

Preface to the Second Edition

Special education teachers collaborate with adults in schools every day. Using collaboration as the basis for job pride and satisfaction, special education teachers can be roughly classified as one of two types of people at different points in their careers:

- *It's All Right With Me!* "I am so glad I took this job! I never thought I'd have such a sense of professional fulfillment so early in my career. I leave my building each night reflecting on the differences we make in the lives of our students. I love working with Jessica, Harold, and Satish. I can't wait for Monday!"
- *Working on the Chain Gang.* "Why did I ever take this job? I can't remember a day when I didn't feel disappointed, frustrated, or angry with Jessica. Harold and Satish aren't much better. Every weekend is the same—Saturday, I'm rushing around catching up on my life, Sundays are spent preparing for the week and thinking about how much I hate my job and especially Jessica. When the alarm clock goes off on Monday morning, the only good thought is 'Maybe Jessica will call in sick today.'"

The first edition of this book was written nearly a decade ago; this edition is being published 30 years after the passage of P.L. 94-142. However, the need for this book and the questions it raises still exists. Its audience remains teachers who want to improve the ways they work with others in schools who want to get off the "collaboration chain gang."

Can anything be done when essential collaborative relationships are unsatisfactory? Yes! This book was inspired by projects that master's students in special education (many of whom were already teaching) developed to answer this question.

- They learned that they did not have to suffer through the agonies of unfulfilled or difficult relationships with others in their educational settings.
- Students designed and carried out projects to change their professional interactions.
- The satisfying outcomes they achieved (and their resulting astonishment) have been the catalysts for this book.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS

This book gives special education teachers (as well as those preparing to be special education teachers) realistic tools to incorporate into day-to-day working relationships

with fellow teachers, para-educators, and administrators. Ideas presented in this book can be used to improve successful collaborative teams and work with family members.

This book was written because other books focusing on collaboration often presume that if teachers become better problem solvers and develop their communication skills they can effectively collaborate. This book takes a very different approach. It presumes that it is naïve to assume that problem solving or communication skills alone are adequate resources for teachers to overcome collaboration barriers. In this book, better communication skills are a subset of what teachers need to learn, and to use, to collaborate. Other, more substantive strategies are provided. After completing the main project and try-outs, special education teachers and preservice teachers will have a sophisticated set of collaboration insights and capabilities.

This book has a clear point of view. It is structured around a presumption that a collaboration project will take place.

- Special education teachers who pick this book up on their own can use it for self-study.
- Special education teachers who decide to use this book for professional development can use it as the basis for a year-long program.
- Instructors teaching special education teachers in training can use it to structure a course on collaboration.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

This is not a “typical” collaboration book. It has three presumptions:

1. The collaboration project will be the focus of the professional development activity.
2. In most cases, when a professional relationship is unsuccessful, one person in the relationship is more motivated to make changes than the other. It offers the option of shared work on a relationship but focuses on the circumstances in which many teachers find themselves: another person is driving them crazy (or underperforming, or distant), and something has to change. Odd is the notion that “collaboration” can be the primary responsibility of one person in a relationship, but that is the underlying assumption of this book.
3. The book assumes that people reading it are ready to change their attitudes and their behaviors. The relationship upon which they are focusing does not have to be terrible—it could be just getting bad, or it could be new. But if you picked up this book looking for a “quick fix” for a collaboration challenge, you had best put it down and find another one.

SPECIAL FEATURES

This book contains the following special features:

- Text and data-based selections from among the more than 1,000 collaboration projects completed by students in college classes

- Text box “voices” of teachers expressing a wide range of thoughts and feelings, frustrations and successes experienced when collaborating
- Up-to-date references throughout the book, including an overview of literature on collaboration (Chapter 1) and the legislative context for collaboration (Chapter 2)
- Idea Try-Outs: Step-by-step reflection activities designed to promote independent, innovative thinking about collaboration
- Project Try-Outs: Step-by-step research and interview activities designed to give teachers structured, focused ways to test their collaboration skills
- Collaboration notebooks are referred to, so that teachers can systematically record their progress
- Preparation, implementation, and analysis of a collaboration project (Chapters 3 to 10). Teachers at any stage of their career can benefit from this book’s focused method of improving a collaborative effort
- Generalization beyond the collaboration project to work with members of families (Chapter 11) and interdisciplinary teams (Chapter 12)

AUDIENCE

This book has been designed for three primary audiences and a fourth secondary audience:

- *Audience 1:* A multi-session professional development series sponsored by a school or district for special education teachers who are interested in improving their collaboration relationships.

- *Audience 2:* Traditional undergraduate and graduate special education teacher preparation programs. Students can best benefit from this book if they are familiar with assessment techniques. Special education teachers-in-training who are close to graduation and special education teachers who are returning to school for advanced coursework can use this book.

- *Audience 3:* Self-study by special education teachers. A collaboration resource network (see Chapter 6) would provide peer counsel. This book could give an independent teacher the structure to use to turn around working relationships at school.

Individuals who are “on their own” have written to me about their success in using this book for self-study. Sufficient materials are provided in the book to enable this approach to work for the motivated reader.

- *Audience 4:* General educators can use this book to examine how their collaboration with others (special educators, general educators, administrators) could be improved.

FOR THE SECOND EDITION

For the second edition, a complete revision of the entire book took place, including the addition of over 400 new articles, books, and Web sites pertaining to the topic. Every line of text of the first edition was reviewed and updated. Chapter 2, focusing on the legislative context for collaboration, was completely revised in collaboration with Dr. Maureen Griffin, University of Wisconsin, Whitewater.

PREMISE AND APPROACH

This book emphasizes *empowerment of special education teachers and teachers-in-training, giving them the motivation, understanding, and skills needed to analyze and improve collaboration relationships*. Full-time teaching requires educators to collaborate every hour of every day with others in their schools (i.e., paraprofessionals, co-teachers, and administrators). The book integrates practical exercises with discussion of relevant research, maximizing the probability of successful collaboration.

After completing self-assessment and assessment of their environments, teachers develop an individualized collaboration project. They can carry out their project in any of a variety of settings—in practica, work, or volunteer settings. The collaboration project helps teachers to generate options that they can use to think and act differently in the collaborative relationship. The collaboration project can take place even if those who are the focus of the project are not similarly motivated toward collaboration. Outcomes of the collaboration project include (a) an improved collaborative relationship, (b) familiarity with literature related to collaboration, and (c) familiarity with a skill set. All three of these outcomes will lead to heightened professionalism and efficacy.

SUMMARY

This book can help teachers who are learning how to collaborate to become curious, self-motivated learners. The long-term benefits of effective collaboration are worthwhile, as shown in the following excerpts from two points in a collaboration project journal:



At the Start

This project is not going very well. I don't seem to be very enthusiastic about it and I'm not sure how to do it. Sally is confused about everything, and I don't know how to explain things differently. I would rather keep things as they are and not do this project.

Later On

I am so glad I chose Sally as the focus of my project. I appreciate what she does for me and the wonderful attitude she has about life in general. I realize that I never noticed this before because I was annoyed at her for little things she did or didn't do. I see that Sally is very good at following a set of instructions that have been thoroughly explained to her. I realize now what I have to do differently. What a change this project has made in my life! (Weisberg, 1995)

This book helps people approach collaboration with optimism, skill, and direction.