

FEATURE

Benefits and Barriers to Collaboration and Co-Teaching

Examining Perspectives of Gifted Education Teachers and General Education Teachers

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Abstract: This article examines collaboration in the context of how gifted education teachers co-plan and co-teach with general education teachers. Perspectives of the benefits and barriers to collaboration are explored from gifted education teachers, gifted education administration, and general education teachers in one school district in the Southeast United States. Benefits include perceived growth in teacher competency to differentiate for students identified as gifted and growth in student learning; barriers include time constraints and perceived conflicting assumptions. The article highlights implications of the challenges and practical nature of implementing collaboration between gifted education teachers and general education teachers within the context of systemic change.

Keywords: collaboration, co-teaching, gifted education, consultation, coaching

Supported by National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2010) programming standards, collaboration is model for enhancing the learning of students identified as gifted through the shared planning and delivery of services. Collaboration can involve working with various educators including general education teachers, school counselors, teachers of English language learners (ELLs), administrators, instructional leaders, as well as parents and community members to address the needs

of students identified as gifted (NAGC, 2014). Whether in the form of co-planning, co-teaching, coaching, or consultation, collaboration between the general education teacher and gifted education teacher can be a valuable way to plan and deliver differentiated instruction. General education teachers often need support in differentiating for the diversity in their classrooms. Because so few general education teachers have specialized training to address the needs of students identified as gifted (Hertberg-Davis, 2009), collaboration with a gifted education teacher can be an efficient way to build a general education teacher's skills and competencies that can transfer to increased outcomes for student learning.

Collaboration is an approach that allows two or more professionals to come together to contribute individual expertise to develop shared expertise (Friend & Cook, 2007). Collaboration is a broad term that encompasses many types of approaches. This may include the following:

- **Consultation:** Consultation is a collaborative effort between a teacher or professional and another educator where the "consultant" (e.g., gifted education teacher) provides advice to the collaboration partner. For consultation to be truly collaborative effort, it is important that the consultant does not dominate conversations (Buettner, 2010). In consultation, there is a shift in services from directly working *with students* to a directly working *with others who*

support students.

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- **Co-planning:** Co-planning involves collaboratively developing differentiated instruction, which may or may not lead to co-teaching. Co-planning may involve two teachers working together to develop assessments, review assessment data, make decisions for flexible grouping, design tiered assignments, and make other curriculum adaptations. This may take place within professional-learning communities or between two educators (e.g., gifted education teacher and general education teacher) (Mofield & Phelps, 2020).
- **Co-teaching:** Co-teaching has been described as a way for two professional educators to “jointly deliver instruction to a diverse group of students . . . in a general education setting and in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs” (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010, p. 11). In the context of gifted education, this may be referred to as a *push-in* model in its most collaborative sense, where the gifted education teacher provides instruction in the general education classroom rather than pull students out into another setting (e.g., *pull-out* programs).
- **Coaching:** Instruction coaching is an ongoing, purposeful collaborative approach to improve teaching and learning for student success. Coaches help teachers clarify goals, monitor progress, solve problems, and help teachers attain goals through strategies and supports until goals are met (Knight, 2007).

Collaboration has been used in other related fields in education, particularly to serve students with disabilities and ELLs. Educators often come together as part of developing students' Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to collaborate, solve problems, and plan on how to serve students with disabilities in the least-restrictive environment. Collaboration through co-teaching became increasingly popular model for inclusion when No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) legislation mandated that all students access the general curriculum (including students with disabilities and ELLs). In addition, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) emphasized that students with disabilities are served in the least-restrictive environment (often the general classroom with support), thus many special education teachers joined general education teachers in various forms of collaboration to exchange ideas, increase understanding of students' needs, and build stronger instructional programs for students around the general curriculum. In terms of serving ELLs, more integrated approaches such as “push-in” services have been used to support more inclusive environments. Most recently, with The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015), schools are accountable for how all students, including ELLs and students with disabilities progress in the regular curriculum based on their performance on state assessments, and so, collaborating to support general education teachers is important for meeting the needs of students. In addition, Response-to-Intervention (RTI), a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), is used in many states to

identify and provide interventions for students with disabilities. In this context, collaboration, often in the form of co-teaching, is way to provide differentiated support for students within the various tiers (Murawski & Hughes, 2009).

In these contexts, collaboration facilitates access to the general curriculum through the sharing of instructional supports between general education teacher and special education or teacher of ELLs. In gifted education, however, collaboration is an opportunity for the gifted education teacher to share his or her expertise to support high-ability students within a content area so that students might accelerate beyond the general curriculum and/or develop their strengths and talents in a domain. Many school districts have adopted a classroom-based model of collaboration/consultation as a part of their coordinated services for students identified as gifted. For those working in an RTI/MTSS framework, for example, collaboration as part of gifted programming may involve working with general education teachers to develop student strengths and potential using varying responsive instruction based on preassessments and monitoring of progress (Brown & Abernathy, 2009). In RTI applied to high-potential students or students identified as gifted, collaboration might be used to improve Tier I instruction through applying differentiation (adapting the content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' strengths or needs; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) or in Tier II by collaborating to work with cluster groups of students identified as gifted (and other high-potential students) within the general education classroom to receive more specialized attention on above grade-level content. As opposed to remediation interventions or removing barriers so students might access the general curriculum, the application of an RTI/MTSS model in gifted education involves enhancing opportunities for talent development through enrichment and acceleration.

Collaboration is also a key element to professional learning as delineated in Learning Forward's (2011) Professional Standards. Through collaboration, notably peer-coaching, gifted education teachers can share instructional strategies whereby the collaboration is a professional growth opportunity for the general education teacher to learn about appropriate differentiation features for high-ability students (Fogarty & Tschida, 2018). Through focused, sustained, data-driven collaborative work, general education teachers and gifted education teachers can work together to achieve shared understanding and plans for instruction. Currently, ESSA (2015) emphasizes that professional development should be sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, and classroom-focused. Collaboration is indeed an opportunity through the engagement in professional-learning communities in which teachers make instructional decisions in response to student data. When students are not demonstrating mastery, decisions are made to intervene to remediate skill deficits. However, gifted education teachers have an opportunity to shift the collaborative conversation to extending the learning for those who have already demonstrated mastery.

Is Collaboration Effective?

Collaboration at the classroom level, notably co-teaching, currently lacks a strong empirical base for its effectiveness. Studies are often limited to small case studies, survey reports on perceptions, or observations from teachers' experiences with the model. Among these studies, positive effects are often noted. Hang and Rabren (2008) found that students with disabilities in co-taught classrooms improved academic and behavior performance, and teachers as well as students reported positive perceptions of co-teaching. Other small studies reveal positive perceptions of co-teaching from both teachers and students (King-Sears, Brawand, Jenkins, & Preston-Smith, 2017; Wicks, 2016). Regarding synthesized research, Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) reviewed findings from 32 qualitative studies on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms (serving students with disabilities) and found that administrative support plays a key role in addressing the needs of co-teaching including planning time and appropriate training on co-teaching. Furthermore, these findings showed the special education teacher often played a subordinate role (more of an assistant than a teacher) whereby the most common co-teaching model was one-teach, one-assist. An older meta-analysis on co-teaching showed an overall small effect size ($d = .40$) for student outcomes; benefits for co-teaching included moderate academic gains for students with disabilities in math and large gains in reading, decreases in absences and referrals, and more peer acceptance (Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, and McCulley (2012) also found similar results from synthesizing six studies on the efficacy of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, including gains for reading and decreases in absences and referrals for students with disabilities. Many of the articles synthesized by Solis et al. (2012) emphasized a need for sufficient planning time, training on co-teaching models, and administrative support as important factors for successful co-teaching. Regarding the use of co-teaching for ELL populations, positive student effects have also been reported, including learning from different teaching styles, developing community between ELL and non-ELL students, increased student achievement, and increased feelings of social inclusion (Pappamihel, 2016; York-Barr, Ghere, & Sommerness, 2007).

In the field of gifted education, only a few studies offer insight on collaboration as an effective model. Landrum (2001) found positive effects of a consultation model where general education teachers increased their skills in differentiating instruction, resulting in better student outcomes. Her findings suggest that collaboration led to shared responsibility of co-planning in preparing and delivering differentiated lessons and ongoing assessment of student learning. Nonnegotiables such as regularly scheduled planning time, voluntary participation in the collaborative process, adequate staff development, and administrative support were noted as requisites for collaboration to be effective. Her findings also implied that a combination of both direct and indirect services in the form of collaboration was needed to meet the needs of students identified as gifted.

Additionally, Masso (2004) found that co-teaching in a differentiated classroom has shown positive effects on gifted students' engagement and interest levels. Through co-teaching in a third-grade math class, Masso (2004) reported the benefits of students identified as gifted working in small flexible groups with a gifted education teacher who could facilitate meaningful, in-depth enrichment learning activities. Students responded that they were less distracted, more excited, and more interested in math when presented with mathematical challenges in small groups. Working in a shared collaborative relationship with the general education teacher also addressed any elitist attitudes toward homogeneous grouping. Collaboration allowed for shared responsibility in using results from preassessments to guide shifts in flexible grouping throughout the year.

The effects of co-teaching on student achievement, specifically for students identified as gifted, have shown mixed results. For example, a report by Wake County Public School System (Lenard & Townsend, 2017) indicated that students who were co-taught in science classes outperformed their peers who were not in co-taught science classes; however, there were no differences found for co-taught math classes and co-taught reading classes. Nevertheless, their report revealed that both gifted education teachers and general education teachers perceived they could more effectively teach students identified as gifted and enjoyed professional collaboration. Like other studies with consultation and co-teaching, time to co-plan was reported as a significant barrier (Kane & Henning, 2004; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Collaboration involves other challenges related to the different assumptions and values of the gifted education and general education teachers (Purcell & Leppien, 1998; Tomlinson, Coleman, Allan, Udall, & Landrum, 1996). As described in an autoethnography, Haberlin (2017) revealed honest reflections of the complexities of meeting the needs of students identified as gifted by working with other teachers who feel territorial about their content and methods. *Frustration* and *isolation* were indicated as themes of his experience as he documented feelings toward teachers who were "set in their ways" (p. 2079). In addition, the researcher perceived these assumptions from the general education teacher: students identified as gifted should be able to make it on their own and general education teachers thought they were already providing differentiation (when they were not). He noted other themes such as *advocacy* and *influence* when collaboration worked well. Soft approaches such as complimenting the teacher's initial plans and offering an idea aligned with the teacher's instructional goals for the week were successful.

Personal Context

As the lead consulting teacher for a school district in the Southeastern United States, I was tasked to implement a deliberate approach to facilitating collaboration between gifted education and general education teachers. In the district where differentiation within Tier I instruction is expected in all general

education classrooms, teachers can be overwhelmed with the additional work of developing differentiated tiered assignments, projects, and assessments, thus the district added a new role for gifted education teachers. Beyond serving students directly in pull-out settings, gifted education teachers would also collaborate and support general education teachers so differentiation within the general education classroom would be more manageable. The role of the gifted education teacher was now to offer support through collecting resources, sharing ideas, co-planning activities for the varied levels of academic readiness in the classroom, and sometimes co-teaching. Using this collaborative teaching model, the benefits to student learning appeared promising and made sense, but the actual implementation of collaboration involved many challenges. Because of my personal experience with implementing collaboration as part of gifted programming within a public school district, I wanted to explore how both gifted education teachers (and the gifted education coordinator) and general education teachers perceived the strengths and weaknesses of this model. Although collaboration can involve working with various personnel in meetings, teams, and conferences (Friend et al., 2010), in the context of this study, collaboration specifically refers to sharing resources, co-planning, and facilitating of differentiated instruction with the general education teacher, which might include co-teaching or modeling instructional strategies.

Purpose

Although collaboration, specifically consultation and co-teaching, in special education and education for ELLs has been examined in the literature, there is limited research on collaboration within gifted education. The purpose of the study was to examine perspectives of gifted education teachers and general education teachers on collaboration, specifically sharing resources, co-planning, and co-teaching. The research question, “How do gifted education teachers and general education teachers perceive collaboration as a means to serve students identified as gifted?” guided this study. Findings may provide guidance to other school districts as they consider the challenges and opportunities related to serving students identified as gifted through collaboration.

Method

Context of the Present Study

In this study, the perceptions of gifted education teachers and general education teachers were examined within school district in the Southeastern United States that shifted from a direct service model (e.g., pull-out enrichment daily for one class period) to implementing an indirect service model of collaboration while also maintaining a form of direct services (e.g., gifted education teachers taught accelerated enrichment classes for two class periods with homogeneous groups of students identified as gifted with IEPs). For the past 4.5 years, the district applied a deliberate approach to collaboration

whereby the schedules for gifted education teachers allowed time for collaboration for sharing strategies, co-planning, and co-teaching in classrooms. This model especially included collaborating at the middle school level with teachers who taught advanced/honors English language arts and math courses (though collaboration with general education teachers was not limited to these courses). The rationale of this model was to provide services to students identified as gifted all day, every day, even beyond the class periods they were directly served by the gifted education teacher. In this context, gifted education teachers collaborated with general education teachers to differentiate for students identified as gifted and other high-potential students (e.g., develop appropriate preassessments, facilitate compacting, create tiered assignments, add depth and complexity to assignments, participate in professional-learning communities using data to plan for continual progress even for the most advanced students, etc.) through sharing strategies, co-planning, or co-teaching. Collaboration also allowed gifted education teachers to work with general education teachers to address issues related to underachievement and develop modifications for twice exceptional learners.

Features of the Integrated Curriculum Model (VanTassel-Baska, 2003) were used as the core model for working with general education teachers to differentiate instruction. Specifically, gifted education teachers were trained to work with general education teachers to differentiate by (a) advancing the content using above-grade level standards or acceleration; (b) differentiating the content, process or product through explicitly teaching critical thinking, creative thinking, higher level thinking, or problem-solving; and (c) connecting content to a theme or overarching issue. Furthermore, gifted education teachers met at least once per month over 4.5 years to discuss and reflect on approaches to collaboration. A spectrum of collaborative service models were introduced and reinforced throughout this time, which included sharing resources with teachers, demonstrating strategies for teachers, sharing insights during PLCs, co-planning a differentiated lesson, and introducing models of co-teaching (e.g., Friend & Cook, 2007) applied to gifted education. Gifted education teachers had the autonomy to choose which methods and approaches worked best within the context of their assigned schools and teaching schedules. During monthly meetings, gifted education teachers reflected on what worked and what did not work regarding their specific situations with students and general education teachers. Co-planning (which sometimes involving co-teaching as well) involved the gifted education teacher working with the general education teacher to differentiate lesson(s) for Tier I or Tier II instruction (within the context of MTSS). To differentiate, they used preassessments for decision-making on instructional grouping, developed tiered assignments with additional depth and complexity for students needing additional challenge, and added more opportunities for talent development, accessing advanced content, problem-based learning, and/or advanced processes of the discipline within the lesson.

Within this context, students were identified and served as gifted through an IEP. Criteria for the IEP included qualifying scores on standardized measures of performance, cognition, and creativity or characteristics of giftedness. Criteria for identification as gifted included: (a) a full-scale intelligence score (130 or above) and a score at the 96th percentile or above on one standardized academic achievement test composite score or at the 90th percentile or higher on two composite scores; (b) a full-scale intelligence score of 123 to 129 and two composite scores on a standardized achievement measuring above the 95th percentile or three composite scores above the 90th percentile, and qualifying characteristics or creative thinking; or (c) a full-scale intelligence score of 118 to 122 and three composite areas on a standardized achievement measuring above the 95th percentile or four composite areas above 90th percentile, and a qualifying score on a measure of gifted characteristics or creative thinking. In addition to meeting criteria with specified scores, identified students also needed to demonstrate that their high cognitive abilities led to an adverse effect in the regular classroom if not provided individualized support. The gifted education IEPs delineated services and accommodations based on student needs.

The district's programming model included providing services to students identified as gifted from grades K-8 through IEPs, which in most cases included pull-out services that extended and enriched content standards (2 days per week in middle school where students were pulled from a related arts class; various days through elementary). The program also included additional support for middle school students through collaboration with general education teachers and curriculum modifications. Although it is best practice to serve students according to their strengths and areas of giftedness (Rogers, 2008), most students identified as gifted were served in a pull-out setting, regardless of how they were identified, though opportunities were provided for students to engage in independent projects and research related to their personal interests and strengths. Unfortunately, gifted education elementary teachers did not have flexibility in their schedules to deliberately implement collaboration with general education teachers on a continuous basis. Gifted education services through IEPs were rarely provided to high school students identified as gifted because the district contended that more opportunities for advanced classes and advanced placement (AP) courses were offered at this level, thus the needs of students identified as gifted could be met without an IEP.

Participants

The researcher sent an e-mail invitation to participate in this study to a purposeful sample of the district's middle school gifted education teachers, gifted education leadership (coordinator and consulting teacher), and past middle school gifted education teachers who taught within the past 4.5 years.

General education middle school teachers were selected through snowball sampling where the teachers of the gifted were asked to identify general education teachers who would be willing to also take the survey. A total of 16 individuals (out of 21 who were invited) participated in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

After consenting to participate in the study, participants completed a survey of three open-ended questions on Google Forms sent via e-mail. Participant responses to the survey were confidential and anonymous. This survey and interview questions were developed by the researcher with an intention to understand perspectives of both general education teachers and gifted education teachers in regard to the systemic supports that facilitated or impeded the gifted program's vision to meet the needs of students identified as gifted all day every day through collaboration (see Appendices A and B). Follow-up interviews were conducted with three participants who were randomly selected from those who indicated they would be willing to be interviewed. All 16 of the participants volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews. The three randomly selected individuals were sent an e-mail for a follow-up interview. All three noted it was most convenient to be interviewed via e-mail. According to Hawkins (2018) and Meho (2006), interviewing through e-mail is a feasible practice for collecting qualitative data, especially when participants are busy and the purpose of the study is to describe an experience (which is the case in the present study). Both survey and interview data were analyzed for patterns and themes using open coding. Codes were applied to participants' words, phrases, and explanations, which led to classification of themes related to benefits and barriers.

Results

Benefits

Two major themes relating to benefits of collaboration emerged: growth in teachers' competencies in differentiation and growth in student learning. Among the survey responses, 64% of respondents indicated growth for teacher competencies and 100% noted learning benefits for students. Collaboration was perceived to have a positive effect on student learning, both for students identified as gifted and other students in the classroom.

Growth in teachers' competencies in differentiation

Responses revealed that general education teachers learned more about the needs of students identified as gifted and differentiation strategies related to high-level questioning, critical thinking, and creative thinking. One general education teacher noted, "The collaboration that my gifted teacher and I do gives me new insights on lesson pacing and depth. She typically will give advice on how to make sure that the lesson is presented for higher thinking." Another general education teacher noted,

I have been able to provide my students with a new perspective of how to present specific content due to the collaboration between myself and our school's gifted teacher. Her suggestions for classroom presentation were endless. This collaboration also included weekly co-teaching . . . Maximum student learning occurs when we collaborate with meeting the needs of our students as the top priority.

Other responses convey the positive spirit of collaboration: “. . . the most excellent instruction is not mine, but ours.” The benefits of using the combined expertise of both collaborators were also noted:

Gifted teachers are able to build confidence in their collaborative partners by letting the regular education teacher be the expert in his/her field, and that can open the pathway for allowing the gifted ed teacher to show him/her how to take that expertise even further with students who can “go there,” . . . That builds excitement, progresses learning, and hopefully deepens understanding.

Growth in student learning

Teachers of the gifted also conveyed benefits for students:

Some of the benefits of collaborating include an increased excitement and engagement for the lesson and learning because of the additional challenge, complexity, and depth that has been added. Students have an increased understanding of the content, and they have usually developed their own abstract connections, and you can actually see their confidence building. Students do not refer to their work as “busy work” or “boring” when collaboration has taken place concerning the required outcomes and goals surrounding a unit.

The students have increased interest in the topic because it is planned on their level. With that comes increased learning—not being bored because they already know the general curriculum. This is also a great way to reinforce what is being taught in pull-out services. Also, it helps the teacher learn the student better . . . this might help a general ed teacher see the potential of a student who is generally lazy in his/her class.

Furthermore, some respondents reported that collaboration allowed for gifted education teachers to recognize other students in the general education classroom who displayed behaviors associated with giftedness, often from underrepresented population. Respondents noted that several students were referred for gifted screening due to the opportunities for talent spotting when differentiated lessons were presented.

Barriers

Two major themes related to the obstacles of successful collaboration: lack of time and structure to collaborate and conflicting assumptions. Ninety-three percent of respondents noted lack of time and 64% of respondents noted conflicting assumptions.

Lack of time and structure

In the context of the study, gifted education teachers served two schools and also delivered direct instruction during an enrichment time. Between other responsibilities, finding time to co-plan and co-teach was especially challenging, and students identified as gifted were often not grouped together in classrooms, rather, some schools distributed students identified as gifted equally among various teachers' schedules. Even though the schedules allowed for the gifted education teacher to have time for collaboration, these times did not necessarily coincide with times that worked for general education teachers. Participants noted,

She is only at our school 2-3 days per week and can only collaborate or present lessons sporadically.

Not having enough time to meet and collaborate because of IEP meetings, data meetings, PLCs, etc. can be very difficult to continue the momentum.

In most schools, gifted students are sprinkled through all classes making it difficult to find the time to consult with multiple teachers.

Interview responses also shed insight into how the lack of time for intentional planning and sporadic nature of collaboration does not as adequately meet students' needs:

Collaborating to differentiate in the regular classroom is just a drop in the bucket to meet the needs of gifted students. Add-on differentiation here and there is not an adequate service without other intensive efforts.

Conflicting assumptions

Regarding the second theme, conflicting assumptions, gifted education teachers felt the needs of students identified as gifted were not understood by the general education teacher:

Many regular education teachers believe they have a full understanding of gifted students, and the student “should” just do or understand whatever the teacher's expectation is. Obviously, this lack of understanding is very difficult. A closed mindset to gifted learners is a huge challenge, and the students can usually tell which teachers understand their needs and which do not.

The biggest obstacle that I see and hear about are the closed minds, and that can include/lead to a lack of

support from the administration. The idea that gifted students “will be fine” without support and focused challenges is prevalent still, and that bars the door for many educators in allowing gifted educators into their world.

Other gifted education teachers perceived that general educators did not feel they needed support for differentiation:

With so much to cover with standards and getting ready for state tests, regular education teachers do not want to divert from a prescribed scope and sequence they feel pressured to follow. They seem to be afraid of developing instruction with above-grade level content. They think they are already challenging the kids adequately, so they do not perceive they need our support.

Another interviewee noted, collaboration “does not change the general education teacher’s ways of approaching gifted students because of the various other needs they have in the classroom.” The interviewee also noted,

I think they assume that gifted teachers have an easy job and that we have an idealistic view of the way things should be. They wish that either we were there *more* per week or that perhaps we might just not approach them about model lessons or student concerns. There is a wide range of emotions about gifted instruction in buildings—some are more open to ideas than others.

Other comments show misconceptions regarding the role of the gifted education teacher and general education teacher:

When I’ve tried co-teaching, sometimes I felt the teacher did not understand my role. Some reg. teachers ask me to just teach a lesson for the day so they can use that time to take care of other responsibilities like make copies for their next class.

On the same vein, another gifted education teacher noted, “Collaboration should not be a time when the general education teacher ‘gets a break’ from teaching.” Clearly, these comments reveal conflicting assumptions related to the purpose of collaboration involving the *shared* responsibility of teaching students.

Related to these conflicting assumptions, it was noted by all interviewees (100%) that collaboration is not an adequate service in itself, given that the needs of the gifted are not understood. “Collaboration with teachers is not adequate enough for the students . . . Often, the collaboration does not change the general education teacher’s ways of approaching gifted students because of the various other needs they have in the classroom”:

Many teachers let differentiation fall through the cracks. Also, many times, gifted students already know the

content being taught in the general education classroom . . . These students even have the opportunity in gifted pull out to show what they know in different ways that in the general ed. classroom—even if the teacher in gen ed is differentiating.

Discussion

This study sought to answer, “How do gifted education teachers and general education teachers perceive collaboration as a means to serve students identified as gifted?” Responses from gifted education teachers, gifted education leadership (gifted education coordinator and consulting teacher), and general education teachers revealed patterns about the structures and supports that facilitate successful collaboration as well as obstacles that impede it. Themes included two major benefits: growth in teachers’ competencies in differentiation and growth in student learning; and two major barriers: lack of time and structure to collaborate and conflicting assumptions between the gifted education teacher and general education teacher.

Overall, findings are consistent with some of the research that shows the positive perceptions of collaboration through models such as co-teaching (King-Sears et al., 2017; Wicks, 2016). Both gifted education teachers and general education teachers emphasized the valuable outcome of student learning when two instructors co-plan differentiated instruction. As indicated by responses, 100% of participants noted benefits to student learning, often noting how other students (beyond those identified as gifted) in the classroom were exposed to more challenging content.

The barriers mirrored those in other studies. As noted in various synthesized studies on the effects of co-teaching (Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et al., 2012) planning is an integral factor for successful implementation. When asked, “What supports and structures have been beneficial in making collaboration work well?” Respondents noted the need for structured time to plan and effective communication: “There must be time to actually be able to collaborate. It is impossible if time is not built into the structure of the schedule.” Another noted how schedules can help facilitate co-planning:

Regularly scheduled times to meet or email. Having a procedure in place (meeting every Tuesday or emailing every other week) seems to keep everyone accountable. Also, teachers making connections during IEP meetings, and even making a plan for differentiation for the student helps everyone be on the same page.

It should be noted that gifted education teachers in this study were assigned multiple schools and could not consistently provide in-person support in a classroom. As noted by a respondent, collaboration is difficult when the gifted education teacher can only sporadically work with a general education

teacher. Time for common planning should be built in the schedule, and this can be organized and supported at the administrative level. It has recommended that teachers co-plan for at least 30 min per week with set goals for sessions (Landrum, 2001; Kane & Henning, 2004). Furthermore, co-teaching would be more feasible if the district consistently implemented cluster grouping as in Masso (2004).

In addition, other synthesized studies (Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et al., 2012) indicated the importance of administrative support. This, too, is echoed in this study as a barrier related to conflicting assumptions. As revealed in the following survey responses, it is important for administrators to show they value the growth of all students to clarify misconceptions:

. . . I also think one of the largest obstacles is the “mindset” that gifted students will be fine no matter what, so the focus is diverted away from the complex needs of gifted learners to the students who are “in the bubble.” If major stakeholders in each school do not acknowledge these needs, then it slows the process of collaboration significantly.

One of the key supports is having the support and encouragement of the school level administration. Teachers tend to fall in line with the beliefs of their administrator, and they—like many students—are “teacher pleasers” who want to please their principals. This can really benefit the collaborative work when the administration believes that gifted education is important and needed, and when that support includes the encouragement of spending time with gifted educators and even finding time in faculty meetings or other opportunities to allow for the general education teachers and teachers of the gifted to learn and plan together.

The administration may provide such support by securing professional development on collaboration, aligning master schedules for collaboration, resolving dilemmas with space, time, and allocation of resources, and participating in PLCs where the needs of students who have already demonstrated mastery of material are discussed. Administrators may articulate the importance of differentiation, giving teachers “permission” to not stay tied to scripted curriculum or pacing guides. Overall, administrators should work to ensure that collaboration as a service for gifted is accountable and sustainable (Friend et al., 2010).

The theme of conflicting assumptions shows the implied expectations and assumptions gifted education teachers hold for general education teachers—they should understand and be open to learning how to meet the needs of diverse learners. These echo the assumptions revealed in a qualitative study conducted by Purcell and Leppien (1998). They found that gifted education teachers expected general education teachers to be willing to try new ideas, have a collaborative spirit, and be able to modify curricula for students identified as gifted,

whereas general education teachers expected the gifted education teachers to offer new ideas, communicate effectively, and understand the daily pressures of classroom teaching.

Relatedly, volunteer participation from both parties is noted as a nonnegotiable for collaboration to work (Landrum, 2001; Scruggs et al., 2007). Teachers spend a considerable amount of time planning lessons. Some general education teachers simply don’t want another teacher to come into their classroom “telling them what to do” with their “best” students (though these would be erroneous assumptions). Those who seek to collaborate need to keep in mind that some teachers are especially not open to some forms of collaboration, especially when it involves direct instruction of students (modeling of strategies, co-teaching).

The results of this study also mirror Haberlin’s (2017) findings regarding working with other general education teachers who feel territorial about their content and methods and teachers “set in their ways.” In a follow-up interview, a gifted education teacher explained that many times, she would offer to consult and/or co-teach, but general education teachers already felt overwhelmed with other responsibilities. Responses such as the following reveal how the overall school climate and culture related to the demands of teaching can affect attitudes toward collaboration:

I think the culture of collaboration will need to change as a whole. I don’t think it’s merely a gifted ed teacher issue, but something that all teachers need to embrace. I think that gifted students having an IEP protects them, but it also makes teachers stressed and possibly resentful (especially for 2E students) to have to differentiate higher and do different things than they are used to.

Implications

These findings reveal many obstacles that impede successful collaboration as well as supports that facilitate its success. Based on the current findings, the following includes implications written as recommendations for tackling such obstacles and building systems of support to implement successful collaboration between gifted education teachers and general education teachers:

1. Administrators must value and communicate the importance of collaboration: Findings indicated that administrators were key to dismantling unspoken assumptions on the roles and responsibilities of gifted education teachers and general education teachers. If the notion of push-in, co-teaching, or any form of collaboration between gifted education and general education teachers is new to a district, the campus administrator should communicate its purpose, value, and importance to all faculty. When other educators see that this is supported and expected from the administration, then they are more likely to participate. Administrators

can also play a key role articulating that high-ability students are not fine on their own and that to make continued progress, they must be provided with challenging learning opportunities.

Ultimately, shifting from direct services alone to a collaboration model involves an understanding of the change process. Leaders must help all find collective meaning in the change and foster commitment to the change (Fullan, 2002). Furthermore, the “implementation dip” must be acknowledged (there will be mishaps and challenges at the start of any change). The key, then, is for leaders and administrators to build sustainable, lasting, impactful change. Addressing resistance (e.g., general education teachers not wanting to share instructional space with gifted education teachers) can be addressed with collective understanding of why the change is necessary. This involves setting the stage for a cultural shift. Fullan (2002) notes, “Much change is structural and superficial. Transforming culture—changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it—leads to deep, lasting change” (p. 19). Such transformational cultural shifts can happen when administrators elicit buy-in by genuinely considering teachers’ beliefs and input and providing opportunities for professional learning so that partnered teachers grow and sharpen skills related to collaboration.

2. Implement collaboration in the context of systemic change: Shifts in gifted programming should be done in the context of a district’s systemic change initiatives. Hubbard (2009) contrasts two types of changes within an institution. “Tinkering change includes reforms intended to address a specific deficiency of practice. System change, or systemic change, or sea change, is a change to the overall structure and mission of an institution” (p. 747). In the context of this study, and perhaps other districts, the shift toward more deliberate collaboration may simply be tinkering changes, but this may be inadequate without deliberate systemic change aligned to the overall district’s goals. Collaboration efforts were often initiated by gifted education teachers in this study where general education teachers and even administrators viewed the collaboration as an add-on part of instruction rather than an essential part of the district’s systematic functioning for positive student outcomes. Some of the participants’ comments reflect that general education teachers perceived a clash in the current district/state’s system focus on grade-level scope and sequence for proficient test performance versus providing differentiation that might accelerate or enrich the general curriculum. Ultimately, in the context of this study, general education teachers were evaluated based on student test performance, and perhaps they perceived that

adaptations to curriculum could impact their students’ scores:

With so much to cover with standards and getting ready for state tests, regular education teachers do not want to divert from a prescribed scope and sequence they feel pressured to follow. They seem to be afraid of developing instruction with above-grade level content.

As with implementing new curriculum initiatives within a school district, the same process may be applied to collaboration, because differentiation is a change to how curriculum is taught. For example, just like with new curriculum, in the context of collaboration it is important to understand teachers’ previous experiences and existing perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs to make connections with new practices and ideas (Callahan, 2016; Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon, & Beyers, 2002). Furthermore, all parties need to understand the why behind the change initiative. Like adopting curriculum, adopting practices such as collaboration from both the perspective of the gifted education teacher and the general education teacher may require a persuasive rationale that can be effectively articulated to others. Moreover, training in collaboration and co-teaching may not suffice. As noted in a multi-year study on differentiation by Brighton, Hertberg, Moon, Tomlinson, and Callahan (2005), professional learning through follow-up interactions and coaching with informed, honest feedback is needed in contexts of changing beliefs and practices. Such may be the case in establishing successful collaborative partnerships focused on differentiating for high-ability students.

3. Communicate clear purposes and roles: It is imperative that both the gifted education teacher and general education teacher understand the purpose of collaboration and the roles they play in a *shared* commitment of planning and delivering instruction. Some of the barriers noted by respondents (especially related to conflicting assumptions) might be eliminated with initial and ongoing high-quality professional learning on understanding and addressing needs of high-ability students (identified as gifted or not). Training should emphasize the *shared* responsibility in collaboration and provide opportunities to define roles. Specifically, to support differentiation, the role of the gifted education teacher might be to develop preassessments, modify curricula, work with groups who need more challenging instruction, model high-level thinking questioning, or work one-on-one with students. The general education teacher’s role may be to share the weekly instructional goals aligned with standards and develop initial ideas for learning activities (Mofield & Phelps, 2020). Moreover, both parties actively “co-labor” together in aligning differentiation with instructional goals. Both the gifted education teacher and the general education teachers

should attend professional development together and receive ongoing follow-up coaching (Friend et al., 2010).

In understanding and clarifying roles, it is important to consider the various assumptions from each partner. The gifted education teacher may work from the assumption that instruction in general education is inadequate. The general education teacher may assume that the ideas of the gifted education teacher are too “extra” and beyond what the scope and sequence prescribes, not worthy of instructional time. When both teachers apply the advice of Covey’s (2004) “seek first to understand,” this can help each individual address underlying belief systems and assumptions they may have toward each other. The gifted education teacher may explain that he or she is not there to tell the teacher what to do and the general education teacher has not done anything “wrong” for him or her to need the support of the gifted education teacher. A clear purpose for collaboration must be articulated *to work together to support differentiation for all students, including those with high-potential*. When both teachers can come together for this purpose and learn from one another, they both grow in their professional learning. This can also lead to peer-coaching situations in which each professional learns strategies from one another to build skills for differentiating instruction (Fogarty & Tschida, 2018).

4. Collaborators must build relationships and trust: Collaboration is a complex interpersonal process that must be established on the foundation of trust. Gifted education teachers often perceived a lack of trust from general education teachers. For example,

A lot of teachers are resistant to feedback and don’t want the gifted ed teacher in their classroom. The way evaluations are structured often creates tension surrounding feedback. I am always very up-front about my intentions and desires (non-evaluatory) but I still encounter a lot of resistance.

“This was such a new concept in the beginning and was difficult for some teachers to realize the value in collaboration. The problem, I feel, some were a bit threatened having me ask to work with them.”

To set contexts for effective collaboration, work to develop open and honest relationships built on reciprocity and respect (Matthews, Foster, Gladstone, Schieck, & Meiners, 2007). Given that general education teachers carry heavy teaching demands, gifted education teachers can strengthen collaboration efforts by acknowledging the challenges of teaching and offering to help alleviate their load (Purcell & Leppien, 1998). The collaborative partnership is an opportunity to share competencies and expertise from both teachers. In building collaborative relationships, the partnership might consider the acronym TEAM to guide open dialogue and reflection:

- T—Trust—Instill a sense of trust with one another. Develop a positive, caring relationship that allows for risk-taking and honesty in giving feedback on how collaboration is working. Give trust to get trust.
- E—Engage—Engage each other in the planning process, valuing the expertise of each. Ask questions, listen to ideas, and build from one another’s ideas. Offer encouragement and praise. Engage to actively address unspoken assumptions of each party.
- A—Align—Align beliefs for student discipline, teaching style, and expectations of both parties. Openly discuss each other’s values (e.g., obtaining high achievement scores, accelerating content, aligning lessons to student interests) and work toward an “and” rather than “or” approach to shared planning.
- M—Maintain—Maintain a positive relationship through frequent reflective discussions on what has worked and what has not worked. Be open to feedback about what could have worked better and what you may try next time. Provide descriptive rather than evaluative feedback; avoid being judgmental.

Building opportunities for reflection with general education teachers as well with other gifted education teachers is also important to building relationships. Learning to harmonize in collaboration can take time. Reflecting on the past provides important feedback for the future. Both teachers should plan for time to consider the following questions:

What impact did this have on student learning (on students identified as gifted and others in the classroom)?
How do we know? Which students were engaged and which ones were not? Why? What are our next steps?
How can we support each other in these next steps?
(Mofield & Phelps, 2020)

Beyond the gifted education teacher reflecting with a general education teacher, a participant also noted the importance of reflecting with other gifted education teachers:

It has also been extremely beneficial to have designated meetings for gifted education itinerant teachers to meet as a group to share insights into what is going well in the different buildings and how to solve problems for areas of needed growth.

5. Strategically choose collaborative partners: This recommendation is based in response to participants who noted the difficulties in sporadic collaboration. If collaboration is a new approach for a school district, it may be beneficial for gifted education teachers to “work with the welcoming” to focus on a few open general education teachers who are viewed as leaders or influencers within the school. Perhaps, gifted education teachers begin collaboration efforts with the general

education teachers who are eager and excited to learn new strategies and who will likely share about positive collaboration experiences with others. Gifted education teachers might focus on a few general education teachers per school rather than try to work with multiple teachers sporadically. This is done most effectively if students identified as gifted (who need differentiation) are grouped together in these classes through cluster grouping. The sustained attention and maintenance of a close collaborative relationship will most likely transfer to the general education teacher's skills of implementing differentiation strategies over time. Providing services to students identified as gifted through a collaboration model requires consistency, otherwise students only receive small doses of differentiation whenever the gifted education teacher has the time to collaborate. A set schedule of collaborating with a teacher at least once per week on a regular basis (to co-plan or co-teach) provides more focused sustained service than intermittently working with teachers once or twice per semester.

6. Build a tool kit to differentiate instruction, not "different" activities: Participants noted the benefits of using gifted instructional strategies and thinking models within classroom instruction. This reveals the importance for gifted education teachers to have a tool kit of effective differentiated strategies to share with general education teachers. Collaboration is an opportunity to share with the general education teacher strategies learned through gifted education course work, professional development, or conferences. It is important to provide clear definitions for terms such as "differentiation," "higher level thinking," "depth," and "complexity." Successful collaboration is facilitated when gifted education teachers are equipped with high-quality gifted curriculum and resources and models to share with teachers and can help co-develop appropriate preassessments, rubrics, and performance-based assessments. Gifted education offers so many rigorous, relevant, student-centered innovative instructional strategies. Many general education are eager to learn about them, see them modeled, or talk with someone about applying them to their classroom context. The following response reveals the positive impact of effectively sharing methods for differentiation:

From my own experience, I have seen general classroom teachers incorporate advanced processing models into their general education classrooms, as well as embrace other opportunities to offer differentiation to better meet the needs of their advanced and gifted learners. In turn, this has also alleviated several behavior problems in their classrooms. There is also the added potential of cross-curricular integration that allows for greater opportunities to add depth and complexity to the learning objectives, and teachers are more apt to grow in their own

pedagogical knowledge, leading to innovative teaching through best practice.

Planned differentiation should be intentionally implemented for challenging students in academic content, not necessarily for different types of activities. As the consulting lead gifted education teacher for the district, I noticed that gifted education teachers would often take initiative to co-plan exciting, entertaining activity-type lessons, rather than use collaboration as an opportunity to build general education teachers' capacity for curriculum differentiation. When this happened, the professional-learning opportunity was lost for the general education teacher to learn why these strategies are necessary and how to apply differentiation features to future lessons. Co-teaching must remain student-focused rather than "activity"-driven in lesson planning. In the initial year of implementing this model, gifted education teachers were eager to simply "get in the door in classrooms." It may be tempting for gifted education teachers to share lessons in which students engage in an activity "different" from a typical lesson, but not really "differentiated." Unless there is intentional depth or complexity tied to the content of the lesson, the gifted education teacher may be perceived as the entertainer or the "fun teacher" by the students. The gifted education teacher should intentionally build from the general education teacher's plan for teaching content standards (or above grade-level standards) so that students can engage with the content as a practitioner in the field (e.g., solve problems as a disciplinarian and apply deep conceptual understanding to content) (Mofield & Phelps, 2020).

7. Use a common framework for differentiation: The perceived benefits to collaboration were related to "know-how" skills of gifted education teachers who were consistently trained on using a specific curriculum model for the gifted. It is important to adopt a differentiation or curriculum model that everyone understands and that fits the context of gifted programming. Questions to consider include, "What should gifted curriculum look like? What do we mean by differentiation?" Providing a framework for lesson planning based on a gifted curriculum model can help provide a focus. For example, providing advanced content, advanced process/product, and embedding issues/themes/concepts using the Integrated Curriculum Model (VanTassel-Baska, 2003) was a useful planning template for designing lessons and sharing ways to differentiate with general education teachers. When a framework is shared and understood by all parties, it is more likely to be implemented.
8. Continually evaluate the purpose of collaboration in the context of the gifted program design: Districts must continually reflect on how and to what extent collaboration benefits students identified as gifted within the context of the gifted program. For example, districts may consider, "How and to what extent does it effectively meet the needs of students identified as gifted (and

others) in the general classroom? To what extent is collaboration really happening?"

Many participants noted the need for continued direct services for most students identified as gifted because differentiation could not happen realistically in all academic classes and could only be done consistently with a few teachers. As noted by participants, collaboration worked "in addition" to other services, but other intensive supports were needed for many students identified as gifted through direct services (e.g., ". . . add-on differentiation here and there is not an adequate service without other intensive efforts"). Furthermore, because of the standards-based emphasis in the schools, general education teachers, even advanced/honors teachers, were hesitant to accelerate and/or modify the content beyond a prescribed scope and sequence. Reflecting on the role of collaboration is indeed important, especially because it was viewed to be not as adequate in meeting the needs of students identified as gifted, though its function to *complement* pull-out services was perceived to be beneficial.

Limitations

The patterns and responses were limited to the implementation of collaboration within one school district. Although gifted education teachers received training and ongoing support for collaboration, general education teachers did not. The responses from general education teachers were limited to those who were willing to take the survey and those who regularly collaborate with gifted education teachers. The responses may not include the perceptions of those who do not value collaboration; future research may investigate why some general education teachers are not open to collaboration. Other perspectives were not captured through this small study such as those of school administrators. Furthermore, this study focused only on the collaboration between gifted education teachers and general education teachers. It is acknowledged that collaboration within the field of gifted education involves multiple personnel, family, and community members working together to enhance the learning of students identified as gifted.

Additional research might use more traditional face-to-face interviewing for qualitative data collection as this would have elicited a fuller understanding of the participants' experiences (e.g., side comments, gestures, and responses to follow-up questions). I personally was involved in facilitating collaboration efforts district-wide; thus, my perceptions likely influence interpretations of findings. Within the context of the district, collaboration existed on a continuum from sharing resources through e-mail to modeling instructional strategies in the classroom to co-teaching practices. Findings do not indicate what types of collaboration worked best and only reveal perceptions of collaboration. More research is needed on understanding the impact of collaboration on student learning by examining direct student outcomes (Friend et al., 2010). As a field, we need to further extend our inquiry on understanding

the complexities of the interpersonal dynamics involved in collaboration and the contexts that allow it to flourish.

Conclusion

Collaboration has clear benefits for both students and teachers, providing opportunities for general education teachers to access to tools, resources, and strategies that enhance the learning of students identified as gifted as well as other high-potential students. When implemented consistently, the model was perceived to indeed help challenge students beyond the "Tuesdays and Thursdays" they are with the gifted education teacher during enrichment time. The findings echo the barriers found in other studies related to conflicting assumptions and time constraints (Haberlin, 2017). The work of collaboration is messy, raveled in the complexities of building interpersonal relationships with general education teachers who may have little training regarding the needs of students identified as gifted and who operate under the pressures of standardized testing, high-stakes evaluations, pacing guides, and the everyday challenging demands of teaching. For collaboration to be more than a just a good idea to meet the needs of students identified as gifted all day every day, it must be executed with deliberate goals with built-in structures and supports. Can it provide an adequate service that helps a child identified as gifted be appropriately challenged and make continual progress? In our experience, *it depends*. For districts which aim to implement similar approaches, it is important to acknowledge and tackle the obstacles of the high demands for time involved in collaboration as well as the varied beliefs, assumptions, and values involved in the interpersonal nature of its process. Because so many students identified as gifted spend most of their time in the general education classroom, collaboration at the classroom level offers great promise in increasing opportunities for differentiated learning. Although the interviewees of this study noted that collaboration alone (in the context of the district's approach) is not sufficient in addressing the needs of students identified as gifted, when collaborative teaching is implemented consistently with students in cluster groups, it has the potential for high-level outcomes for both students identified as gifted and those who are not (Matthews et al., 2007). Paving a clear path embodied in systemic change with a shared vision of success can guide efforts to maximize benefits and minimize barriers for impactful collaboration so that students identified as gifted as well as other high-potential students can progress and thrive in their learning.

Appendix A

Collaboration Survey

Collaboration between gifted education teachers and regular education teachers involves the sharing of resources, instructional strategies, and differentiation practices for advanced learners to make continual academic progress. Please respond to the following questions:

1. What are the benefits for student learning because of the collaboration between regular ed teachers and gifted teachers? Please comment on specific benefits you have directly observed.
2. What supports and structures have been beneficial in making collaboration work well between the regular ed teacher and gifted ed teacher?
3. What are the obstacles that you have encountered during the collaboration process? Please comment on issues that make collaboration difficult to implement.
4. Additional comments (feel free to share any additional opinions, concerns, or insight about collaboration as a service for gifted learners):
5. Would you be willing to take part of a follow-up interview? If so, provide your e-mail:

Appendix B

Interview Questions (E-mail)

Thank you for being willing to participate in the interview. Please comment on your experiences collaborating with classroom teachers (or gifted teachers) to meet the needs of gifted learners:

1. Is collaboration (with classroom teachers/gifted education teachers) an adequate way to meet the needs of gifted learners? Are direct services still needed? Why/why not?
2. What assumptions do you as a gifted teacher have about regular ed teachers (What are your underlying expectations for them?) (Reverse question for regular ed teachers.)
3. What assumptions do you think regular ed teachers have of gifted teachers? (Reverse question for regular ed teachers.)
4. What other thoughts or comments would you like to share regarding your experiences with collaboration as a means to serve gifted learners?


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