

# Merging Expertise: Preparing Collaborative Educators

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## Abstract

In this article, teacher education faculty of a medium-size university, historically grounded in teacher preparation within a rural context, describe their ongoing work to transform their practice in order to prepare special and general educators who co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess with their counterparts in the field. Follow-up research with their graduates revealed insights into the impact of a collaborative preparation model on teachers and students and suggested positive effects on teacher retention problems. These insights inform their continuing program transformation and their recommendations for the field of teacher preparation.

*Keywords:* co-teaching, collaboration, co-placement, teacher preparation

What would it be like if teacher candidates were prepared to negotiate difference as it exists in today's classrooms by learning to operate within collaborative communities of inclusive practice? What would it be like if teacher education modeled a truly inclusive form of educational practice where students "are not seen as disabled, defective, or disordered" but instead viewed as "different, complex, and whole" and "reflecting a diversity of cultural, social, racial, physical, and intellectual identities" (Christensen, 1996, p. 63)? What if teacher education programs helped future general and special education teachers to feel comfortable and capable with such complexity through a preparation model that promoted the merging of their areas of expertise (Altieri et al., 2012)? These were the philosophical questions that were driving us in 2006 as we began to think about transforming our teacher education model.

We knew that co-teaching had proven to be an effective model for promoting the achievement of students with disabilities. Thousand, Villa, and Nevin (2006) and Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) cogently presented their meta-analyses and the documented benefits of collaborative partnerships and co-teaching for students, teachers, and schools. We also knew that, after more than 30 years of calls for collaborative teacher preparation in special and general education (e.g., Blanton & Pugach, 2007; Winn & Blanton, 2005), only a small number of programs had made significant, long-lasting changes to that end. We just had become a unified school of teacher education at Radford University in 2006, but there were still strong ties to program areas, and we were looking for ways to enhance collaboration but keep the distinct practitioner roles of general and special education. Blanton and Pugach's (2007) conceptual models for collab-

orative programs helped us think about how we could integrate our programs and merge expertise, rather than merge programs.

We also were strongly influenced by the realities of the field of special education and those who chose it as a career. In 2008, when we proposed our 325T grant (Project MERGE: Merging Expertise for Results in the General Education Curriculum), a chronic shortage of special education teachers was a major problem in Virginia and the nation. In Virginia, 70% of school divisions anticipated "severe shortages" or "shortages" of teachers of students with "high incidence disabilities" (Virginia Department of Education, 2006).

## Program Description

The purpose of our project was to improve the quality of services and results for children with disabilities, primarily through collaboration. Merging the expertise of our special education, general education, and content-area faculty served what was and continues to be our overarching vision: the preparation of special and general educators who create and sustain successful, equal partnerships to teach all students in the general curriculum.

Through the 325T grant, we designed and implemented an integrated teacher education pilot program based around the Blanton and Pugach (2007) model of integrated teacher education and an expanded collaborative field experience based around the work of Kozleski, Pugach, and Yinger (2002). Our goals were (a) to revise curriculum and requirements so that graduates would meet highly-qualified teacher standards and would be prepared to meet the needs of students from all backgrounds; (b) to recruit, retain, and graduate 20 students per cohort, resulting in approximately 80 new

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teachers who successfully completed the improved program in Years 2 through 5 of the grant; and (c) to develop and implement collaborative induction and mentoring activities that would lend support to new teachers and create mutually beneficial opportunities for professional growth for current and former students, faculty, and cooperating professionals.

The current iteration of the program works this way. Each fall semester, two cohorts comprising both special education interns and elementary interns who have opted for a concentration in special education are co-taught by special education-elementary education faculty pairs. These candidates have taken almost exactly the same general education methods, reading, and special education courses during their junior year. As seniors, members of each cohort are placed in the same schools and participate in a weekly, co-taught internship seminar.

All special education interns are co-placed in general education classrooms with general education interns for a semester of co-teaching. Because elementary interns outnumber those in special education, not all elementary interns are co-placed. They do, however, experience co-teaching opportunities with their cooperating teachers, other grade-level team members, or special education graduate students also placed in the school.

Cohort members are enrolled in the same courses, which embed strategies to support all learners, and have the same schedules and assignments directly related to their fieldwork. The interns receive instruction in co-teaching models and strategies; they create a co-planned, co-taught, co-assessed social studies unit and collect data demonstrating student achievement. Universal Design for Learning and differentiation strategies are also important curriculum components for these interns.

The special education interns move on to a secondary early field experience in the spring, typically with a different faculty supervisor, while the special and elementary education faculty pair remains in place with the elementary student teachers in the inclusive setting. In this way, faculty members continue to build on and enhance collaboration and evidence-based instructional strategies to support all learners.

At the secondary level, we created and refined a course for senior-level general education teacher preparation students who are in their first field experience. The course, "Introduction to Special Education for Secondary Educators," must cover the traditional laws and characteristics but also includes instruction in content enhancement and differentiation strategies and co-teaching. As part of the coursework, students prepare and teach a collaborative lesson with a teacher or fellow course member in their placement school. During their student teaching, a select few of these candidates are paired with special education interns for a co-placement one or more periods a day.

For middle-level general education teacher preparation students in their first field experience, a special education faculty member teaches one or more class sessions of a methods course on content enhancement and differentiation strategies, and co-teaching. Some of these candidates are then selected to be paired with special education interns for co-teaching one or more periods a day during their student teaching.

Although not all special education interns are co-placed during their middle/secondary-level student teaching, all do some co-teaching at that level, whether with a general education candidate or with a general educator in their placement school. Although collaboration between special education faculty and middle/secondary faculty is less structured than at the elementary level, faculty observe and provide feedback to co-placed special-general education pairs. There is obviously more work for us to do at the middle/secondary level, but we have partnered with a small, local school district to create a more systematic, collaborative experience for our candidates and have provided training in collaborative strategies to their teachers.

## Rural Context

Radford University (RU), a medium-size, comprehensive university, is located in the heart of Southwest Virginia. RU has a strong base of teacher preparation students who come from rural areas and, after graduation, work in rural areas. There are eight Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) educational regions in Virginia, and all have rural school districts (VDOE, School Division Menu, 2014). Table 1 shows further evidence of rural context.

## Program Accomplishments

Graduates of our collaborative model have been in the field since 2010, primarily in Virginia schools, although several are teaching in other states, including Illinois, Florida, and South Carolina. Many are teaching in rural school districts, while some have taken the model to urban or suburban areas. Table 2 shows the number of professionals trained in our model to date.

As part of our program evaluation, we wanted to document the impact of the program on the collaborative practices of graduates teaching in the field. Because the most complete and formal version of our model is at the elementary level, we studied the quantity and quality—and the impact on K-12 students—of co-teaching by special and elementary education alumni who were taught in collaborative cohorts and elementary education alumni who were not prepared in collaborative cohorts.

We conducted an extensive review of the research in collaboration and co-teaching and identified key practices, which we used to develop a comprehensive survey and interview tool to study the collaborative practices of our graduates. We distributed the link to the anonymous online survey through multiple means to approximately 340 individuals from graduation years 2010-2012. Eighty-two alumni in special and elementary education participated in the survey, with 49 individuals completing the survey. Thirty-five respondents who completed the survey were from the collaborative preparation cohorts. Below are key findings from the survey.

### *Collaboration on Planning of Instruction*

Sixty-three percent of respondents (40 of 62) collaborated with their general/special education counterpart on the planning of instruction. The most frequent reported collaboration was around the planning of specific accommodations, curriculum modifications, and behavior supports for identified individual students into lessons or units; for this

**Table 1.**

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*The Rural Context of RU's Teacher Preparation Program and Project MERGE*

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Rural Context

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Twenty-five percent of Virginia's population is considered rural, but over 93% of Virginia is rural in nature (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010).

"Southwest Virginia" includes 19 counties and four small cities. With the exceptions of the cities of Bristol and Radford, each of these is primarily a rural area.

Radford is the smallest city in Virginia, population 16,408 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), and its density is due to the student population of RU, 9,798 (Radford University, Office of University Relations, n.d.).

Of 365 open teaching positions in Virginia posted by Teachers-Teachers.com (December 2014), 77 were in special education, and approximately half of those were in rural counties or towns.

Forty-eight to fifty percent of the students in special education and elementary education come from rural or mixed-rural school districts (Virginia Rural Health Association, 2013).

Thirty-four percent of 2010-2013 1st-3rd-year elementary and special education teaching alumni who responded to our survey of collaborative practices were working in rural schools.

In 3 of the 4 elementary schools where we have co-placements, October 2013 figures showed free and reduced lunches at 44%, 52%, and 53%. One of these schools is in accreditation-with-warning status.

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**Table 2.**

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*Number of Professionals Trained in RU's Collaborative Co-placement Model*

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Type of Professional	Number
Special Educators, K-12	76
Elementary General Educators who were in co-placement field experiences	73
Middle/Secondary General Educators who were co-placed in student teaching	20
Elementary General Educators who were taught in collaborative cohorts but who were not in full co-placements	85
Total	254

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element, 53% (21 of 35) reported that they collaborated daily or several times per week and that the quality of this collaboration was either highly successful or making good progress.

*Collaboration on Delivery of Instruction*

Almost 50% of responding alumni (28 of 57) reported collaboration on the delivery of instruction, with the majority

reporting that co-teaching occurred at least once per week. Of those who were using a co-teaching strategy once per week or more, 73% (19 of 26) were using the one teach, one assist model; 72% (18 of 25) were using station teaching; 60% (15 of 25) were team teaching; and 58% (15 of 26) were using parallel teaching. More than two thirds reported that their co-teaching was a successful, equal partnership or that the partnership was making good progress. Reading and mathematics were the subjects most frequently reported as co-taught.

### *Collaboration on Assessment*

Sixty-two percent of respondents (34 of 55) reported collaborating in the area of assessment. Of these, the majority engaged in specific co-assessment activities once per week or more: developing lesson and unit assessment tools, such as tests and project rubrics (60%; 19 of 32); creating testing and grading accommodations for students with disabilities (60%; 19 of 32); observing and gathering student data for progress monitoring and planning of future instruction (82%; 27 of 33); and sharing the actual grading of assignments (56%; 18 of 32).

### *Impact of Collaboration on Students*

One hundred percent of the 32 respondents who co-planned, co-taught, or co-assessed with their special/general education counterparts stated that the classroom performance of at least some of their struggling students and students with disabilities had improved as a result of their collaboration. Seventy-three percent (12 of 32) reported a positive impact on test scores, and 97% (31 of 32) reported significant improvement in classroom behavior and participation.

## **What We Have Learned**

We have learned that the journey through curriculum and practice change truly takes time—many years, in fact. This is our ninth academic year since beginning our pilot co-placement project, and our collaborative model of teacher education is still evolving.

### *The Merging of Expertise and Collaborative Practice at the University Level*

Within the university, we needed repeated opportunities for discussion about philosophy of teaching and inclusion, roles and duties for all faculty members, goals and the steps to take toward those goals, and our different perspectives and backgrounds (general education and special education). We continually revisited how we worked together around co-planning, co-teaching, co-supervision, and co-assessment.

Faculty came into the process open to taking risks and with a willingness to “build the plane while flying it.” This phrase served as a reminder that it was acceptable, and even positive, to move ahead with a vision and to allow the details to emerge as we enacted that vision. This was freeing. We were committed to becoming full teaching partners; we co-planned and co-taught our methods seminar, co-supervised in the schools, and co-evaluated the interns. We wrote and presented together. Our 325T grant funding allowed us to recruit students, obtain ongoing feedback from our stakeholders via an advisory council, change our model, revise and enhance our coursework, engage with general education and

discipline-specific faculty (e.g., English faculty), offer professional development to our partnership schools, and much more. See Altieri et al. (2012) for a more complete description of our early efforts.

Administrator support was key as well. We were given space within our teaching load to share supervision of a cohort. Our collaborative efforts were shared with faculty from the School of Teacher Education and Leadership within the context of transformation of all our practices and the long-term plan that was collaboratively created for the School. Consistency across administration and faculty partnerships would have been ideal, but retirements, transitions to new positions, shifting of teaching and supervision responsibilities, and hiring new faculty all had an impact.

Support from our partnership schools was essential. For the past 17 years, we have been privileged to work within a rural school district that has been committed to inclusive education for a quarter century. In the past, we have partnered with four different schools in this division; we now partner with two of those schools and two in a neighboring division. Each of our partner schools has supported the collaborative placement and co-teaching model, and we have both long-standing and new cooperating teachers who embrace co-teaching. Both school districts have hired many of our graduates, thus helping to embed the model in the divisions’ cultures.

We have learned that sustaining collaborative practice requires passion and commitment. It also requires a mindset that collaborative practices are unique, ambitious, and continually morphing. Collaborative practice requires flexibility, a high tolerance for ambiguity, and a willingness to view slow but steady progress as success. Preparing educators within a collaborative model is time-consuming and requires much more work in teacher education than single-supervision and single-discipline models.

We feel confident that our model is becoming a valued part of our institutional culture. The School of Teacher Education and Leadership (STEL) hired two new elementary education faculty members for the 2014-2015 academic year specifically to teach in the collaborative co-placement model. One of these new faculty members earned a doctoral degree in special education for the express purpose of preparing elementary candidates to work with special educators. Both have classroom experience with co-teaching and are committed to it. They are bridge builders who will help to improve and increase collaborative practices among STEL faculty.

In addition, we now have the curriculum option for dual certification in elementary education and special education. Elementary candidates who complete a concentration in special education may graduate with a BS in interdisciplinary studies and licensure in PreK-6 and add a fifth year with coursework and internships in special education, resulting in a MS in Special Education and licensure in Special Education, General Curriculum K-12.

### *Preparing and Sustaining Collaborative Educators*

We have learned that the majority of teacher preparation students in our collaborative program go on to become collaborative practitioners. In addition to the information gleaned from the surveys, we completed 10 qualitative interviews of 20-30 min each using videoconferencing with respondents

who volunteered to be interviewed after completing the survey. Seven were working as special educators, and three were working as elementary educators.

These graduates indicated that they entered the field with the expectation that they would be working in collaborative relationships in the schools:

When I interviewed with the school, I shared with them my portfolio . . . [which] showed that I had taught in a collaborative classroom. During the interview, they asked me if I would like to continue that work . . . [T]hey had this first grade teacher who also wanted to try it out . . . I think that year worked well because both of us were willing to do it. (third-year special education teacher)

They described looking for teaching jobs where their skills in collaboration would be considered an asset and reported that they both sought out and initiated co-teaching relationships in their schools: “My goal was to really interview the schools and to find a school where they did co-teaching and where the educators are trained in co-teaching” (graduate special education intern, final semester of internship and courses).

In turn, we have found that school districts are beginning to actively look for teachers with collaborative and co-teaching skills:

When I applied for and began my first job, they said they had wanted to push for co-teaching . . . [S]ince I expressed interest, they sent me to training. Turns out it was like a course in what we had learned at Radford. I was like, ‘I know all this and I’ve done all this’. (second-year elementary teacher)

In 2011, we hired an experienced filmmaker and special educator to interview several current elementary and special education interns, as well as alumni of our earliest co-teaching models. This video, *Transforming our Practice* (Radford University, 2012) can be viewed at a private YouTube channel: <http://youtu.be/AIKgJ0DY2MM>. From these video interviews, and from the current study, we learned about the value of collaboration to our candidates, the impact they saw on their students in the schools and on themselves as professionals, and the supports that were key to their success in learning about collaborative practice.

Our graduates noted that they learned from seeing us model collaborative practice through our co-supervision and co-teaching: “For our seminar, our teachers co-teach . . . They want us to use the model, and they are showing that through what they do . . . and setting an example for us” (a co-placed pair of interns, elementary and special education).

We learned that collaborative practice has the potential to sustain and support new teachers: “It has really made me even more excited about teaching . . . It makes me feel like I’m not alone” (first-year special education teacher). Another graduate stated the following:

[I]t allowed me to remain optimistic about the profession. Last year was very difficult for me . . . If anything, being able to do this has given me a renewed sense of hope about my profession and my job and, more importantly, about the kids. I saw the kids unsuccessful last year . . . It’s incredible how, this year, it’s been a positive experience for everyone involved. (second-year special education teacher)

We learned collaboration and co-teaching must be coupled with seeing the positive impact on students in order to sustain and promote collaboration in actual teaching practice:

We went back to the data to see how well the students in the special education program had done with the [Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL)] assessments in math . . . they were about at 30% with no true inclusion or no co-teaching going on for the 2 years prior to my co-teacher and I working together . . . [T]he first year that we worked together, we had 7% of our students who passed the SOLs . . . The subsequent year, we had 100% of the students in the special education program pass their SOLs. (high school special education teacher, now serving as cooperating teacher for our interns)

We have learned that our graduates figure out the “no time for planning” piece that is so often cited in the literature:

The general ed math teacher and I clicked . . . I was super busy, so we really didn’t have the time to plan at school, and that’s where my idea of Google Docs came in . . . How can we look at these plans together, kind of in the cloud instead of being on paper or getting an email attachment? This is something we can work on together, anyplace, anytime. (third-year special education teacher, middle school)

## Concerns

While we feel proud of the results of our research, we must consider some concerns. There were 82 individuals who began our survey but only 49 who completed it. It seemed apparent that once respondents answered no on one of the questions related to co-planning, co-teaching, or co-assessing, they simply stopped responding to the survey (even though we had built in a redirect to the final questions). Over 90% of the individuals who began the survey and did not complete it were individuals prepared as elementary teachers outside our collaborative cohort.

We also must look at these data: 37%, 50%, and 38% respectively did not collaboratively plan, teach, or assess instruction. We learned in our interviews that there are school districts where models of segregated special education still are strongly entrenched and where co-teaching is either not allowed or considered an “experiment.” Pugach, Blanton, and Correa (2011), in their critical look at collaborative teacher preparation programs, cautioned us that the “deeply embedded separation between special and general education” (p. 195) still exists and must be dismantled. We believe our special and general education alumni trained in collaborative practice are the key to bridging this separation.

## Recommendations

Many teacher education programs, including our own, model and provide field experience in collaborative practice and prepare educators who can teach all learners and enhance the academic success of struggling students and learners with disabilities. This has been identified as best practice in teacher preparation thanks to the 325T grant program (Pugach et al., 2011). We recommend that teacher education programs who prepare collaborative practitioners conduct

systematic research to study the collaborative practices of their alumni. Our research was one study, but, overall, there has been little research in this area. We second Goe and Coggshall (2007) and Brownell, Griffin, Leko, and Stephens (2011) who made a number of recommendations urging teacher preparation programs to examine the relationships between the elements and practices of their preparation programs, the actual practices of their graduates as teachers, and the impact on students with disabilities.

In our 325T application, we noted the work done by Billingsley (2004) on teacher attrition in special education. This has not changed. Schaffhauser (2014) noted that retention is a particular problem for schools with high-poverty populations. To curb turnover—especially among new teachers—Haynes (2014) recommended a comprehensive induction

program comprising multiple types of support, including high-quality mentoring and support mechanisms, common planning times, and ongoing support from school leaders. Shank (2005), in a study of what supports new teachers, noted, “Common space, common time, and common work frame the support and learning that new teachers experience in the company of their colleagues” (p. 16). She also highlighted the impact of what she calls “the flow of collaborative energy” (p. 16). In our research, these are the very supports that have emerged from the co-teaching relationships and collaborative practices of our alumni practicing in the schools. Could co-teaching and collaborative practice be the key to teacher retention in special education and in rural schools? Our final recommendation is that the field considers this as an important line of inquiry.

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