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## Flexible Facilitation: Coaching and Modelling to Support Inclusive Education

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## Flexible Facilitation: Coaching and Modelling to Support Inclusive Education

### Abstract

The practices of education, such as separate and resource placements, pull-out services, scripted intervention programmes, an emphasis on diagnoses, and behaviorist discipline practices, are not conducive to the goals of inclusive education. This study demonstrates how one instructional coach worked to disrupt traditional special education practices and guide special educators towards the use of more effective research-based instructional strategies and collaborative practices to promote inclusion. Using Robert Stake's intrinsic case study methodology, we explored the perceived roles of coaching and modelling to promote inclusion through the lens of one coach who modelled methods for the special education teachers in multiple general education classrooms. The following themes emerged from the multiphase analysis of data collected throughout the coaching project: coaching as flexible facilitation, coaching as recognition of existing good practice, coaching pedagogical decision-making, coaching instructional reflectivity, and coaching collaborative partnerships. Coaching and modelling for special educators are recommended for promoting inclusive education as they embrace the complexity of changing classroom practice and can enhance collaborative instructional practice.

### Keywords

inclusion, coaching, modelling, case study

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## Flexible Facilitation: Coaching and Modelling to Support Inclusive Education

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The practices of education, such as separate and resource placements, pull-out services, scripted intervention programmes, an emphasis on diagnoses, and behaviorist discipline practices, are not conducive to the goals of inclusive education. This study demonstrates how one instructional coach worked to disrupt traditional special education practices and guide special educators towards the use of more effective research-based instructional strategies and collaborative practices to promote inclusion. Using Robert Stake's intrinsic case study methodology, we explored the perceived roles of coaching and modelling to promote inclusion through the lens of one coach who modelled methods for the special education teachers in multiple general education classrooms. The following themes emerged from the multiphase analysis of data collected throughout the coaching project: coaching as flexible facilitation, coaching as recognition of existing good practice, coaching pedagogical decision-making, coaching instructional reflectivity, and coaching collaborative partnerships. Coaching and modelling for special educators are recommended for promoting inclusive education as they embrace the complexity of changing classroom practice and can enhance collaborative instructional practice.

*Keywords:* inclusion, coaching, modelling, case study

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“Build a rapport of comfort and trust with your teachers. Don't take it personally if they don't want to open up right away. Teachers are not that different than students; they all have different needs and will be coached on different things in a variety of ways. Be flexible.”  
(Stephanie, member check interview)

Since its inception, the federal legislation governing special education has emphasized access to the general education curriculum for children with disabilities (Musgrove, 2017). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 initiated the inclusion of students with disabilities in state-wide testing. More recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 strengthened the right to access by continuing to hold states responsible for the progress of students with disabilities with state accountability measures (National Council on Disability, 2018). The continuing focus on states being accountable for all students has resulted in increased recognition of the need for collaboration among general and special educators, as well as the need to rethink traditional approaches in the field.

In *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education*, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) put forward recommendations for promoting the inclusion of children with disabilities that require a reconceptualization of general and special education. UNESCO has suggested that this can only be accomplished by

merging the separate systems of general and special education, further stating that “The recognition that inclusive schools will not be achieved by transplanting special education thinking and practice into mainstream contexts opens up new possibilities” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 33). We agree that traditional practices of special education (separate and resource placements, pull-out services, scripted intervention programmes, emphasis on diagnoses, and behaviorist discipline practices) are not conducive to the goals of inclusive education.

Within the United States, it is estimated that, among K–12 students, 5% (2.5 million students) require intensive academic interventions (Peterson et al., 2019). A recent review of special education research findings indicates that many students with disabilities stagnate or fail to make gains despite intervention efforts (Lemons et al., 2016). There are two major views on how to respond to this persistent challenge: further specialize the role of special educators such that they are viewed as diagnostic interventionists or, as we contend, enhance the special educator’s instructional and collaborative repertoire within general education settings.

Historically, proponents of the specialist and diagnostic pedagogy approach have argued that the intensity of specialized and individualized intervention required for students with disabilities cannot be provided in a general education classroom (Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2002; Fuchs et al., 2014; Lemons et al., 2016). On the other hand, many have observed that the promise of traditional approaches to special education has been largely unfulfilled and that inclusive approaches must be considered at all levels (Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2012; Nind & Wearmouth, 2006; Norwich & Lewis, 2005). In our view, this begins with challenging the practices of special educators – turning them away from a prioritized focus on diagnosis and intervention, and towards facilitating student engagement in the general education curriculum via research-based instructional practices and collaborative strategies. This may be done more or less intensively given the individual needs of the student. In this article, we provide educational leaders with an insider’s perspective on how an instructional coach worked to challenge traditional special education practices and guide teachers towards the use of more effective research-based instructional strategies and collaborative practices.

## **Literature Review**

Here we explain the nature and benefits of pedagogical coaching as it has been used within general education and the need for similar coaching within special education. However, there is a notable gap in the literature with regard to coaching in special education as compared to general education, which features coaching for reading, science, math, and other content areas. In our experience, the gap in pedagogical coaching for special educators likely occurs because significant compliance-related pressures are placed on special educators. We argue that pedagogical coaching that is focused on instructional and collaborative practices is necessary for special educators to make sound decisions and efficient use of their time in the classroom. As an added benefit, we assert that with these improvements special educators may feel an increased sense of autonomy – a factor that impacts their intentions to stay in the field (Conley & You, 2017).

### ***What Is Job-Embedded Professional Development?***

There has been a shift over the past two decades away from the traditional one-day workshop model to a focus on “enhancing teachers’ knowledge of how to engage in specific pedagogical skills and how to teach specific kinds of content to learners” (Wei et al., 2009, p. 3). This has led to the use of school-based coaching as a model to support both special and general educators in their professional development. When providing coaching as a model, there are six components to consider. These include sufficient duration, collective participation,

content focus, coherence, active learning, observation and feedback (Faraclas, 2018). Before implementing any type of coaching as a model, it is important to plan out the length of time the coaching will take place (when, how often, and for how long). All stakeholders involved must agree to participate; without the full support of all members, the coaching may be ineffective at reaching the desired outcomes. When planning, there also needs to be a clear focus and coherence to state and district standards (Faraclas, 2018). Lastly, active learning through participation, practice, observation, and feedback are needed to support the coaching as a model and highlight effective collaboration among special and general educators.

### ***What Are Coaching and Modelling?***

There has been a recent shift towards requiring increased collaboration among special and general educators, which can be seen in the growing literature (Bennett, 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; Karten, 2013; Marx et al., 2020) on the effectiveness of coaching and job-embedded professional development for teachers. Designing and implementing an educator-centred instructional coaching practice mean embracing the complexity of changing classroom practices (Eisenberg et al., 2017). Coaching focuses on the implementation and analysis of teaching (Showers & Joyce, 1996). It involves a coach who is able to facilitate change in the coachee by means of a reciprocal relationship of equal status (Jones et al., 2016). Coaching does not include hierarchical supervision, but rather focuses on expanding classroom practice by improving the practice of teaching. Coaching has been employed to support more inclusive practices in schools (Bennett, 2016; Karten, 2013). As Bennett (2016) has suggested, “Coaches recognize that the inclusive practices of educators change when they have opportunities to engage in transformative learning by reflecting on and challenging their beliefs” (p. 898). In a Canadian research study, the teachers’ established views of inclusion needed to be addressed through the coaching cycle. Striker et al. (2012) have highlighted the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers, including these key factors:

- (1) on-going emotional and technical support at the classroom level; (2) a forum through which to articulate and understand their beliefs, and how those beliefs influence daily practice; and (3) professional learning that is student-focused. (pp. 1048-1049)

Coaches are seen as nonthreatening agents of change when they work with classroom teachers in a collaborative manner, such that classroom practices are the focus of the coaching and improved student outcomes are the ultimate goal of both the teachers and the coaches (Karten, 2013). In their seminal work, Joyce and Showers (1982) highlighted the importance of and potential for coaching. They recommended a “coaching environment” in which each member of the faculty is seen as a colleague’s coach: “If we had our way, *all* school faculties would be divided into coaching teams who regularly observe one another’s teaching and provide helpful information, feedback, and so forth” (Joyce & Showers, 1982, p. 6). This includes both special and general educators working collaboratively to support one another’s ability to provide all students with an inclusive learning environment.

### ***Special Education Teacher Coaching***

Coaching is often used when preparing novice special educators during their preparation programmes. According to Peterson-Ahmad (2018), “Exposure to early and multiple instructional coaching experiences helps to prepare pre-service educators to more thoughtfully meet the many demands in today’s schools” (p. 2). In our experience, however,

once special educators begin teaching, instructional support shifts to more traditional professional development practices focused on compliance and remediation. However, as remediation programmes and data-based decision-making processes have become increasingly complex, there has been recognition of the need to coach educators to ensure implementation fidelity. As such, the National Institute for Intensive Intervention (Marx et al., 2020) recently published a guide for coaching within the context of tiered intervention support models (response to intervention, positive behavioral support, and multi-tiered systems of support). Beyond this guide, there is a paucity of research on coaching-based professional development focused on inclusive practices.

The professional development needs assessment survey of special educators conducted by the CEC (Bullock) in 2018 identified the major concerns keeping special educators awake at night, with coteaching featured as one of the top five concerns. Another Council for Exceptional Children survey of special educators indicated that, in terms of collaboration, “A majority (79%) noted that they had no time or insufficient time to plan lessons and work with teaching partners, while only a few (21%) rated the time as sufficient” (Fowler et al., 2019, p. 15). Even with adequate time and support, collaborative or “coteaching” approaches as described by Friend (2015) may not be a cure-all. Some researchers hesitate to recommend inclusive practices such as coteaching, citing the following concerns: (a) a lack of studies confirming causal inferences between the collaborative approaches and student outcomes; (b) over-reliance on the one teach/one assist model; (c) lack of planned and intentional small group instruction; and (d) coteaching not involving specialized instruction designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Lemons et al., 2018).

With regard to instructional practices, only half of respondents of the Council for Exceptional Children’s State of the Field Survey felt very competent with skills such as designing differentiated and individualized instruction, using culturally relevant strategies, and working in accordance with coteaching models (Fowler et al., 2019). These data show that special education teachers could benefit from professional development on collaborative approaches and research-based instructional practices. The survey also indicated that only 28% of special educators received coaching support (Fowler et al., 2019). We contend that coaching should be considered an integral part of the professional development of special educators to strengthen their collaboration with general educators for a more inclusive experience for all students.

## **Background**

In the fall of 2018, a large suburban school district in Southwest Florida initiated a pilot project to improve instructional support for students with disabilities in two elementary, one middle, and one high school. The district chose to focus on developing special education teachers’ use of collaborative practices (Friend, 2015) and research-based instructional strategies (Marzano et al., 2001) in general education classrooms. Prior to the 2018–2019 school year, the district conducted an informal survey to gather input on areas of professional development related to research-based instructional strategies. Survey results indicated that many special education teachers seemed unable to describe how to implement research-based practices that support inclusion and asked for more personalized assistance in learning how to implement these practices. In response, the district designed a coaching and modelling project to address these needs. The district administrator selected the schools after inviting school principals to voluntarily participate. The district hired third-party coaches to work with the special education teachers through the spring of 2020.

In their weekly visits, the coaches informally observed, coached, or modelled methods for the special education teacher in one or more general education classrooms, adjusting in

real-time depending on the activities occurring in the classroom. The district requested that the coaching and modelling occur in the general education setting. However, there were instances when a special education teacher provided instruction or intervention to small groups of students in an adjoining space or a separate classroom. The coaches worked with the special education teacher in these settings if requested to do so by the special education teacher or school administrator. Following this, the coach and special education teacher would meet to collaboratively discuss what had happened, and the coaches would often discuss the instructional strategies and collaborative practices encouraged by the district. The coaching and modelling professional development format that the district employed can be described as job-embedded professional development (JEPD), consisting of “(1) on-going emotional and technical support at the classroom level; (2) a forum through which to articulate and understand their beliefs, and how those beliefs influence daily practice; and (3) professional learning that is student-focused” (Strieker et al., 2012, pp. 1048–1049). The district chose a JEPD approach to assist the special education teachers in developing their collaborative skills and knowledge of research-based instruction.

As skilled listeners with recent teaching experience in schools, the coaches were able to provide empathy and encouragement to the special education teachers who felt overwhelmed or frustrated in their roles or when trying new practices. As non-district personnel, the coaches were able to maintain confidentiality when they provided emotional support and made it a point to recognize and celebrate the special education teachers’ efforts and successes. Technical support was provided to the special education teachers to assist them in developing schedules or in finding resources to ensure that they could most efficiently provide services to students as required by their individualized education plans (IEPs). In the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) survey of special education teacher preferences regarding the delivery of professional development, in-person support was considered preferable (Bullock, 2018). Such support is thought to be beneficial and necessary for special education teachers who are charged with shifting their thinking about how they work with the general education teachers in their schools to promote inclusion (Strieker et al., 2012). Our study of this initiative was guided by the following research questions:

### ***Research Questions:***

- How did the coach perceive her role when coaching and modelling methods to promote inclusion?
- How did the coach support decision-making in a coaching and modelling inclusion project?
- What did the coach do to support the facilitation of inclusion?

### **Researcher Context**

As members of this research team, we are teacher educators and researchers with extensive teaching experience in PK-12 special and general education settings. Additionally, we all earned our doctorates from the same Exceptional Student Education Program in Florida that emphasized the critical analysis of current issues related to equity and disability. We have all taught in differentiated higher education settings across the United States. In addition, the fourth author has experience teaching in an international higher education institution. As such, we entered this study as teacher educators who acknowledge the current state of inclusive education around the globe. We recognize the dire situation many states and nations are facing in relation to teacher shortages and inadequate teacher preparation. Ultimately, we came together as a team to explore sustainable approaches to in-service professional development

that models best practices aimed at enhancing inclusive education for students with diverse needs.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Design***

This study employed a qualitative single case design in an attempt to explore the perceived roles of coaching and modelling to promote inclusion through a district-based initiative. We selected this design as we aimed to understand coaching and modelling and provide “thick description” of the coach’s experience within the context of this specific initiative. More specifically, through the use of Robert Stake’s intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995), we aimed to understand the intricacies of coaching and modelling to support inclusive practices for students with disabilities. According to Stake, a case is specific, complex, and bounded (1995). The case in this inquiry was selected and is bound by the participant’s role as a coach in the district’s inclusion initiative. The selected case was viewed as an exemplar from the two-year project and focuses on the second year of coaching and modelling, which followed the district’s one-year pilot of the coaching project.

### ***Participants***

The participant in this study, Stephanie (pseudonym), was selected for this study as she was considered an exemplary coach throughout the district initiative, going above and beyond the perceived expectations for coaches, and has extensive experience in the field. Stephanie has a master’s degree in collaborative teaching and learning, as well as certification in elementary education. She has 17 years of experience working in highly diverse Title 1 schools. She has taught multiple subjects to children with autism, hydrocephalus, specific learning disabilities, significant challenging behaviors, and to children learning English as a second language. She was selected to serve as an independent contractor for this coaching project based on her experience with coteaching, her dynamic teaching style, her in-depth knowledge of elementary school curricula and instruction, and her ability to effectively coach and mentor other teachers.

In the project, Stephanie’s role was to serve as a coach to the special education teachers in her assigned elementary schools. As a coach at each school (during fall and spring), Stephanie worked with eight special education teachers. All of these teachers were encouraged to become inclusive educators by the school district – and were expected to collaborate with general educators to instruct students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting. Stephanie spent one full day onsite for 16 weeks, splitting her time between each teacher, thus spending approximately two hours per week with each teacher. Additionally, she communicated with teachers by email and telephone for planning and mentoring purposes. Coaching outside of school hours was optional for the teachers; however, the majority of teachers engaged Stephanie for her support during this time as they worked through various challenges they were facing in their classrooms.

### ***Funding***

In an effort to ensure transparency, it is important to note that the participant served as an independent contractor, while another author served in the role of project coordinator and was also an independent contractor. Both individuals received a stipend from the school district for their work and for travel to and from school sites. While the two individuals received a

stipend for their work as coach and coordinator, respectively, this research and all research-related activities were not funded by the district. While this study was not funded by the school district, it was funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University, through the Group Research Project, under grant number (RGP.1/290/42).

### ***Data Collection***

This study was conducted in compliance with the university institutional review board approved protocol guidelines. Throughout this process, consent was obtained from the participant for access to her coaching records, end of year survey, and member checked interview. All identifiable information was removed from the coaching records during analysis and pseudonyms are used throughout this publication in order to uphold confidentiality of the teachers and coaches. Furthermore, this study was conducted based on the existence of a school district initiative aimed at increasing inclusive practices for students with disabilities. As such, district approval was provided for this study.

Coaching records were used to investigate the perceived roles of coaching and modelling to promote inclusion. These records were considered for this study as they provided an insider's perspective and snapshot of the experiences Stephanie had as a coach throughout this initiative. Each record, completed after each of Stephanie's coaching sessions, included anecdotal notes, a summary of joint discussions focused on what went well as well as areas for growth, and an action plan for the next coaching session. A total of 109 records were collected and analyzed throughout the fall and spring semesters. In addition, the participant engaged in a member check discussion, which served as a triangulating data source in this study. In compliance with the institutional review board approved protocol, all records used in this study were provided to the research team throughout the duration of the school initiative. Further, when conducting a member check discussion with Stephanie, verbal assent was obtained and her written feedback on this publication considered.

### ***Data Analysis and Trustworthiness***

Throughout this study, the research team employed qualitative data analysis procedures to identify understandings and interpretations of Stephanie's experiences as a coach. Specifically, the team used a collaborative three-phase analysis, which included initial and values coding (Saldana, 2016), as well as member checking (Stake, 1995) to ensure trustworthiness. In the first phase, the first and second author conducted independent coding of Stephanie's coaching entries. This phase was broken into multiple rounds of analysis with approximately 20 entries in each round of coding. After each round, the two researchers met to discuss their current coding system and emerging themes, and to discuss next steps in the coding process. After five rounds of initial coding were complete, the researchers met to solidify their themes.

Given the large data set, the first and second author determined that to increase the study's trustworthiness, an outside collaborator was necessary to support the second phase of analysis. In this phase, the third author independently coded a subset of Stephanie's coaching records, which consisted of 25% of the full dataset, randomly chosen from Stephanie's 109 coaching records using Microsoft Excel's random numbering function. The random numbers associated with the records were then sorted from smallest to greatest. The third author received 25% of the randomized data set. The team then met to discuss the third authors codes and themes, as well as the themes that emerged from the first phase of analysis. The team collaboratively discussed the themes using Saldaña's (2016) recommendations for team coding via intensive group discussion recognising "dialogical intersubjectivity" (2016, p. 6). Through

this process, the team interpreted and synthesized the themes that emerged throughout phases one and two of the data analysis process.

The third phase of analysis focused on triangulation and trustworthiness. According to Stake (2006), triangulation is the process used to “assure that we have the picture as clear and suitably meaningful as we can get it, relatively free of our own biases, and not likely to mislead the reader greatly” (p. 77). Furthermore, Tracy (2010) has suggested that trustworthiness or credibility in qualitative research is achieved through providing thick descriptions, triangulation, and member reflections. To achieve this, the team met with Stephanie to discuss the themes the team identified from her coaching records. The team presented the themes and encouraged Stephanie to provide her thoughts in response to each theme while engaging in intensive group discussion (Saldaña, 2016). Stephanie took an active role in the member check interview and provided additional insights that charged the team to further refine their understanding and framing of the themes.

## Results

Analysis of the coaching records indicates that Stephanie consistently performed the expected roles of a coach for the special education teachers (e.g., establishing communication protocols, meeting and debriefing, identifying and addressing needs). However, she also took on multiple roles and responsibilities that went beyond or varied from the coaching expectations. The themes that emerged from analysis of the coaching records, described below, include the following: coaching as flexible facilitation, coaching as recognition of existing good practice, coaching pedagogical decision-making, coaching instructional reflectivity, and coaching collaborative partnerships.

### *Coaching as Flexible Facilitation*

The complexity of the special education teacher’s role cannot be overstated. Special education teachers often report being stretched thin, which is to be expected given that they provide services to students with varying needs across multiple classrooms and/or grade levels (Fowler et al., 2019). Stephanie appreciated the openness and commitment of the special educators participating in coaching. She often helped them streamline their service provision, problem-solving, and scheduling issues, modelling instructional techniques as needed, as illustrated in this quote about a special education teacher who was collaborating with a general education teacher:

Paula needs the gift of time. We will be pulling several students into Ms. Drake’s 2nd grade class during the math block. She will have a total of 7 kids in her group, but will be able to have them for almost an hour, instead of hopping around from class to class for 20 minutes a piece. Paula will preview the lesson beforehand and will have math manipulatives at the ready. I will model cooperative learning structures when it is appropriate. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 9 - 9)

During the member check discussion, Stephanie described her role as that of a “flexible facilitator”. On a micro level, she provided coaching and modelled for her special education teachers regularly, often finding time and ways to engage with her teachers despite the numerous disruptions caused by the constraints of their special education teacher roles (testing, meetings, training, etc.).

Janelle was grade level testing all day. I helped her craft a new schedule (she's absorbing Paula's 2nd graders), test her kids, and find phonemic awareness activities for her RTI block. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 7 - 7)

In addition to being flexible on a micro level, Stephanie served as a “flexible facilitator” on a macro level when working with the school administration to arrange for an upper grade-level special education teacher, as well as when working with her collaborating general education team to take a field trip to another school to see a different and highly effective collaborative and instructional model in action.

At [the school they visited], the teachers seamlessly transitioned from teaming to station teaching. The student groups were well supported and flexible. During the debrief the teachers showed us how they track data and use it to drive their daily instruction. 16 of the 29 students have special needs, and they had over 70 percent proficiency on their first math quarterlies; among the highest in the grade level. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 8 - 8)

During her member check discussion, Stephanie shared that her hope in arranging this experience was to show the team that a few adjustments to their current way of work – specifically, making use of different collaborative structures and instructional strategies – could have a tremendous impact on their current processes and student outcomes. She also confirmed that the school principal invested in this opportunity and participated in the field trip, further demonstrating the importance of administrative buy-in.

### ***Coaching as Recognition of Existing Good Practice***

Stephanie worked with each special education teacher individually to further the district’s goal of increasing special education teachers’ use of instructional and collaborative practices. In terms of effective practices, she was impressed with the special education teachers’ existing classroom management, accommodations, differentiation, and provision of behavior supports, such as in the case of the following example:

Went well: differentiation of quiz review to meet student needs. Student R had a larger print. Extra time was given for review, able to dive deep into the standard, fraction chart visual was used to help identify equivalent fractions, Student J got very frustrated at one point and Ms. Lucas handled the meltdown with positive reinforcement. (Stephanie, Coaching Record GW: 8 - 8)

Stephanie also noted that one teacher team was exemplary in terms of collaborative teaching practices, use of multiple coteaching approaches, flexible grouping, and resources.

Went well: Kyle and Ms. Gregory have a SOLID grasp on what collaboration looks like. Ms. Gregory explained the lesson goals and outcomes, Kyle taught the whole class the gestures for cause and effect, then the teachers split off from teaming to parallel teaching. Kyle’s group was doing the same work as their peers, but had accommodations such as a graphic organizer partially filled in using SnapType Pro, and Wiki sticks to "underline" text evidence. In his RTI group he used a "Popsicle stick clothes pins" manipulative to build words. The students had to work in pairs and take turns being the builder or the scribe. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 8 - 8)

This team was also adept at integrating technology into its collaborative lessons.

Went well: ...Each table had a book that the class had previously read, and two iPads. They used the program Padlet, and all worked together to find the theme of the story, write their own, then collaborate and decide how to write a sentence that represents what they both thought... Students were engaged and collaborative. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 8 - 8)

Notably, this general education classroom had the greatest number of students with individualized education plans across the grade level. However, the general education teacher and the special education teacher had a few years of collaboration experience and were on pace and on par in terms of achievement with the rest of the grade-level classrooms. In fact, Stephanie commented that “you could not tell which students had IEPs and which did not” (Stephanie, member check interview). Her coaching for this special education teacher consisted of moving him from an “A” to an “A+” through the incorporation of more cooperative learning and non-linguistic representations (Stephanie, member check interview). Subsequently, this team became a model for collaborative teaching practice that was shared throughout the district.

### ***Coaching Pedagogical Decision-Making***

Stephanie also noted some areas of practice that could be improved upon among the special education teachers. First, many of the special education teachers struggled with pacing during lessons, using questioning techniques or wait time, and setting high expectations for their students. Some needed to learn how to design and facilitate small group lessons to promote engagement and build effective collaboration between students. Other special education teachers struggled with being able to finish intervention programme lessons in the allotted time frame. Some also lacked confidence in showing initiative and being flexible in collaborative relationships with their general education counterparts (discussed more in the next section). These were all areas in which Stephanie worked to stretch and coach the special education teachers in order to improve their practice.

To help the teachers move beyond their current practices, Stephanie coached and modelled how to make data-based decisions, helped with implementing and adjusting interventions, and demonstrated research-based teaching approaches. Additionally, Stephanie helped establish a fluency intervention involving student-led data tracking for a grade level teacher whose students were struggling in this area:

Students were highly invested in the process, all fluency went UP, and so did their confidence. Candice will be emailing or texting parents with pictures of their child's bar graph to keep the momentum going. Grow: continue to be consistent with this intervention, which we have nicknamed, "Fluency Fridays" from now on. (Stephanie, Coaching Record GW: 13 - 8).

Another special education teacher needed guidance on how to promote literacy for all students during the school's dedicated silent reading and intervention time known as the “IRLA block.”

Tanya ... had good organization this week and a clear purpose. Room to grow: We need to revamp her IRLA block. Some of her students are just sitting there, so I suggested that we pull four or five kids that aren't ready for independent reading. Tanya can do a group read aloud and have all five kids take a quiz on

the iPad. They can start earning points and feeling successful. In her tier 3 group we discussed how to make the "Power Words" activity more engaging... (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 8 - 8)

It was a shift for this teacher to understand that she could find an alternative way to use the school's IRLA block. Stephanie coached her through approaching the school principal to gain permission to make this modification for these students (which the principal readily approved). Similarly, special education teachers needed to be empowered to streamline how they provided services, which would determine their daily workload.

Paula has convinced her team to combine some of her students during the math block so that she can work with them for longer chunks of time. Paula and I will be parallel teaching math in Drake's class next week with these extra students. If this is successful, she may be able to do this for ELA in the upcoming weeks, especially if the teachers stay close to the same lessons. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 9 - 9)

The special education teachers clearly faced pedagogical challenges when serving students with IEPs in general education settings. Stephanie took a methodological approach, modelling a few times, but then expecting to see the practice implemented.

I will model a guided reading lesson for one more week, with a focus on graphic organizers and compare and contrast. The following week I will coach her through the guided IRLA block as SHE leads it. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 9 - 9)

As the teachers' confidence grew, Stephanie worked with them to layer on additional skills, and strategies while helping them see the impact of their efforts with the children they were serving.

Karen was already doing monthly fluency checks to progress monitor, but she really likes the graphing and HOT read component to the new fluency plan. SIPPS went well. Kids were more on task and really breaking down the words. Much improvement on vowel sounds. (Stephanie, Coaching Record GW: 8 - 8)

Having a coach such as Stephanie available to notice issues, provide gentle critiques, and suggest or show possibilities seemed to help the teachers grow in their practice, resulting in real changes they could see in their classrooms.

### ***Coaching Instructional Reflectivity***

Professional reflectivity (Schön, 1983) is a skill that is vital to developing sound judgements about which instructional or collaborative practices will be most effective given a particular lesson objective or student learning need. When Stephanie coached, she made a point to also model and discuss her thinking and decisions with the special education teachers. Through these discussions, she modelled how to be a more reflective teacher.

Janelle liked my expression, and the kinesthetic "muscle" gestures that I used when explaining to the kids how fluency works in our brain. She liked my directness with the kids about the data; being logical with it - like a problem to

be solved, not emotional about making mistakes. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 8 - 8)

In another instance, Stephanie modelled completing a 3-Act mathematical task for the whole group. Afterwards, in the discussion among her, the special education teacher, and the general education teacher, the teachers highlighted the benefits of 3-Act tasks and noted how the standard being taught that week was not in the lesson plan Stephanie had been given prior to the session.

Went well: high level of math talk and critical thinking, and great pacing. Room to grow: making communication with the General Education Teacher clear. Making sure the 3-act task matches the standard. The lesson plans indicated that the students were learning about area this week and they were not, making the 3-act task less effective. We treated it as a preview of content. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 7-8)

In this example, Stephanie modelled how to pivot and grow from a lesson that was not as effective as hoped. Just as she discussed the data with the students in a matter-of-fact way, when speaking with the teachers she made a point to underscore the need for clear communication and being on the same page when planning.

### ***Coaching Collaborative Partnerships***

Stephanie worked with the special education teachers to encourage them to take initiative to collaborate and implement new practices that would benefit all of the students, as well as to make inclusion of their students more productive. Helping them work collaboratively with their general education counterparts and other staff was an important component of this work. One challenge that some of the special education teachers faced was how to collaborate and serve students in general education classrooms when the general education teacher lacked classroom management skills or had not structured the space to effectively accommodate small group work. Such small groups, consisting of students (with and without disabilities) who needed additional support or reteaching, were often pulled to the side or back of the classroom during the guided practice or work portion of the lesson. In one instance, the special education teacher gained confidence and took charge even when the teacher was out of the room.

Ms. Mathews was out at a training, so Janelle (who is gifted in classroom management) really helped the substitute get ELA stations going in an organized fashion. We were able to get through 3 or 4 rotations by the end of the block with minimal behavior barriers. Ms. Edwards is feeling overwhelmed by stations. This is largely due to a lack of structure. I suggested implementing a task list to help students with their executive functioning skills... (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 8 - 8)

This opportunity allowed the special education teacher to report back to the general education teacher about what worked and gave her the confidence to be able to work with the general education teacher on implementing such practices more frequently. Building professional collaboration often also involved Stephanie modelling how to work with the general educators to determine ways to improve collaboration and inclusion.

I worked mainly with Candice's fourth grade teachers today. They needed some coaching on how to restructure their room for more effortless teaming, and how

to make independent task time in ELA and Math more effective. (Stephanie, Coaching Record GW: 7 - 7)

In another situation, the special education teacher needed to learn to delegate some work to the instructional assistants (IAs), also known as paraprofessionals.

ELA scores were low across the grade level based on the quarterlies. Lisa will train the IA to begin fluency plans for struggling readers across the grade level. I will model more Marzano strategies in small group, which will give Lisa the confidence to roll it out in whole group. Next week I will coach Lisa through her ELA/Science infused block. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 9 - 9)

Another barrier to using collaborative approaches (approaches such as station teaching) involved planning. Stephanie helped one special education teacher see that, once set up and established in the classroom, station teaching could be easily maintained with brief conferences about grouping decisions and materials development.

Went well: flexible grouping, prepared stations are so convenient and make it easy to pop in and support. Room to grow: Have a conference with teacher before stations that week and decide on which station to go to and who will be in that group would be a more strategic way to meet needs. (Stephanie, Coaching Record RN: 8)

Building professional collaborations and ensuring the special education teachers had confidence in their new (or refined) pedagogical and decision-making skills empowered them to show more initiative. They came to see how their increased participation in the instructional and decision-making processes benefitted their students and allowed students to overcome many of the barriers they typically faced.

## Discussion

It is important to contextualize this study within the ongoing international debate about the role of special educators and special education pedagogy. The findings from this study suggest that we should question the need for specialized approaches for children who learn differently. Prominent special education researchers in the field contend that special education teachers need to serve in ever more specialized roles and primarily focus on intensive data-based diagnosis and intervention (Fuchs et al., 2014; Lemons et al., 2016; Lemons et al., 2018). However, Nind and Wearmouth (2006) have suggested that there is a “history of faith in special procedures and approaches conducted in special settings or by special teachers” (p. 116) that should be questioned. There have been arguments in the literature about whether a “special” pedagogy for working with students with disabilities exists (Norwich & Lewis, 2005). Some scholars (Porter, 2005; Ware, 2005) have argued that rather than any separate specialist pedagogy, there is a continuum along which “generic strategies ... are geared to difference by degrees of deliberateness and intensification” (Norwich & Lewis, 2005, p. 215). We believe that the priority of special educators should be developing their repertoire of instructional and collaborative strategies, which can then be informed by student progress and outcome data rather than becoming more specialized.

Regardless of where one stands in relation to this debate, it is clear that special educators make many decisions throughout the day, the most important of which may be how to balance coordinating and providing services to students. Additionally, special educators must decide

where best to provide the services that students need to be successful in the inclusive setting. To that end, the core of our data suggests that special educators lack confidence, not in themselves, but rather in their understanding of their roles and responsibilities. To address this foundational challenge, Stephanie worked to instil in her special educators the understanding that they hold as much decision-making power as the general education teacher when designing, choosing, or reworking instructional decisions. Additionally, the data suggest that special education teachers lack initiative to advocate for effective instructional or collaborative practices to support their students. We contend that this lack of initiative is not inherent to special educators, but is a result of their uncertainty regarding their roles and responsibilities.

Throughout the project, Stephanie prioritized the message that special educators should not dwell on the mistakes they made or the areas that could be improved. Specifically, Stephanie provided the teachers with the space to reflect, set goals, and “try again next time”. Such a shift in thinking is rarely natural for special educators, as time constraints, continual movement from one room to the next, and scripted programmes limit the availability and perceived necessity of engagement in critical reflection. As such, we suggest that these factors, repeatedly noted in the literature (Fowler et al, 2018; Karten 2013) and evident in this study, impact not only service delivery, but also special educators’ ability to engage in or prioritize critical reflection on issues of equity, access to the curriculum, accommodations and materials, readiness, and other factors.

Collaborative relationships between special and general educators, which are a key component of promoting and facilitating inclusion, can be challenging and complex (Faraclas, 2018; Fowler et al., 2018; Karten, 2013). This may be partly due to the barriers that special education teachers face daily, such as those of time and movement described above, but is also due to how special education teachers have been trained and socialized as specialists in schools, which impacts their confidence, willingness, and ability to collaborate in new ways with general educators. As Stephanie coached and modelled, she kept the idea of inclusion and the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities at the forefront of her mind, which may not be the default perspective of special and general educators. Challenging teachers’ existing patterns of practice and building collaborative partnerships is difficult, but as the exemplar teachers Stephanie identified and the school she took a team to visit illustrate, the practices she promotes can become second nature and subsequently prove extremely effective.

### ***Limitations***

This study was employed as a single case study in line with Stake’s (1995 & 2006) approach to case study. As such, this study embraces the notion that the study, in its entirety, may not be generalizable; however, that as readers there may be portions of the study or findings that are applicable in a given context. As such, we do not view our sample size as a limitation, but rather an opportunity to gain a “thick description” of the case. Further, this study embraces the notion that the district initiative in this study may not be perfectly replicable as there are a multitude of resources that were available for the initiative as well as the study. To that end, we recognize that this study is limited to one case, in one district with teacher and administrative buy-in, and in one geographical location and that each of these characteristics may be viewed as limitations to this study.

### ***Implications***

In considering the coach as a flexible facilitator, we suggest that professional development interventions should aim to meet teachers where they are in their knowledge and practice. For example, Stephanie modelled how to be flexible by readjusting schedules as

required and prioritizing the work needed in the moment versus the work that was originally planned for the lesson, as well as by stepping in to model specific teaching strategies as needed. Reflecting a similar mindset to that required of special education teachers, who need to be flexible and responsive when teaching students with a variety of diverse needs, she modelled, helped to set goals, organized a field trip, and used her knowledge of best practices to support each special education teacher with whom she worked.

The findings in this study appear to indicate that district leaders must work to increase special educators' sense of autonomy in schoolwide and classroom instructional programmes or decisions. Furthermore, district leaders should consider providing professional development for special education teachers in the form of coaching and modelling opportunities that focus on pedagogical decision-making, instructional and collaborative techniques, critical reflection, and, of course, building trusting relationships with general educators and school administrators.

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