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Introduction to Section I

Foundations of Co-teaching and Collaborative Teaming



Every year, we continue to learn more about what works and what does not work for our diverse group of students. We use research to guide us, sharing strategies with our colleagues and trying out new techniques to meet the constantly changing needs of our classes. Veteran and novice teachers alike seek guidance for how to integrate important frameworks and practices, as each school year and each group of students is unique.

While clever techniques and Pinterest-worthy ideas abound, teacher educators caution current and future educators to be wary of simply trying to be “fun” without using approaches based on research or evidence. Teacher educators are not alone in their emphasis on the need for scientific evidence over anecdotes or impressive pictures. Federal laws, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), actually require teachers to use practices grounded in research. This brings us directly to this book.

Sharing ideas and collaborating with others to get better and to meet students’ needs is, in itself, an evidence-based practice. In this text, we describe the research demonstrating why collaboration results in improved teaching quality and thereby improved student outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Obviously, though, the content of what is shared between teachers also matters. Thus, we focus this book not merely on ways to collaborate through teaming or co-teaching, but also on the practices we learn through that collaboration. After clarifying key terms like high-leverage and evidence-based practices, we make a case for how collaborative activities can connect these practices and the outcomes we desire for students.

Focus, Framework, and Format of Text

This book is grounded in the principles of inclusive education. Within that broader emphasis, this text focuses on using co-teaching and

collaborative teams to bring high-leverage practices together within a multi-tiered system of support to meet the needs of *all* learners.

To create our framework, we have chosen the four areas of practice from the 22 high-leverage practices for special education. These four clusters are collaboration, instruction, assessment, and social emotional/behavioral skills (McLeskey et al., 2017). In our view, collaboration is central. Co-teaching and collaborative teaming can only be accomplished when it is present. Collaborative assessment and instruction that embed high-leverage practices and evidence-based practices lead to positive student outcomes in academic and social emotional/behavioral skills.

Our tone is intentionally informal. While we make sure to give credit for key concepts and research by using citations and quotes, we generally strive to use a conversational tone. We will talk to you, the reader. To avoid confusing “him/her” pronouns, we choose instead to use “they/them/their” as a singular.

Recognizing that readers are themselves as diverse as the students with whom they interact, we tried to create a book that can be read in the order that is most meaningful to each individual. Chapters have been formatted into three sections. The first one, *Foundations of Co-teaching and Collaborative Teaming*, provides guidance for developing the fundamental elements of co-teaching, including discussions of partnerships and parity, roles and responsibilities, communication and co-planning, as well as co-teaching and collaborative teaming models. Those who feel competent in these areas may choose to skim the first section and to focus on the second and third sections, which offer more strategies. However, reading the first section will ensure that readers and the authors are using the same terminology and have the same expectations throughout the text.

The second section, *Collaborating for Academic Success*, offers detailed guidance (with examples) for using high-leverage and evidence-based practices for assessment and instruction to address academic standards and goals. Similarly, the third section, *Collaborating for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Growth*, provides numerous descriptions and examples of these practices for assessment and instruction to address social emotional learning and behavioral goals. The second and third sections can be read in any order. Those most interested in strategies related to behavior or social emotional learning may want to read the third section first and move back to the second section when they are looking for more ideas to enhance academic outcomes for their learners.

Throughout the book, we emphasize the crucial role of collaboration. Collaboration is certainly not a new concept in schools. In fact, “collaboration is a ubiquitously championed concept and widely recognized across the public and private sectors as the foundation on which the capacity for addressing complex issues is predicated. For those invested in organizational improvement, high-quality collaboration has become no less than an imperative” (Gajda & Koliba, 2007, p. 26). If we accomplish

our objectives, this book will help you connect your understanding of how to use co-teaching and collaborative teaming to apply high-leverage and evidence-based practices in a multi-tiered system of support—all for the benefit of students in an inclusive environment! While seemingly complex, the examples and vignettes provided throughout should make each reader feel empowered to reach out, collaborate, and engage in more effective inclusive practices.

Key Terms

To get the most out of this text, certain terms and concepts need to be clarified so that both readers and authors are on the same page. First and foremost, this book is written from an **inclusive education perspective**. But what does this mean and how does it relate to collaborative teaming and co-teaching, our topic of focus? For us, **inclusion** is a philosophy, not a particular practice or set of skills.



See It Yourself

Check out “The Evolution of Inclusion” by Shelley Moore



<https://bit.ly/3lm9L72>

To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.

It embraces the belief that all children have the right to be taught in the general education classroom and participate in activities with their nondisabled peers of the same age or grade level. Our philosophy of inclusion recognizes that this practice may not be easy and may require adaptations, assistance, and modifications to the setting or materials, or even content. Above all, we emphasize the fact that these adaptations are both doable and worth it. To promote this belief system, educators will need support from one another and from the families of students with whom they work. Collaboration supports educators in transforming inclusive philosophy into inclusive practice. (To learn more about the history of inclusive schools, see Shelley Moore’s video linked in the “See It Yourself” box above.)

We continue to mention collaboration and co-teaching, so it behooves us to define these two key terms as well. While most individuals know the general definition of **collaboration**, its meaning in this text is focused on

the sharing of mutual goals, responsibilities, resources, and accountability between educators and other educational stakeholders, such as families and students. Collaboration is a style of interaction, not a step-by-step process. Two or more educators who share the goal of including students with disabilities in more general education activities for improved academic, behavioral, or social emotional outcomes can collaborate to help realize this goal. These educators might participate in larger group meetings that involve other adults or even the students themselves, or they might merely consult with one another. They might invite others who have specific expertise to join for focused collaborative sessions, or they might engage with one another daily through co-teaching. If these interactions are based on open and active communication, trust, respect, and shared expertise, then each of the scenarios above would qualify as collaborative.

Co-teaching is a specific collaborative practice with a more refined definition. While many teachers have heard of co-teaching, we find that most have experienced something we would call “in-class support” as opposed to true co-teaching. True co-teaching happens when two or more professional educators co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess (Murawski, 2010); it is not enough for them to be merely present in the same classroom together or to collaborate in general. Simply being in the same room does not qualify as co-teaching! Co-teaching certainly does require collaboration and the elements that define it—shared goals, accountability, responsibility, resources, and expertise, as well as trust, respect, and strong communication skills. While collaboration can occur in myriad examples, co-teaching is focused on what occurs in the shared classroom between two professionals. These two individuals can come together to co-teach just one lesson (e.g., a school psychologist comes in to co-teach a lesson on self-care with a general education third-grade teacher) or a unit (e.g., a school nurse comes in to co-teach a unit on health and sex education with a general education health teacher).



Chapter Connections

See Chapter 1 and 2 for more on co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing.

More often, however, co-teaching exists in American schools in the form of a general education classroom teacher sharing the class with a special education teacher for an hour, a class period or two, or even a full day. More information on what co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing can entail is provided in future chapters.

There are a few other key principles and practices that require review prior to moving on to our explanation of how collaboration and co-teaching can help serve as a connection to, and enhancement of, inclusive education. Table SI.1 (Section Intro) offers an at-a-glance reference

for many of the key terms and concepts that permeate this book. In fact, they are so important, we will offer a similar table in each of the three section introductions for your convenience!

TABLE SI.1 Principal Concepts Related to Collaboration in Inclusive Education

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE	DEFINITION
Collaboration	Collaboration is a style of interaction, not a step-by-step process. It requires the sharing of mutual goals, responsibilities, resources, and accountability between educators, education stakeholders, families, and students. Collaboration can occur between two individuals or within larger groups.
Co-teaching	Co-teaching requires two or more professionals to co-plan, co-instruct, co-assess, and co-reflect. Educators can collaborate to co-teach one lesson, one unit, or an entire school year. Key elements for successful co-teaching include time for planning, professional development, use of multiple co-instructional approaches, parity, and administrative support.
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support	Multi-Tiered Systems of Support is an evidence-based framework designed to meet the needs of all learners through data-driven instructional delivery across three tiers of support. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support include academic and behavioral strands. The strands focus on data collection to identify areas of need for staff development and student learning, to promote proactive universal supports, and to systematically intensify intervention for students.
Response to Intervention	Response to Intervention is a strand of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support that traditionally focused on intervention for academic skills. The framework and terminology emerged from special education requirements for intervention before initial evaluation. However, the framework evolved to create a system in which educators provide early intervention to students as soon as academic concerns become evident, regardless of whether the child may require special education (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2007a).
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	UDL is a framework for planning, instruction, and assessment that promotes equity and inclusion. UDL is centered around three guidelines that can be applied across grade levels and content areas (CAST, 2018). These include multiple means of engagement, representation, as well as action and expression. The integration of UDL concepts is intended to promote accessibility across phases of instruction for all students and reduce the need for multiple forms of individualized differentiation.

Much of this book focuses on how collaborative teaming among adults (and students in some instances) will help make the connections needed to implement high-leverage and evidence-based practices. **Evidence-based practices** are strategies that have proven to be effective based on objective evidence—most often, through educational research or metrics of school, teacher, and student performance (Gaines & Murawski, in press). To be considered evidence-based, a practice is expected to be effective in real-world classroom settings, not just under research conditions. Such practices exist across content areas and for students at different developmental levels. The standards that must be met to qualify a practice as evidence-based are rigorous. In fact, some say these requirements are so rigorous that it is nearly impossible to meet the criteria in special education due to the complex diversity of student and educational settings (CEEDAR Center, 2014). We embed many of the agreed-upon evidence-based practices into examples and vignettes throughout this book.

Similarly, **high-leverage practices** are research-proven techniques that are effective in improving student learning and behavior (McLeskey et al., 2017). These practices are of value to all educators seeking to meet the needs of diverse learners in inclusive settings (Ball & Forzani, 2011). They can be used across grade levels, ages, and content areas. There are 19 general education high-leverage practices, introduced as **[GE_HLP#]** in this text, with # replaced by the corresponding number. They were developed by the TeachingWorks program at the University of Michigan and are applicable to all students. Students with disabilities may require additional considerations. Thus, the 22 high-leverage practices in special education, **[SE_HLP#]**, were developed by a variety of educational experts and published by McLeskey and colleagues (2017).



Dive Deeper

Visit TeachingWorks to learn more about the general education high-leverage practices.

bit.ly/40ZmTr9

High-leverage practices for students with disabilities can be found here:

bit.ly/413gnQc

Links to the websites where you can find all these strategies are provided in the Dive Deeper box. We have also included the high-leverage practices with connections to specific collaborative strategies in Appendices A and B of this book. A goal for this book is to highlight how collaboration between professionals, students, and family members can integrate the high-leverage and evidence-based practices to meet the monumental challenge of inclusive education. As Gaines and Murawski (in press) write, “robust, effective schoolwide collaboration is neither a luxury nor a passing fad. Rather, it is the very foundation upon which effective, inclusive, and organizationally adaptable schoolwide communities are cultivated and maintained” (p. x). Collaboration connects high-leverage and evidence-based practices to contribute to student success.

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Collaborative Teaming

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In the introduction to this section, we defined collaboration as a style of interaction and co-teaching as multiple professionals co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing the same group of learners. We also emphasized that merely placing two or more educators in the same room does not qualify as either collaboration or co-teaching. Co-teaching is a service, and one that is rendered differently based on the individuals providing the service. Collaboration is also a difficult-to-quantify interaction, but it is certainly easy to know when it is *not* happening. In an inclusive school environment, some educators may co-teach and others may not, but all need to be collaborating. Collaborative teaming occurs at department meetings, grade-level activities, co-planning sessions, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, School Site Council meetings, parent–teacher organization gatherings, and more. When multiple individuals gather to achieve a common goal, collaborative teaming is in place. And, simply put, *relationships do matter* when it comes to collaboration.

Building respectful relationships—with colleagues, family members, specialists, and students—is a general education high-leverage practice [GE_HLP10]. Respectful relationships foster a positive classroom and school culture and lead to a more inclusive environment for all. Once relationships are established, collaborating parties can use self-awareness and communication skills to identify clear roles and establish responsibilities, leading to a sense of parity between participants. While Chapter 3 will go into more detail on how to establish specific roles and responsibilities, the current chapter emphasizes how collaborative teaming can help ***establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment*** [SE_HLP7] for our colleagues, our families, our students, and ourselves. By creating organizational structures and norms to aid in smooth and effective collaborative teaming, we can ***organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families*** [SE_HLP2], thereby demonstrating our commitment to true collaboration and inclusion.

Before we jump right in, it behooves us to define what we mean by **collaborative teaming**. Collaborative teaming is happening when two criteria are met: (1) multiple individuals get together with the common goal of solving a mutual problem and (2) they are willing to share expertise, resources, and accountability while communicating respectfully and trusting one another. Knackendoffel (2005) emphasized that collaborative teaming is a process, not a specific model of service delivery.

Collaborative Teaming Beliefs

1. All participants in the collaborative relationship must have equal status (parity).
2. All educators can learn better ways to teach all students.
3. Educators should be involved continuously in creating and delivering instructional innovations.
4. Education improves when educators work together rather than in isolation.
5. Effective collaborative relationships involve people who see themselves on the same side, working toward positive outcomes for students.

Source: Knackendoffel (2005, p. 1).

Collaborative teams may involve two educators (e.g., co-teaching), multiple educators (e.g., department meetings), teachers and special service professionals (e.g., grade-level meeting with a speech teacher), or educators and families (e.g., IEP meetings). As Dr. Margaret King-Sears and colleagues (2015) explained:

Collaborative teaming is not used in schools that strive to practice inclusive education merely because education laws and regulations require it. Collaborative teaming is so central to inclusive schooling that it can be viewed as the glue that holds the school together. It is through collaboration that the educational programs and special education supports for individual students are planned and implemented. (p. 5)

In this chapter, we first discuss the concept of **parity** as it relates to collaboration and the way individuals work in teams of two or more to build those relationships. Think of parity as a feeling of equality between individuals. Research has identified a lack of parity as one

of the key barriers to true collaboration between educators (Ghedin & Aquario, 2020), as well as between educators and families (Fallah et al., 2020). As part of our conversation around parity, we address issues that may arise when trying to engage in collaborative teaming with a variety of partners, to include special service providers, administrators, families, paraprofessionals, and others. Next, we identify how teachers' self-awareness of strengths, challenges, values, and biases can impact collaborative relationships and lead to improved parity—or serve as a barrier to it! Through a better knowledge of self, potential collaborating partners can recognize what they bring to the interaction, what they need or want from their partners, how to identify when those needs are not being met, and how to make appropriate adaptations. Finally, we describe elements required for educators to build, model, and engage in respectful relationships as they participate in collaborative teams.

The Role of Parity in Collaborative Relationships

Diversity and various frames of reference add value to the collaboration. If each member of a team were to have the same skills, interests, and areas of expertise, there would be little value added by additional participants. Members of a collaborative team, or teachers in a co-teaching partnership, need to feel valued for the unique perspectives or skills they bring to the table. For example, in an IEP meeting, a speech pathologist may share their expertise related to expressive language, while an administrator is able to describe components of the master schedule that may impact students' academic elective options. In a department meeting, team members may share an affinity and talent for their subject, but still have different perspectives and skills they can contribute when designing lessons. Families who are asked to share information about their children so teachers are better able to integrate areas of interest will feel valued and know they are positively impacting their children's education. This feeling of parity means that each member sees their contribution is necessary and valuable. Bringing in different but complementary areas of expertise is exactly what is needed for strong collaborative partnerships. When one member of a team feels superfluous, invaluable, or secondary to another team member, the parity between team members is lost. Note that parity does not require collaborators to do the same thing or the same amount, it is a *feeling* that all are equally valuable and engaged in the work at hand.

Parity Issues With Families

When collaborating as a larger team involving home and school, a lack of parity is often identified between parents and educators. The literature is replete with examples of family members who felt demoralized, patronized, humiliated, disrespected, and condescended to by educational team members (Fallah et al., 2020; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

If families feel unwelcome in the school environment or feel that the opportunities provided for them to collaborate are not inclusive of diverse family types, they may not see the collaboration offer as genuine. Family members may feel judged if their manner of communicating or collaborating is different from that of school personnel. Certainly, other factors, such as poverty, language, family structure, transportation, and technology, can also negatively impact family engagement and collaboration if educators are not responsive (Hindman et al., 2012). Despite numerous barriers, the research also continues to find that when families and school personnel do collaborate—often for activities such as IEP or Student Study Team meetings—the benefits far outweigh the struggles (e.g., Fallah et al., 2020).



Chapter Connections

See Chapter 8 for more on how a community liaison might enhance collaboration between educators and other stakeholders.

Parity Issues With General Educators

General education teachers report feeling confused and unimportant during IEP meetings where special education professionals take the lead, often using jargon that is inaccessible to anyone outside the field of special education (Fallah et al., 2020). Each member of an IEP meeting is there because they bring a unique perspective on how to support the student; to alienate anyone during these meetings by not establishing practices that ensure parity is to miss the whole point of the collaboration. General educators are valuable contributors to collaborative meetings because of their knowledge of standards and curriculum, familiarity with age-expected social and academic development, and relationships with students and family members. It is important that administrators and special education professionals highlight this knowledge and encourage general education teachers to be active members of special education/intervention team meetings. General educators can also be helpful in calling out jargon or asking questions about technical aspects of special education meetings. In all likelihood, if a general education teacher doesn't know what a test score or acronym means, someone else at the table is also unfamiliar with the concept. When professionals ask questions of each other and family members, they acknowledge the expertise that others bring to the table and deepen the collaborative engagement.

The strategies provided in the following list are offered to help ensure that all team members feel equally valued and included.

Strategies to Enhance Parity on Collaborative Teams

- Create name cards for team meetings that include community or family members. Position the name cards outward so everyone can see names and titles.
- Design posters identifying norms for collaborative meetings and place them in conference rooms. Review norms with new teams and team members.
- Develop table tents with the agenda or typical process for team meetings to ensure all members are aware of how the meeting will progress. Review at the beginning of each meeting.
- Just as teachers do with student cooperative learning groups, consider identifying specific roles within collaborative groups to ensure everyone feels valued and engaged. These may include facilitator, reporter, recorder, timer, materials manager, tech support, jargon catcher, welcomer, and so on.
- Ask the “jargon catcher” to help clarify terms so no one has to be embarrassed if they are unfamiliar with acronyms or internal slang. Do this at the beginning of each meeting so it is a familiar and expected practice.
- Use DoodlePro, Calendly, or another app to schedule meetings that are convenient for all members. Be sure to include paraprofessionals and additional support personnel for meetings in which their roles will be discussed. Students can also be included, especially in meetings about themselves!

Parity Issues With Related Service Providers

Collaboration with related service providers has its own barriers and issues. Related service providers include individuals such as school psychologists, speech-language providers, occupational and physical therapists, adapted physical education teachers, mobility and vision specialists, social workers, nurses, and behavior coaches. While each of these individuals has their own unique area of expertise that they might bring to an inclusive classroom—and a teacher would be lucky to have them—most are spread quite thin across a school district. As schools become more inclusive, more of these providers are beginning to offer their services through collaborative, push-in, or even co-taught models, as opposed to the more common pull-out, clinical application

(Zimmerman et al., 2022). When teachers witness the strategies and cues these experts use with students, they are more likely to apply those same skills in the future, even with students not yet identified as having specific special educational needs.

One strategy for building communication and collaboration between related service providers and classroom teachers is to add consultation time to the IEP so providers can schedule regular and consistent time in the classroom. For those who are still providing more pull-out services to students, a baby step toward increased collaborative teaming is for service providers and teachers to create a shared communication notebook (hard copy or digital). A notebook could house comments by the service provider following sessions with students and allow teachers to ask questions or seek suggestions for better meeting students' needs in the classroom. Because teachers interact with students in more settings and for longer periods of time, service providers can also learn more about the students and their behaviors by communicating with teachers, thereby reinforcing the feeling of parity between both parties.

Parity Issues With Paraeducators

By definition and title, paraprofessionals are not credentialed or certified educational professionals. Thus, there is no expectation of parity between teachers and paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals typically have little to no formal training in education; however, veteran “paras” may have extensive experience in working with a student or group of students. Many also get to know students on a more personal level, learning students' strengths, interests, communication styles, family dynamics, and culture, at a level that teachers should value. Thus, communication, collaboration, and teaming can and should still occur between paras and teachers, despite the lack of formal parity. When teachers demonstrate respect and communicate clearly with paraprofessionals, everyone benefits. For enhanced teaming, teachers should determine paras' knowledge of content and students, the strengths they bring to the classroom, and their own beliefs and values.



Dive Deeper

Seeking training opportunities for paraprofessionals? Check out the free, on-demand training on high-leverage practices designed specifically for paras at

bit.ly/41d0J4S

Teachers and paras who will share a classroom, even if only for part of the day, need to find time to communicate what that dynamic will look like. There are times when a paraprofessional's beliefs about the best way to work with students or families does not align with the teachers' perspectives. This issue needs to be addressed proactively and clearly to minimize confusion and possible resentment. Communication notebooks are a positive, effective, and efficient way for collaborative teams to write short notes to one another throughout a day; these may stay between a teacher and a para or, when specific to a student, even include family communication. Scheduling quick checks can also give paras and teachers the opportunity to review upcoming activities, discuss plans, answer questions, talk about a particular student, share a strategy, or look at data. When possible, we encourage teachers to seek training opportunities for the paraprofessionals with whom they work; the more professional development they receive, the more collaborative teaming will ultimately be possible!

Self-Awareness

As mentioned, collaborative teaming is most beneficial when all individuals on the team bring their unique skills and perspectives, and when they feel valued for those distinctive traits. While both internal (e.g., active listening skills) and external (e.g., posters of norms on the wall) structures can be in place to support parity, educators are more likely to make use of those structures when they have a strong sense of self-awareness. For example, if you know you tend to interrupt others, that knowledge alone will help you improve your communication skills and take a breath before interrupting again. We've all experienced the person who was not self-aware and clearly did not pick up on social or communication cues. How often do you want to get into conversations with that person? We are guessing not very often!

Richardson and Shupe (2003) tell us that increased self-awareness includes understanding how "students affect our own emotional processes and behaviors and how we affect students" (p. 8). Wait. What? Students impact our emotions and behaviors? We are professional educators! Aren't we always in charge of how we feel, what we say, and what we do? Go ahead. Take a moment to laugh. Obviously, Richardson and Shupe recognized that not only do others impact our emotions and behaviors, but also we need to do the work to figure out exactly what our triggers and reactions are, and why we respond the way we do. While these authors focused on the impact of students on teachers, we would apply this need for self-reflection to work with colleagues, administrators, and families as well. By getting in touch with one's own feelings, strengths, challenges, values, and behaviors, educators are better equipped to work with other adults on collaborative teams. In fact, while Murawski (2003) introduced the co-teaching definition as "co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess" two decades ago, recently "co-reflect" has been frequently added to the definition (Conderman & Hedin, 2017; Dubeck & Doyle-Jones, 2021).

Identifying one's strengths and challenges as a collaborator requires true reflection and honesty with oneself. While it may be relatively easy to point out strengths like "I'm really good at math" or "I put a lot of time into lesson planning," it may be more difficult to acknowledge other strengths such as "I regularly employ active listening skills," "I'm funny," and "I put my phone away during collaborative planning meetings." Yet these are strengths that need to be acknowledged, celebrated, and shared! Strengths do not need to be specific only to content expertise. In fact, there is a wide array of areas in which teachers may want to consider strengths, including general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts, as well as knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values (Rytivaara et al., 2019). Family members bring their knowledge about their child, at home and in the community, while related service providers offer an insight into specific fields of expertise. Paraprofessionals too bring a unique insight, often interacting with students on a different level than teachers do. Beyond these areas, individuals also possess personal attributes that can be considered strengths when collaborating; they include communication skills, trustworthiness, dependability, humor, commitment, and flexibility, among other characteristics.

As much as we prefer to be strengths-focused, engaging in self-reflection requires taking a hard look at areas for improvement. Personal challenge areas can be difficult—but are essential—to identify:

Although teachers need to learn how to recognize signs of emotional distress in their students, it is equally important to acknowledge that teachers' own personalities, learned prejudices, and individual psychological histories have helped shape their attitudes and responses to certain behaviors.
(Richardson & Shupe, 2003, p. 9)

Being able to honestly share personal challenges with oneself and those with whom you are trying to collaborate will lower barriers, make collaboration more effective, and ultimately make you a more responsive educator. Consider identifying any potential triggers or pet peeves you may have and sharing those proactively and diplomatically with potential team members.

Self-awareness also extends to acknowledging one's values and biases related to classroom culture. What practices are sacrosanct to you? What would be difficult for you to get rid of? Sharing a classroom during co-teaching means that partners need to be forthright about what is important to them, while still being open to the idea of letting go of control and developing new shared norms and ways of doing things. The ability to bring in multiple voices, teaching styles, and perspectives is paramount to collaboration. Ask yourself: Are you holding on to certain

practices out of fear, habit, preference, or because you truly believe in them? If the latter is the case, be prepared to share your values with your collaborators.

Being able to communicate about one's values will help partners avoid offending one another, mitigate negative effects of bias, and allow for more open feedback. When preferences or practices relate to one's culture, language, or background, sharing those values assists others in understanding and appreciating where you are coming from, especially if they do not share your culture (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016). Awareness of different cultures and how they can impact collaborative relationships also applies to collaboration with families. When school teams acknowledge strengths of families and build on them, they increase the amount of available supports at school, at home, and in the community (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

To be able to ***organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families [SE_HLP2]***, educators need to recognize that what is considered an “effective” meeting for one family may vary from what is considered “effective” by another, and both may differ from what is considered “effective” by the school personnel. Asking team members at the beginning of a meeting (or even prior to it!) about their goals helps collaborating team members find commonality and use the time efficiently so all participants walk away pleased.

Relationship Building for Collaborative Teaming

Individuals who share resources and accountability as they work together to achieve shared goals exemplify collaboration. To the layperson, collaboration is—in a nutshell—teamwork. It is evident when we cheer on our favorite sports teams (“Go Manchester United!”) and when we watch a well-organized group of baristas get us our chai lattes in record time despite long lines (“Thank you, Starbucks!”). We know there is a significant amount of behind-the-scenes collaboration when we attend a well-run conference, concert, or other event. And, just as we know collaboration has occurred when everything runs smoothly, we are equally aware when collaboration breaks down. Successful collaborative relationships, or a lack thereof, are almost always due to two linked factors: **communication** and **role understanding**. We address both here but go into more detail on roles related to co-teaching in Chapter 3. These two factors are not the only ones impacting the success of collaborative teams. Other critical competencies include mutual trust and respect, conflict resolution skills, willingness to collaborate, a positive attitude, and more (Suter et al., 2009).

Using Strong Communication Skills

The literature across multiple disciplines links open communication with positive outcomes, while communication failures are linked to

negative, and sometimes even harmful, outcomes (Suter et al., 2009). Both informal and formal communication skills are key to successful collaboration and may encompass a wide range of strategies and purposes. Solis et al. (2012) remind us that, when engaged in collaborative consultation, interpersonal skills that need to be practiced include active listening, empathy, assertiveness, questioning to gain information, and negotiating an outcome that is mutually beneficial. The application of these skills can help co-teachers share information regarding their preferred teaching styles, philosophies, and classroom expectations; negotiate roles that each person prefers; discuss which co-teaching model might best meet their students' needs; manage conflicts; and take turns sharing ideas and concerns.

Developing Team Norms

One of the first actions that teams should take, whether they are a co-teaching team or a larger collaborative body (e.g., a grade-level team or parent–teacher–student association), is to **identify norms [GE_HLP5]**. Norms help to establish a shared purpose for the collaboration, ways to interact and communicate, techniques for managing conflict, as well as reinforcement of shared accountability, resources, and ownership of the situation. Basically, team norms are principles that the group agrees to use for their interactions or to determine the way the group operates.

Example of Transdisciplinary Team Norms

1. Respect the shared expertise of all team members. Each team member brings unique knowledge about a discipline, child, and/or interaction in the classroom. Team members should listen to each other's expertise and value it.
2. All children in the classroom are the responsibility of all team members. Children learn from all adults in the classroom, all adults share accountability for child outcomes, and all adults celebrate all children's accomplishments.
3. Team member role assignments should be clear and flexible.
4. A conflict resolution process will be developed and used. When a conflict occurs, team members will be asked to consider differing perspectives and support the team in modifying their consensus to move the collaboration forward.

Team norms help **establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment** [SE_HLP7]. Transdisciplinary teams are made of individuals who collaborate and agree to cooperate across their fields, sharing roles, expertise, and consulting with one another throughout the process. Transdisciplinary team members are comfortable with the concept of role release, helping another team member learn your role if it will benefit students. The following list offers an example of team norms used by a transdisciplinary team.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback openly is a key aspect of successful communication and can greatly impact collaboration. Yet these are not intuitive skills. Educators do not always know how to adequately give feedback to peers. Moreover, they often lack the ability to receive constructive feedback, frequently feeling judged or evaluated. When teachers spend a significant time in their own classrooms, or “silos,” it can be hard for them to open up to outside ideas, opinions, and criticisms, even when those are intended to be constructive. Educators also tend to have different perspectives shaped by their cultural and personal backgrounds as well as their professional ones. To emphasize these differences, we often tell teacher educators: “General educators are taught to see the forest: How can I take this third-grade class and prepare them to be fourth graders? Special educators are taught to see the trees: What does Eli need to improve his reading comprehension skills?”

These differing frames of reference result in messages that may cause anxiety, frustration, anger, or embarrassment. In this respect, Hackett et al. (2021) note:

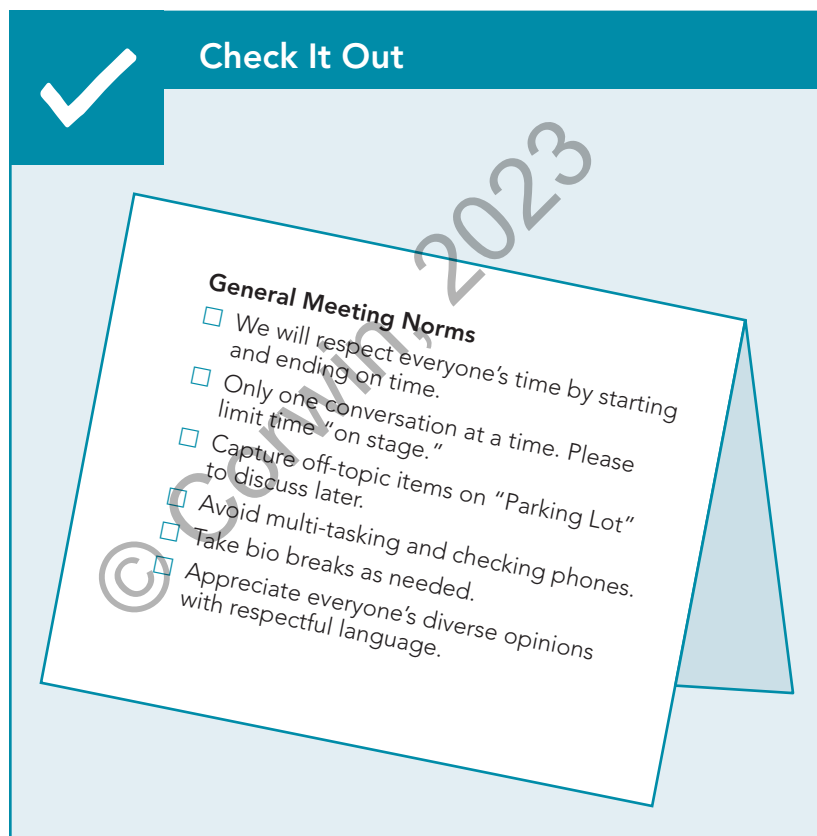
These apprehensive feelings may be internalized and prevent the guest or host [special or general education teacher] from feeling comfortable, regardless of messages voiced. Accounts of the shared experiences can be radically different for several reasons including communication barriers, cultural norms, or feelings of being the outsider. (p. 118)

Murawski and Lochner (2018) suggest that team members who share common goals create a community of practice, develop team norms, and use a *2+2 model* of giving and receiving feedback, wherein each team member offers two suggestions for improvement as well as two areas of strength to one another.

Building Role Understanding Across Tasks

The special education high-leverage practices encourage educators to **establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment** [SE_HLP7]. By keeping this goal in mind,

collaborators can identify tasks that will help to establish such an environment. For team meetings, this may include creating a checklist of actions to be taken, including warm welcomes, introductions, and ensuring the meeting is well-run and jargon-free. A template for the agenda can be created so that meetings are organized and all participants know what to expect. Accepted positive behaviors and team norms might be posted on a table tent, laminated, and set out during meetings for all to see. While general transdisciplinary team norms, such as those described above, are foundational to role understanding, the Check It Out callout box here displays a table tent that might be created to set guidelines for specific behaviors during a team meeting.



Being able to talk about what organization, structure, and respect look like in a shared class can help co-teachers recognize their differences and determine roles. Co-teaching pairs may want to collaboratively identify what each member sees as a consistent, organized, and respectful environment. For example, one teacher may feel strongly that lecture notes

should be made accessible via the class website. The other teacher may not feel as strongly about it but, in an effort to maintain a consistent environment, will agree that these notes can be posted for the shared class as well as for a section that is not co-taught. While the first co-teacher takes on the role of capturing and posting the lecture notes, the second may take on a different role, such as obtaining various forms (e.g., Audible, hard copy, graphic novel) of a book they are about to read in class. Negotiation and compromise will be required often when collaborating and, in a co-taught class, both teachers should be able to use their strong communication skills to do so.

Establishing Mutual Trust and Respect

While the definitions of collaboration and co-teaching are fairly clear, the practices vary based on the contexts in which they are applied. Regardless of the specific context, professional relationships are key to successful collaboration and co-teaching. Sometimes, people just “click” with one another—and sometimes they do not. This concept of “clicking” falls under the broad category of personal characteristics. While structural aspects of collaboration are important (e.g., time, staffing), the personal aspects appear even more critical. These include compatibility, attitudes, behaviors, culture, and communication styles (Ghedin & Aquario, 2020). Those who need to collaborate do not always have to be best friends. However, it is difficult to collaborate with someone you do not trust or respect, or with whom you cannot communicate. When colleagues get to know one another beyond the superficial level, their mutual trust and respect can grow. ***Building a respectful relationship*** [GE_HLP10] and ***environment*** [SE_HLP7] are critical for strong collaborative teamwork.

Even when partners do not agree, they should do their best to respect one another’s differing opinions. This effort entails using strong communication skills when differences are discussed, negotiated, and used to reach a compromise, or even when they are acknowledged and avoided. When trust is present and relationships are strong, disagreements and conflicts can even strengthen collaborative teams. One of the primary purposes of collaboration is to benefit from different perspectives, opinions, and frames of reference; to ignore or silence this diversity would minimize its potential benefits. Taking time to build trust and respect in a collaborative team, whether that team is composed of many individuals or two co-teachers, is worth the time spent. The strategies offered in the following list offer ways for team members to build trust and respect as they improve communication skills and establish strong relationships.

Strategies for Respectful Relationship Building and Communication

- Spend time at meetings talking about what “safe and brave spaces” may look like. A safe space is one that doesn’t incite judgment regarding differences, while a brave space is one that recognizes differences and encourages respectful dialogue to build understanding around those differences.
- Start each collaborative team meeting with a statement like the following one: “This meeting is intended to be a psychologically safe event, where we give one another the benefit of the doubt when taking risks. We will avoid all embarrassment, ridicule, and shame so that we can engage, connect, and learn from one another.” (More information on psychological safety is provided in Chapter 3.)
- Administrators can set aside 10 minutes at each faculty meeting to have “brag time.” Select 10 faculty at random to stand up and “brag” about themselves for one minute. The goal is for them to share their skills, expertise, experiences, and interests with colleagues. No one is allowed to be humble or say anything negative about themselves. Learning more about the skills of colleagues (e.g., Who speaks Farsi? Who used to be a professional skateboarder? Who can code HTML?) builds respect, communication, and collaboration. This may also lead to possible co-teaching pairings!
- Colleagues who will co-teach in the next semester or school year are encouraged to complete Murawski and Dieker’s (2004) SHARE worksheet. This resource encourages educators to consider their expectations and preferences regarding the planned co-teaching relationship. After completing the worksheet individually, the team meets to share responses and determine where they may need to compromise, or discuss how to operate their shared classroom.
- Special educators can create a school blog or newsletter to share strategies for differentiation, accommodations, and modifications. These resources can be disseminated to families and to general education colleagues. Such blogs and newsletters will help others

recognize the value that special educators bring to collaborative teams or co-teaching situations.

- Proactively establish communication plans with co-teaching teams, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and other collaborators. Consider selecting times for communication, sharing how to give/receive feedback, and planning how to deal with disagreements. This is also a good time to discuss how to share with one another if participants do not feel psychologically safe.

Dealing With Conflict

Even in an excellent relationship, conflict will occur due to disagreements, incompatibility of perspectives, and differences of opinion. While ineffective communication skills can certainly exacerbate a bad situation, conflict doesn't always have to be destructive. In fact, research has identified benefits for individuals who collaboratively problem solve to address conflict and grow from the interaction (Greer & Dannals, 2017). Collaborators' goal should be to communicate, negotiate, and come to a consensus that respects differences of personality, culture, training, or opinion (Suter et al., 2009). Most people do not seek out conflict, but we also know that it really cannot be avoided. If team members have not taken the time to identify the purpose for collaboration, establish norms, delineate roles, or communicate through challenges, a conflict between them can get worse, adding stress to the relationship and preventing the team from functioning well (Steele et al., 2021).

One potential source of conflict is when educators have differing opinions to share with families. For example, if co-teachers disagree about accommodations to be provided to a student in their co-taught class, they often feel the need to come to a consensus before discussing those accommodations with the student or their family. Team members, in education and other fields, often want to present a cohesive and unified opinion when interacting with families (Suter et al., 2009). However, we must remember that families are part of the team and should be allowed to participate in the problem-solving process, even when there are potential disagreements. In fact, the purpose of meetings is to discuss ideas and reach a consensus about the best option. Parents need to hear pros and cons of different options so they have a voice in the decision making. In our experience, these discussions elicit true collaboration among team members and often produce new and powerful ideas.

Being Willing to Collaborate

Willingness to collaborate is more than merely a desired characteristic. It can make a significant impact on the efforts of a team. In 1993, Anderson et al. proposed “willingness to collaborate” as a communication trait and a concept, creating a Willingness to Collaborate Trait scale. Their study defined willingness to collaborate as “active communication involvement with another during the process of decision making. Conceptually, this means a willingness to participate in decision making but also includes a willingness to negotiate and be assertive” (p. 4). They found, not surprisingly, that interpersonal communication competence was a strong predictor of willingness to collaborate. Consider how the opposite may be true. A family member or educator who lacks strength in interpersonal communication skills may struggle or be reluctant to participate in a collaborative team, not because they do not believe in the goals of the team but because of low comfort with the communication required to be a part of that team. Ensuring that all members have time to process, ask questions, and participate equally will help ease those who are uncomfortable in collaborative situations. While a positive attitude and desire to work together will go far in ensuring that a collaborative team is successful, other skills, such as listening, turn-taking, and oral communication, also play a role.

Different team members’ willingness to collaborate may impact others’ participation. In many instances, a school leader or administrator will be a group member. While this individual is a leader in many capacities in the school environment, within a collaborative team they are supposed to share with the other members an equal role and voice. This dynamic can be sometimes difficult to navigate. However, research has found that school leaders who demonstrate willingness to collaborate and communicate inspire other team members to do the same (Karadimou & Tsioumis, 2021). School leaders can positively influence team processes, strengthen teams’ self-esteem, and play an essential role in building a collaborative climate (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2017).

Summary

Collaborative teaming occurs between educators, family members, and students for the purpose of creating a **consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment [SE_HLP7]**. It takes concerted effort to build the **respectful relationships [GE_HLP10]** that result in effective teams. Self-awareness and strong communication are among the interpersonal skills essential for developing parity. Structural supports, such as **norms and routines for work [GE_HLP5]**, and **well-organized collaborative meetings with professionals and family members [SE_HLP2]** are also crucial features.