ARTICLES

GETTING STARTED WITH COLLABORATIVE TEAMWORK FOR INCLUSION

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This article illustrates the collaborative team process for inclusion as it grew within two schools attempting to improve their efforts to welcome students with disabilities into general education classrooms. Team members learned specialized skills needed for successful collaboration, in the context of bringing about specific changes they deemed critical to the desired outcomes of their own projects.

Educators often are advised to make collaborative teamwork an integral part of school improvement efforts (Fullan, 1993; Hobbs & Westling, 1998; Lawrence-Brown, 2000; O'Keefe & Haney, 1999; Treloar & Patchell, 1999; Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996; Wagner, 1994). Collaboration can facilitate more creative and effective problem solving as well as greater "buy-in" by various stakeholders, as they become integrally involved in the decision-making process (Hobbs & Westling, 1998). Ongoing collaborative teamwork is essential for successful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and critical for schools attempting to "promote the harmonious relations and fruitful collaborations of all peoples" (Paul VI, 1964, para. 16) and act on the teaching of *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework of Access and Inclusion* (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002).

Despite this, ongoing collaborative teamwork is frequently neglected. Educators who are dissatisfied with inclusive schooling efforts within their schools often confess to the woefully insufficient, or even nonexistent, role of collaborative teamwork in their process. As noted by Ayers (1994), "While our times demand collaborative actions, in many cases our training, experiences, organizational structures, and traditions lead us to continue less successful patterns" (p. 5). Specific disincentives include for example,

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troublesome scheduling changes needed to support meetings of stakeholders on an ongoing basis (e.g., common planning time for general and special education teachers responsible for the same students). In addition, effective collaborators are "made, not born" and may require specific staff development to acquire the collaborative teaming skills needed. But is it worth the effort? What specific collaboration skills are needed, and how can they be learned in an efficient and effective manner? And what might the collaborative team process look like as it gets started? This article provides a description of the collaborative team process as it grew within two schools attempting to improve their efforts to welcome more diverse students into general education classrooms. This will be especially helpful for teachers and administrators, who may be recognizing the need for collaborative teamwork in their inclusive schooling efforts, but have little experience with the process.

METHODOLOGY

Participating in this project were general and special educators and administrators who were members of collaborative teams in two schools (see Table 1). Since one of the purposes of the grant through which this project

Table 1

Description of Participants and Projects

	School A	School B
Participants	Science teacher, social studies teacher, special education teacher, guidance counselor, school psychologist, middle school principal.	Grade 1-2 (multi-age) general education teacher, grade 3-4 (looping) general education teacher, grades K-4 special education teacher, grades 7-9 special education consultant teacher, superintendent.
Level	Middle School (Grade 8)	Elementary and Middle School
Years of Experience	Range: 1-22 years	Range: 2-31 years
Project	Expansion of inclusion at the eighth grade level (more students with more challenging problems)	Inclusive school-wide progress report

was partially funded was to improve the quality of inclusive field placements, school districts were asked to participate with those whom the affiliated university had relationships for field placements. Individuals participating in the project were volunteers. The authors provided 8 to 10 hours of training (see Figure 1) and facilitation of the collaborative team process for each group, over the course of five or six work sessions. Work sessions averaged 1 hour and 30 minutes in length (range 40 minutes to 3 hours and 30 minutes) and were spread out over 2 months. The project took place near the end of the school year, in preparation for the next school year.

Sessions were audio taped, and then transcribed. In addition, participants completed a written team process evaluation at the close of each session. Data were reduced by annotating and analyzed recursively in a search for emergent themes and patterns, as well as negative cases (Adler & Adler, 1994).

An advantage of the approach taken here was that specific training in collaborative teaming skills was provided to team members as they worked on tasks identified by the teams as critical to inclusive schooling efforts within their schools (e.g., developing guidelines for curriculum adaptations, reporting progress, etc.). Rather than taking time out to attend isolated, decontextualized in-service sessions then, team members learned specialized skills needed for successful collaboration in the context of bringing about specific changes they deemed critical to the desired outcomes of their own projects.

RESULTS

In the sections that follow, descriptions are provided of collaboration as it existed in the schools prior to the project, the team development process as it developed, and outcomes of the project. Quotes from participants, describing their experiences and exemplifying steps and outcomes of the process, are provided throughout.

BEFORE THE COLLABORATIVE TEAM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Although participants had an appreciation for collaborative teamwork as a valuable aspect of successful educational change efforts, there was little collaboration among team members prior to the project. Communication among team members tended to be friendly, but not necessarily goal directed. For example, a special education teacher commented, "Sometimes [we] would talk, about all kinds of stuff, but we don't always talk about what we need to do, to make sure that 'Child A' is successful, or what we've done that's been good or bad."

Participants also described a lack of shared vision of inclusive school-

ing. As this general education teacher explains, "We all kind of came in [on] different pages and had no idea what was going to happen next year."

DURING THE COLLABORATIVE TEAM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

This section illustrates what happened during the time that the authors met formally with the two teams, including roles as trainers and facilitators, relationships among team members, activities of the team, and specific roles of team members. Also discussed in this section is the major drawback of the project expressed by participants – time.

Authors' roles with the teams. The authors' main function with the teams was to provide training in the collaborative process and teaming skills (see Figure 1). A supplementary role was informal consultation for inclusive schooling practices. A typical meeting involved brief training in a specific collaborative teamwork topic, followed by a work period during which the team addressed specific tasks that they had identified as being important for improved inclusive education within their schools (e.g., developing guidelines for curriculum adaptations, reporting progress, etc.). Collaboration skills also were modeled and encouraged during work sessions (e.g., full team participation, clarifying positions – see Figure 1, section IV), as illustrated here:

> I am hearing a little bit different ideas [from each of you]....Why don't you each go around and say what you think – what's the goal of this?...And what's your vision at this point of how things would look?

Under a traditional staff development model, participants would hear about collaboration skills such as full team participation or clarifying positions at a training session, and then be expected to develop and apply the skills independently back at school. Instead, team members heard brief presentations and then received immediate feedback and guidance from a trainer about their use of collaboration skills, as the team worked on practical tasks needed to effect desired changes.

I. Purpose and Goals of Collaborative Teamwork.

A. Purpose: Improved quality of work, due to synergistic nature of collaboration.

B. Goals:

1. Consensus decision making.
2. A solution all group members can live with--not majority rule. Any group member has veto power.
3. Although it is not necessary for everyone to agree entirely, everyone must be willing for the solution to be implemented and to support the solution for certain length of time. Not everyone has to be actively involved in implementing it, but everyone must agree not to undermine it.

II. Roles of Team Members.

A. Facilitator: Encourages each team member to participate, tries to keep the group working effectively together. Leads the use of problem-solving methods, conflict management strategies, etc. Ensures that the agenda is developed for the next meeting. The facilitator can be one person, or everyone who doesn't have another role may be responsible to help facilitate the meeting.

B. Recorder: Takes public notes.

C. Timekeeper: Keeps track of the agenda and how much time is left, keeps people on task.

D. Observer: Observes behaviors which encourage either task achievement or good working relationships and discusses this at predetermined intervals.

III. Qualities of Effective Teams

1) All opinions are listened to and respected
2) Positions on issues are explained without defensiveness
3) Open to new ideas
4) Willing to go to bat for students
5) Conflict is dealt with openly, honestly, and constructively
6) "Safe" atmosphere
7) Responsibilities are divided fairly, and in a way that takes advantage of each member's strengths and expertise
8) Ability to compromise
9) Education of other members re: own areas of specialty
10) Good communication both in and outside of meetings
11) "We sink or swim together."

IV. Specific Teaming Skills

A. Active Listening

1. Paraphrase the person's opinion who just spoke before stating your own.

2. Integrate what different people have said into a unified summary statement.
3. Use open-ended questions to get more information about someone's opinion. Ex: "Will you tell me more about that?"
4. Support or criticize ideas, not people.
5. Build upon the ideas of others.

B. Group Problem Solving

1. Fact-finding- Examine as much data about the problem as possible.
2. Develop a problem summary statement.
3. Brainstorm ideas without evaluating--write everything down at this stage.
4. Develop criteria for choosing ideas to work with further. Discuss the consequences of the various solutions.
5. Generate ideas to enhance or facilitate implementation of the most promising solution.
6. Devise and implement the plan.
7. Evaluate the plan and the results.

C. Conflict Management

1. Establish ground rules for group interaction. If the group is addressing value-laden issues, then a clearly defined set of values or mission statement needs to be identified.
2. Seeing the issue from someone else's viewpoint.
3. Recognizing the value of divergent ideas in obtaining the best solution.
4. Use "I" messages, e.g., "I feel" vs. "You are..." or "You do..."
5. Summarize discussion and progress, emphasizing agreements while acknowledging areas still needing work.
6. Check for group acceptance of summary.

Figure 1: Collaborative Teamwork Training Topics (Ferguson, Meyer, Jeanchild, Juniper, & Zingo, 1992; Morton et al., 1991)

Relationships among team members. Significantly, team members involved in this project seemed already comfortable with each other on a personal level; there was a good deal of joking and socialization during meetings, although not to the exclusion of progress on the agenda. An additional feature that seemed instrumental to the success of the team was the routine involvement of an administrator in project meetings and the teachers' apparent comfort with this.

Activities of the teams. Common activities of the teams included analyzing past efforts, setting goals, and troubleshooting. For example, an elementary teacher commented, "We have not accomplished goals in the past because we lacked direction. Now we have a direction to follow." Another general education teacher explained:

> It's proactive instead of reactive….Everything was reactive when it first started. Because it was like…you know, "I could have changed <u>that</u>."…And then [the special education teacher] was like "All right…we've got to do something different for these guys here…so let's do <u>this</u>….Whereas now we're actually doing it [proactive planning] in the beginning."

Rather than merely waiting for problems to occur then, teams began to look ahead to try to resolve potential problems in advance.

Roles of team members. One of the strategies that teams were encouraged to use was identifying structured roles for team members that rotated among members from meeting to meeting (e.g., facilitator, time keeper, recorder, observer – see Figure 1, section II). There were two benefits of this strategy; the first was ensuring that someone actually did keep track of the time, record notes, and facilitate the team process. The second benefit mentioned by participants was gaining a better understanding of what it was like to be responsible for various aspects of team functioning, especially when members took on roles that typically had been performed by someone else. Here a general education teacher illustrates this development:

> Being timekeeper has forced me to realize that I jabber way too much, because I was timekeeper, yet I'm the one that was continuing to draw this on and on and on. And so…I had a little self-reflection here, too.

On many teams, fulfillment of these important roles is left to chance, waiting for someone spontaneously to both recognize the need and volunteer to fill the role. More often, however, no one fills the role unless there is a conscious, ongoing effort on the part of team members to ensure that someone is assigned to each role. In many team meetings, no one, for example, takes responsibility to redirect the team when the discussion gets off track, resulting in enormous amounts of wasted time. As another example, often the same person is repeatedly left to fill the same role, such as developing the agenda, or recording public notes. In this case, the other team members may have little appreciation for or understanding of responsibilities in which they have played no part.

Drawback of collaborative teaming: Time. As with so many other projects, finding the time to meet was the major concern team members expressed about their participation in this process. As a principal observed:

> I think time was our biggest problem. And as [another team member] said, we gave a lot of time, but I…feel we haven't given enough time because the task is big….I certainly feel better about having spent the time than I would if we hadn't done it, but I also think that it's a big job….We could've spent weeks at this.

As will be illustrated in the next section, although time was the main drawback of the collaborative teamwork project, team members identified many important outcomes from their participation that made the time investment worthwhile. Also significant here is this principal's recognition that the task is incomplete – that although important gains have been made, significant work remains for the collaborative team.

OUTCOMES OF COLLABORATIVE TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Participants identified the following outcomes of their work in collaborative team development: role clarification, acquisition of skills needed for effective collaborative teaming, development of shared vision, development of a schema for curriculum modifications and reporting progress, self-confidence in and enthusiasm for inclusive schooling efforts, a plan for expanding inclusive schooling efforts, and satisfaction with and commitment to a collaborative process. Each of those outcomes will now be illustrated.

Role clarification. A common concern in any significant change effort is deciding "who does what" under the new system. Participants in this process were able to come to consensus about roles for various team members in their inclusive schooling efforts (see Figure 2).

- General education teacher
  - As leader in prioritizing curriculum content
  - Responsible for grading
- Special education teacher as leader in adapting curriculum, instruction and materials
- Special education aide available to assist the team generally
- Psychologist & guidance counselor
  - As leaders for behavioral supports
  - Available for routine collaboration meetings
- Principal as leader with other staff, but not solely responsible for communication re: inclusion pilot project, mission statement, etc.

Figure 2. Role clarification example.

The clarification process for this group tended to diffuse leadership in various areas among the team members, rather than assigning any particular team member as primarily responsible for inclusion. This included the team as a whole taking a leadership role with other staff, as portrayed here by the principal:

> We've created a core of people….We've reached some sort of common understanding I think in this group – and now maybe these people will be good ambassadors and they'll go out and pass on the common understanding to other people on the faculty.

The roles identified by this group for various team members as they pursue their efforts toward inclusive schooling are likely to be subject to ongoing revision, negotiation, and fine-tuning. It is important to note that collaborative teamwork must not be a one-time event, but will be required as an ongoing aspect of productive inclusion efforts as teams contend with important, yet difficult issues such as fair and appropriate division of labor, instructional modifications, or diffused leadership.

Development of collaborative teaming skills. Participants identified several specific skills that had been developed as a result of their work in the project (see Figure 1, section III):

- *Integrating what different people have said into a unified summary statement*. An important skill in helping diverse groups of people come to consensus is the ability to draw the common threads of various perspectives together into a cohesive whole. The following comment illustrates how the facilitator summarizes the remarks of several previous speakers: "So tell me if I'm hearing this right. A broad statement about the ultimate mission, like, you know…this is the goal…this is what we hope to see happen…is that what you're talking about [developing]?" Another important aspect of this comment is the attention given to checking for group agreement with the summary statement.

- *Facilitating involvement by all team members*. In many groups, a few, relatively assertive team members dominate discussion and decision making. The contributions of quieter members are lost, and members who have not actively participated in decision making may be less committed to implementing those decisions. Here a quieter member of the project comments: "One benefit is the process [each member specifically asked to comment, "round-robin" style]. I tend to be more of a – oh, maybe, onlooker you know sometimes….So I thought that was beneficial." (General Educator)

- *Program evaluation.* Assessing the effectiveness of past efforts was an ongoing effort throughout the project, and formed a foundation for recommendations for future efforts. One special education teacher commented: "Now I know what I need to fix. I've had the opportunity to try [inclusion] without as much of…the modifications, the curriculum, and the instruction and I know now what I need to fix….This really forces us to take a good hard look at what we do and what's right and what's wrong."

- *Conflict management skills.* An important aspect of conflict management is the recognition that divergent opinions are necessary for the group to find a high-quality solution. Here a general education teacher comments: "It's good to see opposing opinions."

- *"We sink or swim together" outlook.* As described by Ayers (1994), "the parties perceive themselves and each other as having a stake in the outcome, and, thus, each are willing to be responsible and accountable for its attainment" (p. 5). Students with disabilities cannot attain expected outcomes through the efforts of special education teachers working alone, particularly when the students are members of general education settings. Here a special education teacher observes:

> Sometimes I feel like I'm solely responsible for making sure that my special ed. students are successful and that their needs are met and that their behavior is under control….But, like now I feel like you know, as a team, we can all take a look at a child and say, "OK come on, let's do this." OK, he's gonna need X, and you know, here it is….And that's good.

In this case, the collaborative team process seems to have mitigated at least to some extent the sense of isolation sometimes associated with a special education teacher's position in a school.

Development of a shared vision. An important outcome of the process was open communication, facilitating the development of a shared vision among team members. Here a principal comments:

> I think it's a really good opportunity to share opinions and lay cards out on the table about how you feel. And then listen to other people's perspectives on how to approach this and hopefully come out with something at the end that everybody feels pretty comfortable with and then can market. So I think that's been a huge benefit.

One of the teams decided to create a formal mission statement to reflect the shared vision of team members and assist their communication with the rest of the faculty and parents. Following is their statement:

> We believe all students can succeed when provided equal access to curriculum. With a proper support system, and modification of the general curriculum, students may receive worthwhile instruction while becoming better prepared for…exams. Higher expectations will equal higher results. (Collaborative Team)

Philosophy for curriculum adaptations. A guiding philosophy for curriculum adaptations was identified by one team, consistent with the expectation that all students should be working for higher standards. This team agreed that every piece of curricular content was not equally important, and decided to identify and prioritize the "big ideas" of curricula (Friend & Bursuck, 1999) as part of an already scheduled summer curriculum project. These "big ideas" will then help focus the energy and resources of the team on the most critical concepts and skills, during ongoing planning and decision-making for specific modifications needed during the school year.

System for reporting progress. Grading is an issue that all collaborative teams for inclusion must face; one team prioritized the development of a school-wide report card system. The system that they devised is uniform through all grade levels in the building, parallels assessment data, and clearly communicates achievement for all students. This example illustrates an important outcome of inclusive schooling – that changes needed for inclusion should be approached from the perspective of improving the educational system for all students (Halvorsen & Neary, 2001).

Self-confidence in and enthusiasm for inclusive schooling efforts. The mood of participants was decidedly upbeat at the conclusion of the project. Here a special education teacher and a general education teacher comment:

- Special Education Teacher: "I feel now more than ever like I can do this….I think we can do this."
- General Education Teacher: "Now it's powerful – I mean you guys have done a heck of a job….[It's the] last day of school and I'm already like, 'Ok, I'm gonna try this and that,' and I've got my books with me, and I'm like 'ooh, hoo!' And yesterday, I was like 'Oh, get me outta here.'…I think we're gonna have a lot of success with it. I think it's gonna make me a better teacher, overall. For all the students, not just the [students with disabilities] – because it forces me to look at my entire curriculum and revamp what I'm doing and there's always room for that."

In this comment as well, the concept is illustrated that changes needed for inclusion can result in positive change to the educational system for all students.

Satisfaction with and commitment to a collaborative process. These educators, while acknowledging the ever-present issue of time, came away from the project very pleased with their efforts in collaborative teamwork; each team was able to accomplish goals they had deemed critical to their inclusive schooling efforts. An elementary teacher noted, “More has been accomplished in 2 months than in 2 years.”

However, as noted by Hobbs and Westling (1998), “Inclusion is a process, not an event” (p. 18). The collaborative efforts presented here appeared to be a significant help, but should not be viewed as a panacea. Collaborative teamwork needs to be a routine part of inclusive schooling, supported by common planning time for team members. In addition, these educators volunteered to participate in the project, had some experience with inclusion, and were considered ready for this project by at least one administrator.

The renewed confidence in their capabilities as inclusive educators expressed by participants, along with mutual respect for team members, are critical aspects of successful efforts toward inclusion. Importantly, team members also expressed a commitment to continuing the collaborative team process:

> I don’t think we’re finished yet. You know? I think that, as we get down to, deeper and deeper into the nitty gritty of procedure and process…I think that then we’ll also have an opportunity to share, “This is how I think we ought to do it.” And how you think we ought to do it and reach some sort of medium ground there and – I don’t think it’s over. I just think we’ve set the climate so that it can continue to happen….To me it’s kind of like, a realization of something I’ve known is the right thing to do for a long time, and haven’t had the time, or the push that I needed to sit down and make it happen. (Principal)

The goal of this article is to illustrate the processes and outcomes associated with these schools’ initial efforts to incorporate collaborative teamwork into their inclusive process. Although collaborative teamwork is increasingly recognized as a critical aspect of inclusive schooling efforts (Halvorsen & Neary, 2001; Treloar & Patchell, 1999), instruction in collaborative teamwork skills has not been a traditional feature of teacher preparation or staff development programs. Contextualized teacher preparation remains uncommon, whether at the preservice or in-service level. A very important aspect of the project was providing training and guidance in collaborative teamwork skills in the context of the teams’ work on specific tasks necessary to improve their inclusive programs. By incorporating this feature, other would-be collaborators might also help maximize the benefits of staff development, through guided use of newly trained skills in context.

DISCUSSION

According to the National Catholic Educational Association (1999), "inclusion fosters collaboration – general and special education teachers, with parents-working together for the common good of all students, especially those with varying exceptionalities. Inclusion implies preparedness – continuing education and ongoing communication are its hallmarks" (p. 1).

In addition, educators need to understand the benefits of inclusion. Contrary to common assumptions, students with disabilities do not usually learn more in self-contained special education classrooms; equal or superior results are obtained when appropriate supports are provided in general education classrooms (Affleck, Madge, Adams, & Lowenbraun, 1988; Banerji & Dailey, 1995; Bunch & Valeo, 1997; Cole & Meyer, 1991; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Ingraham & Daugherty, 1995; Logan & Keefe, 1997; Lipsky & Gartner, 1995; Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1993; McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998; Schulte, Osborne, & McKinney, 1990; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998; Wang & Birch, 1984; Willrodt & Claybrook, 1995). Of course, educators are also concerned about the progress of students without disabilities; here the outcomes research is equally reassuring, with equal or superior academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for students without disabilities in inclusive general education classrooms compared to non-inclusive classrooms (Holloway, Salisbury, Rainforth, & Palombar, 1995; Peck, Donaldson, & Pezzoli, 1990; Salend & Duhaney, 1999; Sasso & Rude, 1988; Sharpe, York, & Knight, 1994). Educators cannot be expected to make a commitment to understanding the "how" of inclusive schooling without first understanding the "why," yet many staff development efforts continue to overlook this important understanding.

Other strategies helpful for development of effective collaborative teams include:

- Rotating roles (e.g., facilitator, recorder, timekeeper, observer) among team members from meeting to meeting.
- Working from an agenda and distribution of minutes that identify specific tasks, staff responsible, and target dates.
- Self-evaluation of team functioning on a routine basis. Collaborative team self-evaluation tools are available from a variety of sources, including the Institute on Community Integration (n.d.).

The importance of administrative support in this process can scarcely be overestimated. Of course, this will include both "talking the talk," and "walking the walk." Among the important administrative activities associated with effective collaborative team functioning are: periodic involvement in team meetings, encouragement and reassurance for both staff who

are enthusiastic about inclusion and those who are more reluctant, and provision of resources. The National Catholic Educational Association (1999) emphasizes that promoting "inclusion without providing the resources needed to make it work effectively for students and teachers offers a false promise of improved opportunities…and a strong possibility for disruptions in the learning environment" (p. 1).

The most important resource for collaborative teams is common planning time; without it, even the most enthusiastic teams are likely to fail. Other important resources are staff development (as noted previously) and flexibility in areas such as scheduling and acquisition of materials. For example, it is helpful to allow a small amount of the supplies budget to be available as petty cash during the school year; it is a rare team that can anticipate all of the needs of an included student for adapted materials at annual requisition time.

Collaborative inclusive schooling efforts are particularly relevant to the mission of Catholic education. According to the National Catholic Educational Association (1999):

> All Catholic school educators [need] to open their minds and hearts and doors to an increasingly diverse world. Certainly part of this diversity is made up of children who have been gifted by God with special needs.
>
> Appropriate inclusion recognizes and affirms the unique learning styles of students with varying exceptionalities. It is within this context that children with special needs are welcomed into the Catholic school community….Inclusion is not a program or placement. Inclusion is the philosophy of teaching that relies on the abilities of educators to promote an environment that respects and reverences the rights of all students to learn in regular education classrooms in Catholic schools. (p. 1)

Because of the spiritual as well as the secular rationale, Catholic educators are likely to feel an obligation to set good examples of effective collaboration and inclusive schooling for students, parents, and the larger educational and social community, even more acutely than educators in secular settings. It is noteworthy that "the first school system that made inclusion a policy for every child in its care" was the Roman Catholic School Board in Hamilton, Ontario, dating back 32 years and drawing visitors from around the world (Pearpoint & Bunch, 2003, p. 17).

In closing, while effective collaborative teamwork is an important part of any school improvement effort, it is critical for inclusive schooling efforts. Because of its complexity, an educator working independently at inclusion is likely to be left feeling alone and uncertain. A strong collaborative team process, however, is associated with educators' comfort with inclusion (Lawrence-Brown, 2000) and facilitates positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities alike.

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