

# Sharing Strength: Collaborating with Special Educators around the General Education Curriculum

By Dr. Kathleen M. Pierce and Dr. Kathy McQuillan

At the heart of our collaboration was a practical yet complex question: How can we help preservice special and general educators understand the importance of each other's content knowledge, the power of collegial work, and implications for their own K-12 teaching practice? The answer was to combine our two university-level preservice education courses in which we modeled collegial inquiry as instructors and we then provided lots of opportunities for our students to share and develop their own work around interdisciplinary unit and assessment planning.

From our perspective as participant observers, our course collaboration yielded some immediate benefits for reframing university education courses around opportunities for interdisciplinary cross-fertilization and interpersonal relationships. More significantly, our preservice educators experienced the potential benefits of special and general educators' sharing to support an eclectic range of K-12 learners at curriculum planning stages. Rather than consider how a set curriculum plan could be modified for students with special needs, for instance, our students worked together to design access to the general curriculum for a potential range of students.

## *The Context*

Although we were members of the same department, we historically worked in different programs and with different sets of students. We redesigned our courses, one in special education and the other in general education, to come together during each weekly class meeting. Our respective students were all working toward teacher certification of some kind. Students in the Instructional Practices for Students with Mild Disabilities course were certified classroom teachers working toward teaching certification in special education, and students in the Curriculum and Teaching in Secondary Schools course were part of a post-baccalaureate program for career changers working toward initial middle/secondary school teaching certification in various subject areas. Each course retained its own set of objectives, but we jointly required a variety of individual and cooperative work, continual assessment, and a final, summative group work product in the form of an interdisciplinary unit plan.

Fortunately, our courses were scheduled to meet at the same day and time, but we did not leave the opportunities for formal and informal communication to

Kathleen M. Pierce is an assistant professor in Rider University's Department of Graduate Education and Human Services. A former middle/secondary English teacher who teaches in the Graduate-Level Teacher Certification Program, she also supervises English language arts student teachers for the School of Education's Office of Field Placement.

# The New Jersey Journal of Supervision and Curriculum Development

New Jersey Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

# Trends in Professional Development Throughout New Jersey



Scott Taylor  
Editor

Volume 50, 2005

chance. In our course collaboration, we started each class session with ten to fifteen-minute base group meetings. With representatives from both classes, each base group consisted of four to five students. Base groups were a way for us to establish community among our two sets of students and two different instructors. According to Johnson and Johnson (1999), the primary responsibilities of the base group are to provide "support, encouragement, and assistance in completing assignments and hold each other accountable for striving to learn." Base groups may be used in different ways, but distinguishing features are their heterogeneity and stable membership over a period of time; in our case, base groups formed the second week of class and worked together throughout the semester.

As former practitioners in public school settings, we know first-hand how difficult the relationships between special education and general education can be- especially in secondary settings. Many reasons conspire to prevent productive collaboration between special and general educators in practice- school culture, scheduling problems, feelings of incompetence regarding each other's discipline, resistance to change, and the realities and ensuing resentments over state and federally-mandated requirements. In the somewhat rarefied air of the university and our course design, we explicitly tried to convince our students that *all* of their prospective students- not just their classified special education students- stood to benefit from special and general education collaboration. We also emphasized how collaboration is far more satisfying than personal and subject area isolation. Educators have been encouraged increasingly to use cooperative strategies among their students and to work cooperatively even collaboratively among themselves (Friend & Cook, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; National Research Council, 2000). The literature encourages student-centered and community-centered classroom arrangements to promote knowledge as well as social interdependence. In professional practice, however, successful special and general educator relationships are limited and difficult to achieve in many school environments.

#### Why Co-Teach Preservice Educators?

We wanted our two preservice populations to appreciate the work of the other before hitting the complex realities of professional practice. As we co-taught throughout the course, we publicly questioned and conversed with each other and our students over matters of content and professional practice. Shutting between subject matter confidence and curiosity, we were not merely role-playing for our students' amusement; our questions and concerns were genuine. Our co-teaching efforts explicitly demonstrated that knowledge and learners make new knowledge through questioning. Our collaborative efforts demonstrated that collaboration is rarely neat and does not always mean compromise. Collaboration can present friction and conflict, understanding and misunderstanding. For both instructors and students, the intense wrangling and conflicts that developed during co-teaching and learning created opportunities for deeper engagement with our own and each other's disciplines. Though it is rarely comfortable, interdisciplinary conflict and reframing seems to enrich and widen students' conceptual knowledge and understanding. Throughout the semester, we continually and explicitly questioned, argued, and revised content

knowledge postures and beliefs, and we expected our students to do the same. In our course collaboration, we required that our students begin knowledgeable, thoughtful practice at the university- not wait to apply their knowledge "some day" in eventual professional practice. Being actively engaged with content, with each other, and with two instructors, our students' questions and understanding grew more sophisticated throughout the semester. In our case, students learned content knowledge, skills, and empathy from *doing* the work of special educators and general educators.

#### Designing Course Collaboration: Determining the Big Ideas

Shared goals do not a collaboration make, but for us they were a vital start. Mindful that as we brought together preservice special and general educators to share authentic work, we were ourselves modeling a special/general education collaboration. As our students collaborated around their final interdisciplinary unit plan projects, we explained how we used the design practices we were preaching and teaching to frame our combined Students in the Instructional Practices for Students with Mild Disabilities and Curriculum and Teaching in Secondary Schools courses. Prior to the start of the semester, we engaged in planning sessions to

#### **WE REDESIGNED OUR COURSES, ONE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND THE OTHER IN GENERAL EDUCATION, TO COME TOGETHER DURING EACH WEEKLY CLASS MEETING.**

determine common content and shared outcomes, which ultimately guided us to our "big ideas." By definition, a "big idea" is a selected, overarching concept that facilitates the most efficient and broadest acquisition of knowledge (Kame'enui, Carnine, Dixon, et al. 2002). Once we examined the content learning that would enhance these common underlying concepts or principles, our planning became easier. We traded broad, in-depth coverage or lots of facts and details for the fundamental instructional design elements relative to our learners. We maintained separate courses, syllabi, and classrooms. What was new was how we together reframed and taught our respective courses around shared conceptual and practical content goals and combined classes of students. Centered on shared goals and "big ideas," we designed our respective courses' syllabi. Syllabi included teaching and learning objectives, opportunities for hands-on application of those skills, class time together, class time apart, and a final large scale collaborative project requiring our students to create work products (interdisciplinary unit/assessment plans) that employed and demonstrated their conceptual and practical learning and understanding.

As a way to express and represent our "big ideas" and guide our students, we developed a course collaboration map- something that we asked our students to compose for their final collaborative interdisciplinary unit/assessment plans. We used our concept map to introduce the course collaboration to our students, and we also modeled concept mapping as a useful learning strategy for all learners in any context. Concept maps or mind maps are visual representations of how content learning is organized and sequenced (Lenz, Bulgren, Kissam, & Taymans, 2004; Weimer, 2002). This seems an especially useful tool for general educators who might be accustomed to learning and presenting content in more

narrative, linear, and/or detail-oriented ways who will need to articulate plans with a variety of diverse students in their prospective practice. Mapping is a useful strategy for capturing the conceptual big ideas in a course or unit of study, so it is particularly helpful when special and general educators engage each other about what students need to learn, experience, and be able to do. Arranged around conceptual big ideas, mapping helps identify and display learning goals in the language of a particular discipline. Our preservice general educators took the lead in naming "big ideas" in their respective disciplines while the special educators illuminated unit/lesson planning with their understanding of varied learning modes and strategies.

#### How We Know They Know: Assessments That Gather Evidence

Our assessments of content knowledge and skills were both formative and summative by design. Using what Wiggins (1998) calls "backward design," we determined what we wanted our students to know and do as a result of our course collaboration- a final summative work product that applied our conceptual "big ideas," skills, and collaboration in the form of an interdisciplinary unit/assessment plan. Learning activities were mindfully planned to provide students with opportunities for interaction and to construct their own meanings. Throughout the semester, our assessment of student work was formative because students' knowledge was evolving; we used a variety of formal and informal methods of assessment. Assessment was an ongoing means to inform teaching and learning in our course collaboration. A variety of informal methods (e.g., base group conversations, individual written reflections) were used as indicators where re-teaching was required or additional practice was needed. Formal evaluation was based upon predetermined rubrics in our respective courses. Results of these more formal assessments indicated satisfactory progress.

As students presented their culminating base group projects at the end of the semester, they provided evidence of conceptual and practical understanding of course objectives. Work products readily met the summative rubric requirement. In fact, compared to our experiences in non-collaborative courses student work products were richer and more elegant in design. Further, student conversations and reflections indicated more than content area accomplishment; they explained that interdisciplinary collaboration could be very difficult but also was very productive.

Through a pre- and post- course survey (See Figure 1), we attempted to capture students' attitudes and changes in attitudes relative to interdisciplinary collegial work. Through the use of a nonparametric test, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test of Difference in Medians, to analyze the pre and post-survey results, some significant changes were noted (See Table 1). Our students' perceptions of their knowledge-base relative to key concepts (e.g., how instructional design can meet all learners' needs in general education) demonstrated favorable change. A review of reflection papers written based upon common prompts also elicited common themes relative to the perceived and real challenges of collaboration. Together these findings allowed us to quantify perceived changes and to elicit the qualitative aspects of collaboration. Formally and informally, our students answered affirmatively our guiding question about how we could help students

understand the importance of each other's content knowledge and collegial work.

#### Implications for Special and General Educators' Collaboration

The results of our small study convinced us of the efficacy of emphasizing the need for special/general education collaboration and encouraging such collaboration in K-12 practice. We invite supervisors and administrators to arrange for their own teams of special and general educators to plan curriculum together, not just plan access to the general curriculum for students with special needs. Our sustained experiences with course collaboration over the course of a semester have strengthened our scholarship and our teaching, and we believe it would do no less for K-12 educators. Curriculum teams, consisting of special and general educators, might consider the following suggestions.

#### Plan Collaboration

Not in the midst of a school year or during occasional inservice opportunity and not outside the general educator's classroom door or in the faculty room, but set aside summer or some other sustained opportunity for the initial grappling and reframing. General educators are used to executing their plans in isolated classrooms and special educators are used to interpreting for every student in their case loads what "access to the general curriculum" looks like. Including special educators in general curriculum planning for all students represents a sea change, and the work should be scheduled deliberately and carefully. In our course collaboration, preservice educators worked through just one curriculum unit of study, but it was enough of an opportunity to create usable work for their potential students and change positively their opinions and attitudes.

#### Uncover Intersections

Uncover common concepts and terminology in your respective disciplines. Interestingly, many of our fields have different names for similar notions. For instance, special educators use the terms of "adaptation" or "modification" to mean roughly the same practice that general educators refer to as "differentiated instruction." However, since special and general educators rarely work together at curriculum planning stages, we found this aspect of deliberate collaboration most useful. In our experience, both special educators and general educators feel inadequate when dealing with the others' content. But in our course collaboration, when special educators started explaining various teaching and learning approaches strategies to our general educators, ice started melting, and exciting conversations developed about planning for student work.

#### Determine "Big Ideas"

The "big ideas" answer the question: "Why do this?" This is a deceptively simple question that belies the deep conceptual understandings undergirding the course or particular curriculum unit. The big curricular ideas are the basis of collaboration. Prepare for philosophical and curricular explaining, wrangling, even arguing. The "big ideas" that you settle on capture the essence of the course or curriculum. Big "general curriculum" ideas convey the essence of the teaching and learning planned- what to teach and what students will learn, do, and

produce. These concepts are non-negotiables; they are the concepts and practices that become shared values and shared vocabulary. These are the same big ideas, values, and vocabulary that will be shared eventually with students as they take up their work. As you plan for depth rather than breadth of coverage in big idea planning, resist the idea that you're "watering down" the curriculum content, and regard the collaborative planning as an opportunity to enhance and extend understanding. Disciplines are not compilations or chronologies of discrete facts, but complex sets of knowledge and skills.

#### Design Assessments of Student Work

First, design assessment criteria for students' culminating work product. Although this step might seem counterintuitive, it leads back to the "big ideas" that frame your course

**AS A WAY TO EXPRESS AND REPRESENT OUR "BIG IDEAS" AND GUIDE OUR STUDENTS, WE DEVELOPED A COURSE COLLABORATION MAP-SOMETHING THAT WE ASKED OUR STUDENTS TO COMPOSE FOR THEIR FINAL COLLABORATIVE INTERDISCIPLINARY UNIT/ASSESSMENT PLANS.**

or curriculum unit and indicates what students should be able to know and do relevant to the general curriculum. Agreeing on summative assessment helps anchor collaboration because it creates a common goal for students and their educators. Knowing where you want students to arrive helps plan the teaching and learning tasks and/or activities that serve as formative assessments. While general educators understand the required curriculum content, special educators understand how to build a variety of teaching and learning strategies and activities for all learners over the course of unit of study to feed and support culminating work.

#### Summarize and Reflect Upon the Collaboration

In addition to the content-related assessments within the course, build in frequent and final opportunities for conversations about how plans are being enacted and experienced by students and educators. Collaboration in most fields has different meanings. From an educational perspective, it is viewed as an interpersonal style between at least two equal parties voluntarily engaging in shared decision-making (Cook & Friend, 2003). To learn how to effectively communicate and interact, a mechanism for feedback needs to be included and ultimately formalized. Ongoing monitoring and assessment are required to evaluate process plus products. Assessment of the collaborative process allows another way to evaluate the application of content knowledge, but most importantly it tests the power of collegial work.

#### Conclusion

We trust our course collaboration will influence positively our preservice educators' eventual professional practice. Based on formal and informal assessments, our special/general education course collaboration changed attitudes and knowledge. As we instructors co-taught and modeled learning in each other's disciplines, our students quickly learned how to support, question,

complement, and extend each other's learning. We believe that such course collaboration provides a promising model for other university teacher education programs. However, we feel the most compelling aspect of our collaboration were its implications for K-12 settings, especially in secondary settings where there is little if any shared curriculum planning opportunities among special and general educators. Collaborative planning seems to hold potential for special and general educators to see and use each others' strengths to imagine and plan curriculum differently for all students.

Figure 1

PLEASE RATE EACH STATEMENT AND ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ON THE BACK.

Assumptions	Strongly Disagree 1	Moderately Disagree 2	Agree 3	Moderately Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
1. I am familiar with instructional design for all learners.					
2. The academic needs of most students including those with mild disabilities can be met in the general education classroom.					
3. Teaching students with disabilities is asking too much of general education teachers.					
4. Teachers who understand instructional design principles can teach all students.					
5. Special education teachers are better trained than general education teachers are to teach students with diverse learning needs.					
6. Special education teachers are more effective than general education teachers in teaching students with diverse needs.					
7. Special education teachers use different teaching methods than general education teachers.					
8. With knowledge and training, both general and special education teachers can teach a wide range of learners with diverse needs.					

9. How would you describe students' diverse learning needs?	
10. How would you describe the challenge of middle/secondary school curriculum design and lesson planning in general education?	

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION.

## References

- Boudah, D. J., Lenz, B. K., Bulgren, J. A., Schumaker, J. B., & Deshler, D. D. (2000). Don't water down! Enhance content learning through the unit organizer routine. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 32 (3), 48-56.
- Friend, M. & Cook, L. (2003). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Janney, R. & Snell, M. E. (2000). *Modifying schoolwork*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1999). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kame'enui, E. J., Carmine, D. W., Dixon, R. C., Simmons, D. C., & Coyne, M. D. (2002). *Effective teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learners*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice-Hall.
- Lenz, B. K., Bulgren, J. A., Kissam, B. R., & Taymans, J. (2004). SMARTER planning for academic diversity. In B. K. Lenz and D. D. Deshler with B. R. Kissam (Eds.) *Teaching Content to All* (pp. 47-77). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- National Research Council (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Polloway, E. A., Patton, J. R. & Serna, L. (2001). *Strategies for teaching learners with special needs* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Rosenshine, B. (1995). Advances in research on instruction. (1995). *The Journal of Educational Research*, 88, 262-68.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative assessment: Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Table 1

Nonparametric Tests: Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test for Differences in Medians on Pre- and Post-Survey Items

Assumptions	Mean Score Pre-	Mean Score Post-	Significance
1. Familiar with instructional design	3.30	4.26	p < .01
2. Meet academic needs in general education	3.61	4.57	p < .01
3. Asks too much of general education teachers	1.91	1.78	Not significant
4. Understand instructional design	3.22	3.70	p < .05
5. Better trained	3.09	3.27	Not significant
6. More effective	2.82	2.86	Not significant
7. Different teaching methods	2.95	3.05	Not significant
8. Able to teach learners with diverse needs	4.48	4.86	Not significant

Note. Judgments were made on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)