

# Collaboration Between Special and General Education Teachers: A Systematic Review

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**Abstract:** This systematic review endeavored to obtain a deeper understanding of how collaboration between special and general education teachers functions and to construct a series of recommendations on how teachers can best implement collaborative practices with their colleagues for the benefit of students with disabilities. We examined the literature that met our research criteria to determine whether there are common factors that influence special and general education during the collaborative process. A search of the educational literature was performed using the following databases: Saudi digital library, PsycInfo, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search was limited to studies published from 2002–2022 and used the keywords “collaboration,” “special education teacher,” general education teachers,” and “inclusion.” Ultimately, 17 studies were identified, and our examination of each of these found certain common themes, including that collaboration between special and general educators positively affects students’ academic outcomes. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are presented in addition to the data obtained from each of the identified studies.

**Keywords:** collaboration, special and general education teachers, inclusion.

## 1-Introduction

A comprehensive education system with a diverse group of learners requires collaboration between all program staff and educators to best serve students (Alghazo & Alkhazaleh, 2021). Although such partnerships are beneficial to all students, they are especially important in the case of students with disabilities. In fact, research has found that the lack of collaborative effort and staff preparation can negatively impact the implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs; Ledoux et al., 2012).

As schools increasingly seek to implement inclusive programs, it is necessary that educators are supported with training and professional development so that they may work together successfully to meet the needs of every student in the inclusive classroom (Blask, 2011).

Collaboration between special education (SE) and general education (GE) teachers is of particular significance to the success of inclusion and key to ensuring that effective teaching strategies for all students are implemented (Collaboration Writing Team & CTE Resource Center, 2007). Moreover, GE teachers cannot meet the requirements of all diverse learners, including those with IEPs, without the support and cooperation of their SE colleagues (Daniels, 2017; Landever, 2010).

## Benefits and Best Practices

Collaborative practices vary, but often are focused on the successful development and implementation of the IEP (Boehme, 2020). However, it is important that collaboration also involve efforts that serve not only students with disabilities but also their peers without disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Therefore, GE and SE teachers may also collaborate on the construction of lesson plans and through practices such as co-teaching (Boehme, 2020; Friend & Cook, 2006). As Friend and Cook (2006) stated, not only can co-teaching be used to meet the different needs of all students, it also allows both teachers—typically one GE and one SE instructor—to diversify teaching strategies and methods to achieve a more successful inclusive classroom. Research has also identified methods for improving collaborative practices between SE and GE teachers, including: (a) expanding upon the settings in which GE and SE teachers work together (e.g., staff meetings, lesson planning, student assessment, etc.); (b) professional development for both GE and SE teachers on inclusive teaching methods and strategies as well as how to work together to develop and implement IEPs; and (c) encouraging dialogue between students’ current and past teachers to collaborate on best practices and intervention efforts (Daniels (2017).

The purpose of this systematic review is to obtain a deeper understanding of how collaboration between SE and GE

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teachers works and how teachers can best engage in collaborative practices. Moreover, this systematic review examines whether there are factors that influence and impact both SE and GE teachers during the process of collaboration. With these goals in mind, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1. How does collaboration between special and general education teachers work and what forms does such collaboration take?

RQ2. What are the benefits of collaboration?

RQ3. What factors impact collaboration between special and general education teachers?

## 2-Methodology

### Research Method

In a systematic review, the researcher searches the available literature to locate papers representative of the topic of investigation, using a set list of inclusion and exclusion criteria to locate the most appropriate works.

### Procedure

#### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

The inclusion criteria for this systematic review were:

1. Studies that examined collaboration between general and special education teachers.
2. Studies published between 2002–2022.
3. Only peer-reviewed articles published in scientific journals.
4. Studies that employed either qualitative or quantitative research.
5. Studies that were conducted in schools where students with disabilities are educated in inclusive general education classrooms.
6. Articles written in either Arabic or English.

Studies that were published before 2002 and studies that were not yet available online and that had a future publishing date of 2023 were excluded from the study. In addition, if a study was in a language other than English or Arabic, it was excluded. Finally, any study that consisted of a systematic review were excluded.

#### *Keywords and Databases*

To conduct this search of the educational literature on teacher collaboration, the following keywords were established: “collaboration,” “special education teacher,” general education teachers,” and “inclusion.” Next, these terms were run in the following databases: the Saudi Digital Library, which is a national electronic library; PsycInfo, ERIC, and Google Scholar (See Table. 1).

**Table 1:** Summary of Criteria for Article Selection

Criteria	Evidence Articles
Search engines	Saudi digital library, ERIC, and Google Scholar
Access	Yes
Publishing Period	2002–2022
Type of article	Evidence article
Language	English, Arabic
Field	Education

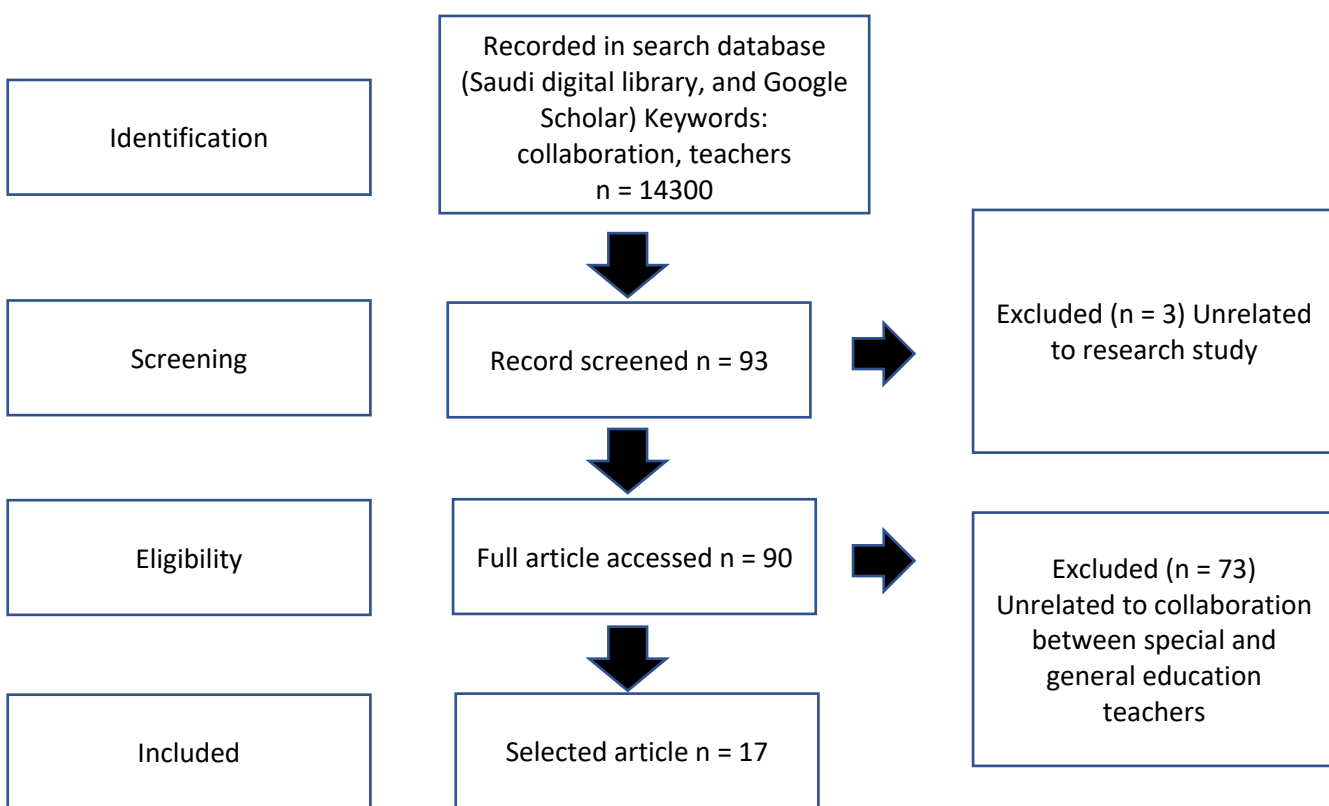
#### *Search Method*

In order to conduct a thorough and comprehensive search, we first entered the following information at the search function of each platform. The parameters for the publishing period were 2002–2022 and we limited the search to only those articles published in either English or Arabic. The subject field was designated as “Education” and we limited the results to only those that had been peer-reviewed (see Fig. 1). Since the established keywords were designed to return the largest number of articles, before the search was begun, we also determined how the initial pool of studies would be reduced to only those relevant to this specific investigation. After the initial search was complete, if the results involved more than 50 studies, additional search terms were added (such as "school administrators" and "special education classroom") to narrow the pool of studies. Once the search results numbered 50 or less, the titles and abstracts of the studies were

manually reviewed to determine if they matched the inclusion criteria required for this study. If necessary, the text of the study was accessed to further confirm that the work was relevant to this systematic review. After this process was implemented with each of the results obtained from each of the search engines, the lists were compared so that any duplication could be eliminated.

### 3-Summary of the Search Results

The search of the Saudi Digital Library returned about 162,000 peer-reviewed, scientific articles from various countries and in several languages. Next, the search was conducted on the database of the American Psychological Association, APA PsycNet; this search returned 41 articles. Our search using ERIC returned about 14,300 articles. As with the initial pool obtained from the search on the Saudi Digital Library, it was necessary to greatly reduce this search result in order to identify a manageable number of relevant articles. This process was made more difficult by the fact that ERIC restricts access to certain items. The problem with this search engine is that the researcher was not able to obtain new studies and articles, and he was also unable to obtain some studies that talk about the factors affecting the cooperation between the special education teacher and the general education teacher. Finally, Through the scientific researcher, nearly 9,000 scientific articles were obtained related to this topic, which is the cooperation between the special education teacher and the general education teacher. Through this search engine, the researcher was able to access a number of studies, while he was unable to obtain other studies due to requirements related to registration and membership.



**Fig. 1** Flowchart of Selected Article Selection

### Characteristics of the Studies

Some of these studies talked about the impact of cooperation between teachers in general and the school administration and the impact of this cooperation on the student's academic and behavioral outcomes. Before identifying the common themes of the studies, the characteristics of each were extracted and catalogued. Regarding the participants in these studies, the majority were SE teachers. The research methods and tools used in these studies varied. The largest number ( $n = 8$ ; 47.09%) employed a qualitative approach; five (29.41%) used quantitative method, and just four (23.53%) employed mixed methods. Furthermore, the studies utilized different data collection instruments, such as questionnaires and interviews. for example, the one-case study and the structured and unstructured interview.

## 4-Results

Once the final pool of 17 articles had been established, relevant data from each was extracted (see Table. 2). Next, each study was read in order to identify common themes in the research on SE–GE teacher collaboration.

**Table 2:** Review of the studies carried out with Collaboration

Study	Participant(s)/Setting	Research design/Instrument	Findings
Al-Natour, Amr, Al-Zboon, & Alkhamra (2015)	<i>N</i> = 368 participants (male = 102; female = 266)  Mainstream schools in Jourdan	Mixed methods research that utilized survey and semi-structured interview. teachers, identified through sampling method were surveyed; of these were interviewed.	1. There is a low level of cooperation between GE and SE teachers. 2. There is poor communication between teachers linked to several factors: high teaching load, lack of awareness of the importance of cooperation, lack of teacher training, negative attitudes regarding working with students with disabilities, and lack of support from school administration and parents.
Alghazo & Alkhalaleh (2021)	<i>N</i> = 135 teachers (75 GE teachers; 60 SE teachers)  Abu Dhabi school district	Quantitative research that utilized a 10-item questionnaire designed by the researchers.	1. Cooperation between the SE and GE teachers is of an average level. 2. There was no statistically significant difference found between teachers on the basis of gender. 3. There were statistical differences found between teachers based on level of educational achievement.
Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay (2002)	12 interviews; 20 focus groups;  Four inclusive high schools	Mixed methods research that included qualitative semi-structured interview with 12 teachers; 20 focus groups; and a quantitative survey was conducted.	Different factors affect the success of collaboration: planning time for educational teams, communication through meetings, supporting teaching and learning in the classroom, and creating a school-wide culture for participation. And serve all students, establish a structure to support cooperation and inclusion
Razalli, Hashim, Mamat, & Ariffin (2020)	<i>N</i> = 70 SE & GE teachers in an inclusive classroom setting  Malaysia	Quantitative research that utilized a questionnaire developed by Milteniene & Venclovate (2012), which was adapted by the researchers.	The study established three areas felt to be key to collaboration. Findings were that for the areas of knowledge and willingness, levels were high; the third area of attitude was found to be at a medium level.
Tzivinikou (2015)	<i>N</i> = 30: (male = 3; female = 27)  15 pairs of GE/SE co-teachers	Quantitative analysis of the teachers' self-evaluation rubrics.	The study was implemented subsequent to the teachers attending in-service training on "effective instructional skills." Results indicated "that in almost all cases, the collaboration between the pairs of educators was improved, they applied the in-service training knowledge in order to meet the different needs of all students, using the most effective strategies and procedures" (p. 108)
Blask (2011)	<i>N</i> = 21 respondents to a questionnaire: 18 GE teachers; 3 speech pathologists  <i>n</i> = 6 interviewees  Elementary schools in central New York state	Mixed methods: quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interview.  Questionnaire 30-min interview	This study was designed to obtain data regarding what issues affect teachers' attitudes toward collaboration; the factors of "time, communication, and professional development" (p. 33) were identified. The author indicated it appeared that while teachers might collaborate with each other daily, they did not collaborate with special service providers as often, likely because there is no specific time designated to do so. Lack of parity among different staff was considered an impediment to communication. Teachers

Study	Participant(s)/Setting	Research design/Instrument	Findings
			indicated a desire and need for more professional development.
Hamilton-Jones, & Vail (2014)	N = 12 pre-service special educators	Qualitative case study during which pre-service teachers were taking a course on collaborative techniques. Five of the 12 were also interviewed	The findings were that the pre-service teachers had deficiencies in their understanding of: “(1) definitions of collaboration, (2) outcomes of collaboration, (3) collaborative behaviors between teachers, (4) challenges to collaboration, and (5) preparedness to collaborate” p. 76. However, after the training program and after conducting the interview by the researchers, their expectations towards cooperation improved
Landever (2010)	N = __, 114 GE teachers, 38 SE teachers, 7 gifted ed teachers, 1 administrator from each elementary and middle school  Public schools (Elementary & Middle) in suburban area of state of Kansas	Mixed methods research. Quantitative data were collected through online surveys and qualitative data were collected through interviews.	The results showed the presence of a group of factors that affect the level of participation and cooperation between the special education teacher and the general education teacher. These factors are: team process, benefits, administrator support and shared leadership, positive attitude, resources, and professional development. The results also indicated that GE teachers and administrators perceive that effective collaboration is occurring while SE teachers do not agree “regarding the extent to which effective collaboration exists”.
Olore (2017)	N = 90 (56 GE teachers; 34 SE teachers)  23 of the 90 were interviewed  Massachusetts middle school districts (Grades 5–8)	Qualitative phenomenological research that included online survey and interviews.	The findings were: (a) GE and SE teachers differ in the types and degree of collaboration they value; (b) teachers’ value of collaboration does not necessarily correlate with how much time they engage in collaboration; (c) both GE and SE teachers do not have a “clear definition of the term collaboration”; (d) most SE/GE collaboration time is spent discussing students & “making instructional modifications”; (e) least SE/GE collaboration time is spent “developing lesson plans and sharing resources”; (f) both are aware of the fact that collaboration has “significant benefits”; and (g) most of the teachers “are struggling to overcome the barriers of collaboration” (p. 6).
Atkins (2008)	4 gifted education (SE) teachers; 4 GE teachers; and administrator  Mississippi	Qualitative case study	The results of the study indicated that all teachers have high expectations, especially SE teachers. All teachers feel that the Department of Education offers them good professional development programs and say that the professional development programs help them to collaborate.
Mofield (2020)	N = 16 GE and gifted ed teachers  School district in Southeastern United States	Qualitative study with survey (of all 16) that included open-ended questions and follow-up interview (of 3 of the 16).	The results indicated the teachers perceived benefits to collaboration in the area of growth in teacher competency (64%) and student outcomes/learning (100%).
Pellegrino, Weiss, & Regan	N = 25 teacher candidates at different stages of	Case study on the first offering of a course on collaboration for SE and GE	Students who took the course were found to show important improvement in their acceptance of collaboration/co-teaching.

Study	Participant(s)/Setting	Research design/Instrument	Findings
(2015)	service; 15 (12 female; 3 male) were in SE and took the course as EDSE 662; 10 (6 male; 4 female) were in GE and took the course as EDUC 597.  Mid-Atlantic public university	educators in a teacher preparation program. To obtain objective data, the course was offered as a class for SE teaching students and separately as a class for GE teaching students (in social studies) over a 16-week semester.	
Slatoff (2014)	Survey of N = 25 teachers Interviews of 6 educators (2 SE teachers; 2 GE teachers; 2 administrators  Suburban elementary public school in Northern California	A qualitative study with survey that included opportunity to supply comments and interviews.	The results of the study indicate that GE teachers do not find enough time to design and prepare the IEP, and therefore SE teachers cannot communicate with them well. It was also found that teachers do not find enough time to activate co-teaching. The results also indicate that the use of modern technology could help to activate communication between teachers.
Boehme (2020)	N = 24 teachers Midwestern junior high school	A qualitative and quantitative approach were implemented in this study. The survey included 5-point Likert scale questions, multiple choice, and short answer.	The results were that only three of 14 teachers indicated agreement that SE teachers and GE teachers are seen as equal partners in the classroom. Other results noted lack of time and having a regular method of collaboration and communication. Twelve teachers indicated that they had limited time to collaborate and plan with SE teachers. Special education teachers reported that regular collaboration occurred between GE and SE teachers. Eleven teachers indicated that email is the easiest way to communicate.
Johnson (2020)	N = 109 GE who teach students with disabilities in their classrooms  Minnesota school districts	Quantitative study that employed a survey	The results were that the GE teachers identified “making accommodations (89.19%), creating an accepting environment (88.19%), and making modifications (81.98%) to be among their primary responsibilities” p.87. The teachers also reported that consulting w/SE teachers was their primary form of collaboration, but that time was an impediment to addressing the needs of students with disabilities.
Wysocki (2016)	N = 9 faculty members  Sunshine University	Case study using qualitative grounded theory method	The results indicate that participants have a shared, collective heuristic view of the team; cite cooperation as a key factor in the process; and note that a sense of community and connectedness seems to enhance the process.
Daniels (2017)	N = 9 teachers, 7 GE teachers and 2 SE teachers participated in focus groups; Only 8 teachers (6 GE, 2 SE) participated in the entire study.	Single holistic case study design that employed Glaser’s choice theory as the theoretical framework that employed questionnaire, observation, and focus group.	The results indicate that cooperation between teachers occurs casually, indirectly, and based on the needs of the students. Moreover, the results indicated that the teachers were often cooperating rather than engaging in full collaboration.



Study	Participant(s)/Setting	Research design/Instrument	Findings
	Southeastern Alabama rural high school		

## Themes Identified in the Research

### *Level of Collaboration*

One notable theme among the studies was the level of cooperation and collaboration between SE and GE teachers. For example, Boehme (2020) conducted a mixed methods study that utilized a survey to obtain information from both teachers (N = 24) at a Midwestern junior high school regarding their perceptions of collaboration between GE and SE teachers. In this study, only three out of fourteen teachers agreed that SE teachers and GE teachers are seen as equal partners in the classroom. The study also found that teachers feel they have limited time to collaborate and plan with SE teachers ( $n = 12$ ; 50.00%). Special education teachers reported that regular collaboration occurred between general and special education teachers. Eleven teachers indicated that email is the easiest way to communicate. However, a study by Alghazo and Alkhazaleh (2021) found that SE and GE teachers collaborate on an average level. Also, there is no statistically significant difference between teachers on the basis of gender. On the other hand, there are statistical differences between teachers who have obtained a better educational qualification.

In other studies, some results have concluded that cooperation between teachers is at a low level and that there are some influences that affect the level of success of this cooperation, for example Al-Natour, Amr, Al-Zboon & Alkhamra (2015) found that The Low level of cooperation between general education teachers and special education teachers and also the poor communication between teachers is linked to several factors, including high teaching load, lack of awareness of the importance of cooperation, lack of teacher training, negative attitudes in working with students with disabilities, and lack of support from the school administration and parents. Finally, the results of some of these studies have found the level of teacher participation among themselves at a high level, for example Mofield (2020) found that all teachers have positive expectations for cooperation among themselves through co teaching. The results also indicate that 100% of teachers confirm that the benefit on students' outcomes when two instructors co-plan differentiated instruction.

## Discussion

The purpose of this systematic review was to obtain a deeper understanding of the literature on how collaboration between SE and GE teachers works and what practices have been found to be most successful in supporting such collaboration. To this end, we conducted a comprehensive review of the available research and identified certain themes in the final pool of 17 studies that were located by our search process. The research methods and tools employed in these studies varied, and included qualitative research (Wysocki, 2016), quantitative research (Blask, 2011), and mixed methods approaches (Landeveer, 2010).

Certain factors that affect the level of cooperation between the two teacher populations were identified in the studies. For example, Johnson (2020) found the majority of GE teachers fully participate in the IEP process with their SE colleagues. The studies also found that teachers often express a desire to have the opportunity to attend professional development programs to help them manage student behaviors and adapt the curriculum to meet students' needs (Johnson, 2020). Moreover, some studies found cooperation between teachers to be at a reasonable level, especially with regard to planning and designing IEPs. For example, Slatoff (2014) found that GE teachers do not have enough time to design and prepare IEPs and therefore SE teachers cannot communicate with them well. In some studies that found that teachers do not have enough time to engage in co-teaching (Slatoff, 2014), it was recommended that digital technology can support better communication between teachers (Slatoff, 2014).

## 5-Conclusions

The results of this systematic review emphasize the necessity of encouraging cooperation between SE and GE teachers for the benefit of students with disabilities. Specifically, the studies we identified on the topic of teacher collaboration consistently found that this practice improved the academic and learning outcomes of this student population. The results of these studies also emphasize the importance of school principals and other decision-makers working to remove all obstacles to collaboration between teachers.

## 6-Implications for Practice

The obstacles to GE–SE teacher collaboration identified by the studies have implications for education stakeholders and

policymakers regarding university education programs, pre-service training, and professional development. These obstacles include the classroom environment, negative expectations, lack of cooperation in the design and implementation of IEPs, and the shortcomings regarding the accessibility and availability of modern technology.

## 7-Recommendations for Future Research

A systematic review of this type is useful in identifying gaps in the research regarding the topic of investigation. One of the weaknesses of the studies that were located is that although the authors focused on collaboration between the two types of teachers, they did not specify what specific population of students with disabilities were the present in the inclusive classrooms. It would be a good idea for research of this type to specify disability, age of the students, and level of school (e.g., pre-school, elementary school, middle school, high school, etc.). Also, the majority of the studies focused on the impact of collaboration on the academic outcomes of students and did not investigate the impact of such cooperation on student behavior; studies on whether SE-GE collaborative practices impact student behavior are therefore indicated. Also, these studies did not talk in detail about the merits and details of the classroom environment and its impact on the cooperation between the special education teacher and the general education teacher. This points to the need for studies on the impact of professional development programs on teachers' expectations and practice of collaboration.

## 8-Limitations

This systematic review was limited to studies that examined collaboration in the context of SE and GE teachers working in schools with inclusive classrooms. As a result, the findings do not include the available research on collaboration involving teachers in general and administrative staff in schools regarding students with disabilities. In addition, some of the databases that we initially identified for the search process were not fully accessible, which means that it is possible that some studies were not identified particularly on the database during the search due to paywall and other restrictions.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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