students with disabilities in the general education setting as the students are often placed there with no support, overwhelming the teacher because of lack of time to plan appropriate lessons, lack of supporting materials and resources, as well as not being able to communicate with the co-teacher if applicable or having a paraprofessional who needs training. Teachers want information about each student placed in the classroom to best serve them (Thompson et al., 2020).

**Collaboration Models for Effective Inclusion: The Next Steps for Implementation**

The issues involving inclusive education are well-known nationwide, but what can be done to address the issues? Equal opportunity in education is only partially fulfilled in that all students are receiving the same quantity of public schooling, not the same quality (Adler, 2017). To best support equal learning for all students, the collaboration between general and special education teachers should be implemented. Collaboration between general and special education teachers is essential to ensure that the student's needs and the curriculum align, making the student's participation in an inclusive environment both worthwhile and meaningful. Creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum depends on teams working together to determine grade-level and course expectations, content pacing, and assessment practices, as well as regularly reviewing performance data to make informed instructional decisions (Friziellie et al, 2016).

**Systematic Supports Planning Process**

One way teachers can experience effective collaboration to support students with disabilities in inclusion is through using the Systematic Supports Planning Process (SSPP). SSPP calls for a team to be formed consisting of the general education teacher, the special education teacher, the administrator, related services, and the parent/guardian. The team is to complete the Supports Intensity Scale-Children's Value (SISV) to measure the type of support needed to be successful in the general education classroom: curricular adaptations, instructional supports, and participation supports. It is important to ensure too much support is not being provided as it is important for the student to be completing the required work as their peers; this can be conducted through frequent progress monitoring and team collaboration (Carpenter et al., 2023).

While SSPP offers a structured approach to identifying and providing individualized supports, its effectiveness rests on the active participation and collaboration of all team members. A potential limitation is the time commitment required for team meetings and the completion of the SISV, which may be a barrier for some schools. To optimize this implementation, schools should ensure that team members have sufficient time and training to effectively participate in the SSPP process. Furthermore, the reliance on SISV may not capture the full complexity of a student's support needs. Overall, this model aligns with the framework in that it is a team-based approach that ensures student voices are heard and support strategies are data-driven (Carpenter et al., 2023).

**Universal Design for Learning**

The Universal Design Learning (UDL) framework also has a collaboration component where teachers are to create and teach a curriculum that supports all levels of learning in the classroom despite abilities, needs, and cultural/educational backgrounds. There must be collaboration between teachers and administrators to plan learning opportunities for all students (Lowrey et al., 2017). All students need to be involved in the activities, not the students with disabilities doing helpful jobs or minuscule tasks. Teachers should also be reflecting on their teaching with their students in mind to best make improvements in support of each student. One way is to provide multiple opportunities to share their knowledge and skills of a topic instead of assuming all students learn the same. Another way is to keep in mind the level of vocabulary or any language barriers that may present an issue for some students. In the end, learning should be tied to the objectives or outcomes of the lesson, not just academic achievement. (Lowrey et al., 2017).

The strength of UDL lies in its proactive approach to designing inclusive learning environments. However, successful implementation requires a significant shift in mindset for teachers, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more flexible and individualized approach. While UDL is typically implemented by individual teachers, the greatest impact will come when there is collaboration across teachers and grade levels (Lowrey et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). A limitation of UDL implementation is a disconnect between grade-level standards and the lesson, which can cause a student to have gaps in needed knowledge (Schiro, 2012). Also, without data-driven supports and reflection UDL might not be


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responsive to student's individual, changing needs, which is why combining it with SSPP can create a more effective outcome (Thompson et al., 2020).

**Inclusion Consultation Model**

Inclusion Consultation Models (ICM) allow for collaboration and structure to inclusion by placing special education teachers in a content area they are well-versed or even certified as this allows both teachers to be able to teach the content, and the special education teacher is seen just as knowledgeable and more than an aide in the classroom. This also creates a sense of professional equality, as when special educators participate as equal partners alongside their general curriculum peers, all students and teachers benefit. (Friziellie et al, 2016). Special education teachers are placed in the inclusive classroom to provide specifically designed instructional supports and modifications to the curriculum for the students who need it, rather than applying modifications to the entire class. This is effectively accomplished through collaboration with the general education teacher on the curriculum, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to achieve high academic performance in the general education classroom (DeMartino & Specht, 2018).

This model is strengthened when special education teachers are seen as equals, which increases respect and value of each of the teachers. To ensure successful implementation, schools must prioritize ongoing professional development and collaboration time for general and special education teachers, but a limitation is that there might be a lack of special education teachers or funding to pay them what they should be paid. In agreement with ICM, Friziellie et al (2016) state general and special education should not be two separate entities like it is today where teachers are getting different training, professional development, and even pay, which is where Professional Learning Communities would be beneficial.

**Professional Learning Communities**

In agreement with ICM, Friziellie et al (2016) state general and special education should not be two separate entities like it is today where teachers are getting different training, professional development, and even pay. Ways to combine the two areas into one cohesive classroom is to focus more on the results rather than the process, embrace a model of prevention, not failure, and think of all students equally, meaning students with disabilities are not seen as different or inferior. This can be done using Professional Learning Communities (PLC) as it ensures all students can learn at high levels as a result of teams taking the responsibility to help them learn. For secondary PLC teams, there are several ways to build depending on the area of focus: 1) cross-curricular for a focus on skills needing improvement, 2) content teams among teachers who teach the same grade level and subject matter, and 3) job-alike/cross-school teams of those who teach specific courses. A school culture must be in support of all students, and for true implementation of this, the curriculum must be guaranteed (all students have the same access to standards, content, and skills) and viable (it must be doable within the timeframe provided). More often than not, educators doubt that all students, especially those with disabilities, meet rigorous expectations. But in reality, rigorous standards allow special education students the opportunity for rigorous content: “Maintaining a growth mindset is essential” (Friziellie et al, 2016, p. 36). By having general and special education teachers collaborate, all students benefit from the wisdom provided by both sides. Three action steps for PLC teams in ensuring the curriculum is guaranteed and viable are: 1) decide what students should know and be able to do in each unit, 2) prioritize what they should know and be able to do, and 3) unpack the priority standards, which involves breaking it down into smaller components to gain a deeper understanding. Schools should use the state or other revised standards to demonstrate independence, strong content knowledge, respond to a variety of demands/tasks, value evidence, use technology, and understand cultural perspectives in the PLC team and curriculum.

It is important to focus on the strengths of students as well to create a balance between what they know and can do. Tailoring instruction for special education students should not include lowering standard expectations, eliminating complex components of the standards, using non-grade level material frequently, or even providing a disproportionate amount of support. Everything in place for general education students also applies to special education students. In the end, PLC teams should address what can be done to support student learning before they simply move forward with the curriculum. When the PLC framework is used with fidelity, there is success for all (Friziellie et al., 2016). However, one of the biggest limitations is time to dedicate to meetings as well as support from district-level employees. This collaboration model also is strengthened when administrators are supportive and knowledgeable. However, when administrators show support in actions but do not follow through, the PLC model can be broken. When PLC is combined with UDL, there is a higher chance for success due to the ability for all team members to provide student-driven data as well as multiple opportunities to master curriculum and be provided with specially designed instruction.

**Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs**

Inclusive Post Secondary Education Programs (IPSE) are another option for students with disabilities as this program promotes independence, growth, problem-solving, and collaboration through academics, social skills, associational groups, employment, and family. IPSE can offer real-world experiences for students with disabilities, and teachers working with an IPSE program in their school developed hands-on experience and could see the impact of the program because of growth in the students' learning and skills. Limitations of IPSE is there might not be programs close by or the programs might have high costs. Due to the age range, data on outcomes for all students is sparse as there has to be a data collection in the future to ensure the programs are still beneficial and constantly improving (Plotner et al., 2023). However, IPSE promotes more collaboration which makes IPSE worth trying but the team needs to be cognizant on what makes the program successful or not.

**Project-Based Learning**

PBL stemmed from Kilpatrick's Project Method in the 1950s, which was being used in schools to teach the curriculum in a way that had the students be in charge. It was seen as progressive education due to the involvement of learning activities that were meaningful, engaging, and connecting to the world around the students. In the 21st Century, PBL has four different methods, each with its significance and broad conceptions relating to skills and knowledge: challenge-based, problem-based, place-based, activity-based, and design-based. Results of implementation of PBL showed successful implementation in all classrooms and promoted collaboration, different perspectives, social skills, teamwork, and engagement, and it was positive among all types of students, no matter their background or abilities (Pecore, 2015). One of the strengths of PBL is the support it provides for all students, despite their abilities. By having the curriculum be student-led, there is a higher level of engagement from all students. The limitation with this model is it can be time-consuming and requires a lot of work to prepare. To make this successful, the team needs to take all aspects into consideration (Pecore, 2015).

**Learner-Centered Classrooms**

Learner-Centered Classrooms support the growth of all students through the collaboration of student-to-student and student-to-teacher. The classroom is free-flowing, meaning that the learners are constantly participating in hands-on projects instead of sitting at desks doing assignments. The teacher moves about the room, answering questions, mentoring, and being of assistance when needed; they create the learning environment by constructing the curriculum around social and academics desired by the learners. But, the learners are the ones in control as they choose which areas to focus on (Schiro, 2012). Collaboration among the students during their learning, where they ask questions and talk through their findings encourages the growth of knowledge. In the documentary *Why Do These Kids Love School?,* teachers shared how group collaboration to reflect on learning and how the teacher can continue to support the students is crucial. Students feel comfortable in the environment and are not afraid to ask questions, share thoughts, or provide the teacher with ideas to make improvements or better support them (Fadiman, 2005). A strength to this model is the freedom of student voices as well as ability to promote student interests, but with the freedom comes limitations. The design of each team member to be collaborative will be limited as not everyone wants the classroom to be student-led. To ensure this model is successful, it takes a special person to lead but overall there has to be more collaboration to take place to promote better outcomes, so implementing UDL or PLC can enhance the learner-centered classroom (Schiro, 2012).

**Conclusion**

When students with any level of disability are placed in inclusive classrooms rather than more restrictive environments, they can show progress in both academics and social skills as well as show improved communication, social-behavioral skills, peer relationships, and self-determination. General education peers learn respect, improve their social skills, and develop friendships with students with disabilities, and teachers benefit by having the best understanding of how to support student's needs in the classroom's environment (Carpenter et al., 2023; Clausen et al., 2023). However, achieving truly effective inclusive education requires more than simply placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms. According to Thompson et al. (2020), effective inclusive education relies on having educational team members who possess the necessary knowledge and creativity to address the challenges involved in meaningfully educating children with diverse characteristics in general education classrooms.

This articles has synthesized prominent collaborative models including Systematic Supports Planning Process, Universal Design for Learning, Inclusion Consultation Model, Professional Learning Communities, Inclusive Post Secondary Education Programs, Project-Based Learning, and Learner-Centered Classrooms to provide a framework for educators and administrators seeking to optimize inclusive practices. While each model

offers unique strengths and approaches, common elements such as shared responsibility, data-driven decision-making, and a focus on individual student needs are critical for successful implementation. This analysis also revealed the importance of addressing the limitations of each model. Factors such as time constraints, resource limitations, and the need for ongoing professional development must be carefully considered to ensure that collaborative efforts are sustainable and effective. Ultimately, the collaborative models chosen must be tailored to the specific context of each school and classroom, taking into account the needs of students, parents, and educators.

There is hope to create better inclusive classrooms for all students. But the resources for collaboration models that can be implemented depends on the school district's initiatives as well as the students being served to be successful, and collaboration is only one area in need of addressing. To truly make an impact in inclusive education, the other issues must be addressed in conjunction with collaboration. Future research should explore the long-term impact of different collaborative models on student outcomes, as well as the factors that contribute to successful implementation in diverse educational settings. By continuing to refine and improve our collaborative practices, we can move closer to realizing the vision of truly inclusive education for all learners.


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