

The effectiveness of collaboration among special and general education teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: This study examined the attitudes of special and general education teachers toward collaboration in an inclusive classroom setting. A semi-structured interview design was used to gain in-depth insights and explore the effectiveness of collaboration between special education and general education teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. After an initial screening questionnaire, six educators—four special education teachers and two general education teachers—were chosen for individual telephone interviews. The data revealed four core themes: (1) professional development, (2) limited communication between teachers, (3) insufficient resources, and (4) time constraints. Further investigation of collaborative practices between special and general education teachers is recommended to enhance inclusion.

Keywords: Collaboration, General education, Inclusion, Special education, Teacher attitudes.

1. Introduction

As inclusive education expands globally, including in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, educators find themselves increasingly at the forefront of shaping the future of education. They are expected to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, requiring collaboration between special education teachers, general education counterparts, and service providers such as occupational and speech-language therapists [1]. This collaborative approach not only supports academic progress for students with disabilities but also reduces the stress and anxiety often experienced by novice special education teachers [2].

Collaboration goes beyond occasional communication; it entails shared responsibilities in planning, delivering, and evaluating instructional strategies designed for inclusive settings [3]. This interconnectedness and interdependence in the educational process are vital for the success of inclusive education. Through such cooperation, educators can create inclusive lesson plans, adapt activities, and ensure that students with disabilities are meaningfully engaged in the learning process [4].

This paper defines the effectiveness of collaboration as requiring time, mutual respect, professional development, and consistent communication [5]. However, several challenges were highlighted, including scheduling conflicts, unclear roles, and a lack of institutional support [6-8]. For instance, while some studies have shown effective communication between teachers, concerns persist regarding adequate planning time and shared instructional responsibilities [9-11]. Moreover, general education teachers are willing to support inclusive education but emphasize the need for structured collaboration and institutional backing [4, 12].

Given this context, the current study examines how teachers in inclusive settings in Saudi Arabia experience collaboration and highlights the factors that either facilitate or hinder cooperative teaching practices.

1.1. Aim of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to explore the attitudes of special and general education teachers toward collaborative teaching in inclusive classrooms and to assess the impact of such collaboration on educational outcomes in Saudi Arabia.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes of special education and general education teachers toward collaboration in inclusive classrooms?
2. What challenges do teachers perceive as limiting their collaborative engagement?
3. What beneficial elements do teachers identify as enhancing collaboration?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study used a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' perspectives. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide a rich and detailed understanding of participants' lived experiences, enabling them to share their insights, beliefs, and challenges freely.

2.2. Participants, Setting, and Procedures

An initial questionnaire was distributed to a group of special and general education teachers to collect demographic data, including age, gender, years of teaching experience, areas of specialization, academic qualifications, and experiences with inclusive education. Sample questions included: "Have you taught students with disabilities?" "Have you collaborated with a special education teacher?" and "Have you taught in inclusive classrooms?" At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Based on their responses, six participants were selected: four special education teachers and two general education teachers. The selection criteria included direct experience in inclusive settings and a willingness to engage in an in-depth study interview.

The interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted about 40 minutes each. Before the interviews, participants were informed of the research objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. The researchers also took additional notes to capture nonverbal cues and contextual details. All interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility to explore emerging themes while ensuring consistency across participant responses. The data were later transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and key findings insights.

Table 1.
Demographics Data Provided by the Six Study Participants.

Participant #	Type	Child's education level	Type of disability
Participant 1	S	Primary Education	ID
Participant 2	S	Primary Education	ID
Participant 3	S	Primary Education	ID
Participant 4	S	Primary Education	ID
Participant 5	G	Primary Education	ID
Participant 6	G	Primary Education	ID

Note: ID = Intellectual Disabilities. S= Special Education Teacher. G= General Education Teacher.

3. Instrumentation

For this qualitative study, the researcher created a semi-structured interview protocol to gather comprehensive insights into the collaborative experiences of special education and general education

teachers. The protocol was developed and refined several times to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives.

The interview protocol comprised open-ended questions, allowing participants to reflect on and share their professional experiences, challenges, and perceptions in detail (Dufour et al., 2008). These questions targeted key areas such as school structure, inclusive practices, teacher collaboration, shared responsibilities, and perceived barriers. The final version of the interview guide included the following:

1. Can you describe your overall experience in teaching?
2. What is the educational structure or system in your current school?
3. Does your school include students with disabilities? If so, please elaborate on your experience.
4. As a general education teacher, do you collaborate with special education teachers when teaching students with disabilities?
5. As a special education teacher, do you collaborate with general education teachers in inclusive settings?
6. What are the shared roles and responsibilities between you and your colleagues in working with students with disabilities?
7. Do you collaborate in selecting and planning extracurricular activities for students in general and students with disabilities?
8. (For general education teachers): Do you currently teach in inclusive or integrated classrooms?
9. (For special education teachers): Do you co-teach or share instruction with general education teachers?
10. What are the most significant obstacles or challenges you face in collaborating with other teachers at your school?
11. Do you want to add anything regarding your experience or thoughts on teacher collaboration?

The open-ended nature of the questions provided flexibility during interviews. The researcher could delve deeper based on participants' responses while ensuring consistency across interviews. This approach balanced guided inquiry with the freedom to explore emergent themes.

4. Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative data, the researcher employed several validation strategies, including expert reviews, member checking, and triangulation. First, a panel of experts in special education, curriculum design, and instructional methods reviewed the semi-structured interview questions to establish content validity. This step ensured that the interview questions aligned with the study's research questions and were properly framed to elicit meaningful and relevant responses. Secondly, the researcher implemented a member check process. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, participants had the opportunity to review their responses for accuracy and completeness. This procedure allowed participants to clarify or expand on their statements, ensuring that the data authentically represented their perspectives [13].

Additionally, the author utilized a triangulation strategy by rephrasing core questions throughout the interview. This methodological triangulation verified the consistency of participants' responses and provided deeper insights into their viewpoints. By comparing different reactions to similarly themed questions, the author identified converging patterns that bolstered the credibility of the findings. Together, these steps improved the overall rigor and trustworthiness of the research process.

5. Analysis of the Results

The author used a descriptive coding method to systematically analyze the interview data for this study. First, all interview transcripts were organized into a structured table to enhance clarity and facilitate comparisons among participants. The researcher then performed a line-by-line coding process,

assigning descriptive codes to relevant data segments based on their content and context. After the initial coding, the researcher grouped similar codes to identify emerging themes and subthemes, highlighting recurring patterns and significant insights. The emerging themes were organized and refined to reflect broader conceptual categories directly linked to the research questions

The author employed the descriptive analysis techniques outlined by Creswell [13] to ensure analytical rigor. These techniques included summarizing, categorizing, and interpreting the data to accurately represent the participants' experiences and perspectives. The analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing the researcher to revisit and refine the codes and themes as deeper patterns emerged. Table 2 presents a sample of the thematic coding and analysis framework, illustrating how raw data were converted into meaningful themes and findings.

Table 2.

Examples from the Coding of the Interview Data.

Coding Label	Sample Quote	Notes
Professional Development	"I had the opportunity to obtain a course that helped me benefit from and improve my attitudes towards the general education teacher. I obtained the course during the first 3 years of my appointment. I feel lucky." (P1).	Through data analysis, the researcher noted that participants had different opinions about the benefits of professional development.
Limited Communication	"We meet every day at the beginning of the morning, but we do not talk about students in general or students with disabilities. I feel that I need to hold a regular and open meeting with general education teachers to talk to them more about students with disabilities and the most important challenges we face." (P1).	The researcher noticed that the participants lacked information about communication.
Resources	"The attached classrooms are well equipped and we sometimes need to collaborate with the general education teacher to obtain a specific classroom." (P2).	The researcher noticed that the participants have different opinion about the resources.

6. Results

Analysis of the interview data from special education and general education teachers revealed recurring themes that reflect shared experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to collaboration in inclusive educational settings. After thorough coding and thematic categorization, the researcher identified four principal thematic axes, each representing a significant dimension of the collaborative process schools.

These themes are as follows:

1. Professional Development
2. Limited Communication Between Teachers
3. Availability of Resources
4. Time Constraints

Each theme consistently emerged across multiple interviews and provides insight into the key factors influencing the effectiveness of teacher collaboration in inclusive classrooms. The following section discusses each theme in detail, supported by direct quotes and examples from participants' responses. A summary of the themes is presented in 3.

Table 3.
Themes That Emerged from the Interviews.

Theme	Title
Theme 1	Professional Development
Theme 2	Limited Communication
Theme 3	Resources
Theme 4	Time

Theme 1: Professional Development

Participants expressed varying perceptions regarding the availability and impact of professional development opportunities, particularly about collaboration between special and general education teachers. Special education teachers viewed professional development programs positively, highlighting their accessibility and relevance. These programs, offered by the National Institute for Educational Development associated with the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, were frequently identified as a crucial support for inclusive teaching practices.

For example, Participant 1 noted: "We have participated in many professional development courses. The Ministry allows us to enroll in online programs. In one course, the trainer emphasized the importance of collaboration among all teachers in the school and how it positively impacts both students and the educational environment." system."

All the special education teachers interviewed shared similar insights. Participant 2 noted, "The courses are available indefinitely. I previously attended a course with both special and general education teachers, where we discussed the importance of school-wide cooperation. Another participant emphasized the supportive role of school leadership: "The school principal encourages us to attend professional development courses. He once told me that these courses help build collaborative relationships with general education teachers, which, as mentioned by Cramer (2006), relates to how improving relationships with co-teachers, teams, and families can manifest. One of the trainers even focused on strategies for partnering with general education teachers."

These perspectives demonstrate that professional development significantly contributes to fostering collaborative practices within inclusive settings. This finding aligns with previous literature emphasizing the essential role of focused professional training in advancing successful inclusive education [1, 4].

Several participants emphasized the significance of professional development in promoting collaboration between special education and general education teachers. Participant 1, a special education teacher, underscored the importance of receiving targeted training early in his career. He stated, "I had the opportunity to take a course that helped me improve my attitudes toward general education teachers. I completed the course during the first three years of my appointment. I feel lucky." This early exposure to training centered on collaboration appeared to enhance his professional outlook and relationships with colleagues in general education

In contrast, general education teachers reported limited access to professional development programs aimed at collaboration with special education teachers. Participant 5 recognized this gap, suggesting he may bear some responsibility for not seeking such training sooner. He expressed his intention to take the initiative by consulting with his school principal and special education colleagues to explore relevant professional development opportunities. He mentioned, "The National Institute for Professional Development offers many programs for teachers in general. I think I will speak with the school principal and my colleagues in special education to inquire about the most important courses available for teachers." collaboration."

Participant 6 similarly emphasized the importance of training that focuses on collaboration and inclusive practices. He noted his regular interactions with students with disabilities during extracurricular activities and expressed uncertainty about how to support them effectively. He stated, "In the school where I work, students with disabilities learn, and we consistently see these students participating in extracurricular activities. I often wonder how I can engage with and communicate with special education teachers to play an effective role with these students. I need to take courses on how to

work alongside the special education teacher and establish a cooperative effort that benefits students with disabilities overall."

These accounts demonstrate the participants' collective understanding of the need for organized professional development programs that promote effective collaboration among educators from various backgrounds specializations.

Theme 2: Limited Communication

Participants shared various concerns and viewpoints regarding communication between special and general education teachers. Several special education teachers mentioned that their interactions with general education teachers often occur in informal settings, such as during breaks or in the teachers' lounge. One participant pointed out the lack of structured communication: "We meet every day at the start of the morning, but we do not discuss students in general, or those with disabilities. I feel that I need to hold regular and open meetings with general education teachers to talk more about students with disabilities and the significant challenges we face" (Participant 1). Another special education teacher expressed a desire for greater collaboration, particularly in planning and classroom engagement: "I wish the general education teacher could join me in the classroom and in developing the educational plan."

However, not all special education teachers express this concern. Two participants reported positive communication and collaborative experiences with their general education counterparts. For instance, Participant 3 noted that general education teachers sometimes assume instructional responsibilities in his absence: "Sometimes the general education teacher at the school where I work teaches students with disabilities when I am away, and he does a great job." Likewise, Participant 4 credited effective communication to the school's small size, stating, "Maybe because I work in a relatively small school where we know each other, the principal knows all the students with disabilities, and all the teachers talk to them and ask for updates when we are here."

In contrast, general education teachers widely recognize a communication gap. Several participants noted that, despite having daily meetings with special education teachers, these interactions rarely involve meaningful discussions about students with disabilities. Participant 5 stated, "We do not talk much about students with disabilities. Maybe they communicate with the principal, but we are not informed about the progress of students with disabilities." Participant 6 echoed this sentiment and emphasized the need for greater exposure to special education practices: "In our school, special education teachers possess high professional qualifications and put in tremendous effort with students with disabilities, participate in extracurricular activities, and provide various supports. I often wonder if it might be possible to discuss the teaching strategies and methods used with students with disabilities?"

Overall, the data suggest a need for improved and organized communication between special and general education teachers. While some schools report successful collaboration, others emphasize missed opportunities for joint planning and shared responsibilities that could enhance the educational experience for students with disabilities

Theme 3: Availability of Resources and Their Impact on Teacher Collaboration

Participants shared various perspectives on the availability of resources and their role in fostering collaboration between special education and general education teachers. Overall, special education teachers expressed positive views regarding the resources provided by their schools, highlighting their contribution to improving collaboration efforts

Participant 1 emphasized the comprehensiveness and quality of the curriculum designed for students with intellectual disabilities. He stated, "The Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has developed a special curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. It is a complete and integrated curriculum that I am very impressed by." According to the participant, this curriculum addresses the topics, skills, and knowledge needed to meet students' educational needs needs.

Participant 2 mentioned classroom infrastructure and noted that collaboration with general education teachers is sometimes essential for effectively accessing and utilizing shared classroom spaces. He remarked, “The adjoining classrooms are well-equipped, and we occasionally need to work with the general education teacher to secure a particular classroom.”

Participant 3 noted the availability of a well-equipped resource room, along with access to various instructional tools and curricula designed for students with intellectual disabilities. He believed these resources facilitated effective communication and collaboration with general education staff. Similarly, Participant 4 described how school-provided transportation services indirectly contributed to improved cooperation, stating, “Sometimes a student with disabilities is late for school transportation, so the general education teacher helps look for this student, enhancing our cooperation.” Such instances illustrate how logistical resources can serve as connection points for collaboration across teaching roles.

General education teachers reported that the resources available to them positively influence their ability to maintain ongoing communication with special education teachers. Participant 5 highlighted the significance of shared physical spaces, such as a regular teachers’ lounge, in promoting consistent interaction. He stated, “We meet in one room early in the morning and between classes, and we often talk to each other. We have developed wonderful professional relationships, and I believe that having one room has greatly improved communication with special education teachers.”

Participant 6 agreed, noting the school’s shared resource room and morning assembly as additional contexts for meaningful exchange. Drawing from his role, he stated, “As a resource room secretary, I believe I interact directly with special education teachers. They reach out to me daily if they want to use the resource room and share their lesson topic. I then prepare this lesson for them and learn about the unique abilities of students with intellectual disabilities. I think it is a beautiful and important experience, and it has helped strengthen cooperation with special education teachers.”

Both special and general education teachers acknowledged the importance of school resources—including inclusive curricula, shared teaching spaces, logistical support, and dedicated resource personnel—in fostering and sustaining effective collaborative programs.

Theme 4: Time Allocation and Its Influence on Collaboration

Participants expressed diverse opinions regarding the amount and quality of time that special education and general education teachers commit, especially concerning collaborative planning and instructional support for students with disabilities. While some believed they spent an adequate amount of time together, others emphasized the need for more organized and deliberate interactions to improve collaboration.

Participant 1, a special education teacher, described frequent interactions with general education teachers during informal school activities, stating, “I see general education teachers all the time, and we spend a lot of time together, whether during the morning assembly or at official school celebrations. We also have a WhatsApp group with general education teachers that keeps me informed about school events.” Participant 2 agreed, acknowledging regular contact with general education teachers in various school settings. However, he emphasized a lack of collaborative time specifically designated for educational planning for students with disabilities: “I spend adequate time with the general education teacher within the school, but I’m not sure I spend enough time with them in the classroom when students with disabilities are present. Sometimes, I wish I could get support from the general education teacher for certain skills, but I can’t find the right time for both of us.”

In contrast, general education teachers reported that their schedules often limit opportunities for collaboration with special education teachers. One participant detailed his daily routine, saying, “I have significant commitments during the school day, so I arrive at 7 a.m., and I rarely find enough time to meet with the special education teacher when asked. Sometimes I’m in the resource room, where we manage to find enough time to collaborate on the educational needs of the students.” This indicates that incidental opportunities, such as interactions in the resource room, may facilitate some level of cooperation despite the overall time constraints.

Another general education teacher echoed this concern and expressed a desire to increase collaborative time. He proposed practical solutions to incorporate collaboration into existing responsibilities, stating, “I feel that I don’t have enough time to sit down with the special education teacher, but I can suggest some future solutions that might help increase the time I spend with the special education teacher. I consider these solutions to be easy to implement, like working together while planning lessons. Additionally, at the end of the school year, we can correct each other’s tests. I also feel it’s important to participate in the evaluation processes conducted for students with disabilities alongside the special education teacher.”

These reflections highlight a common appreciation for the importance of time in promoting effective collaboration. Although informal interactions occur often, both groups of teachers indicate that more structured and intentional time for joint planning, assessment, and instructional dialogue is essential to effectively support students with disabilities.

7. Findings Regarding the Themes

The thematic analysis highlighted several key elements influencing collaboration between special education and general education teachers. Participants consistently identified professional development programs as crucial in strengthening ongoing partnerships. Both groups of teachers emphasized that access to targeted training empowers them to engage more effectively in joint decision-making processes that benefit all students, including those with disabilities. These programs were seen as a means for skill development and a foundation for fostering mutual understanding and coordinated teaching practices.

Additionally, the findings underscored concerns about the quality and consistency of communication between special and general education teachers. Although informal interactions take place, participants pointed out that structured communication often remains limited due to the demanding and varied roles of teachers within the school environment. This absence of systematic dialogue may hinder collaborative planning and shared responsibility in supporting students with disabilities [14].

Another theme that emerged was the role of school resources in promoting collaboration. Special education teachers emphasized the importance of specialized curricula, resource rooms, and inclusive classroom environments in supporting cooperative teaching efforts. These resources not only address the unique needs of students with intellectual disabilities but also create a foundation for collaboration with general education staff

Ultimately, time became a major obstacle to effective collaboration. Most participants indicated that, despite their willingness to work together, the demands of instructional planning, classroom management, and administrative tasks leave little opportunity for joint engagement. Teachers expressed a need for dedicated time in their schedules to discuss instructional strategies, assessments, and student progress in a collaborative and meaningful way

The findings highlight the significance of structured professional development, clear and consistent communication, access to supportive resources, and purposeful time management in fostering effective and enduring collaboration between special and general education teachers

8. Discussion and Implications

This study's findings offer crucial insights into the factors influencing collaboration between special education and general education teachers. These insights hold significant implications for school leadership, teacher training, and educational policy practices.

One of the central findings was the important role of professional development programs in enhancing collaboration between special and general education teachers. Many participants highlighted the positive impact of training courses on their ability to work together effectively. For example, Participant 1 noted, “I had the opportunity to take a course that helped me improve my attitudes toward general education teachers. I took the course during the first three years of my appointment, and I feel fortunate.” This finding aligns with Blask [1] results, which concluded that professional development

programs are vital for promoting collaboration among teachers, especially when supporting students with disabilities. Early access to such training is crucial for laying the groundwork for effective interdisciplinary cooperation

Another key theme involved challenges in communication among teachers. While special education teachers generally reported having more frequent contact with their general education colleagues, the latter often cited time constraints as a barrier to meaningful dialogue. For instance, Participant 1 emphasized the need for structured communication, stating, “We meet every day at the beginning of the morning, but we do not discuss students in general or students with disabilities. I feel that I need to hold regular and open meetings with general education teachers to talk about students with disabilities and the significant challenges we face.” The data also reveal a gap in perceived communication, highlighting the need for dedicated time during the school day for meaningful collaboration. This aligns with the findings of Boehme [5] who reported that general education teachers often lack the necessary time to engage in collaborative planning with special education teachers, particularly in developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

The study also highlighted the vital role of school resources in promoting collaboration. Participants emphasized that the availability of appropriate resources—such as specialized curricula, shared classrooms, and transportation services for students with disabilities—acts as supportive factors for cooperation. For instance, Participant 5 remarked, “We meet in a single room early in the morning and between classes, and we often talk to each other. We have built wonderful professional relationships, and I believe that having one room has significantly improved communication with special education teachers.” Shared spaces and logistical systems within schools were recognized as beneficial in creating natural opportunities for teachers to interact and collaborate in problem-solving. These findings align with those of Landever [7] who found that adequate resources positively influence the quality and frequency of collaboration between special and general education staff.

In summary, this study shows that teacher collaboration is influenced by access to professional development, the availability of time for structured communication, and supportive school resources. These findings underscore the need for school administrators and policymakers to provide intentional support to foster more effective and lasting partnerships among educators. Schools that prioritize collaborative environments—through training, time allocation, and shared resources—are more likely to promote inclusive practices and enhance educational outcomes for students with disabilities

9. Future Direction

Given the study's findings, future research should explore collaboration between general and special education teachers. Additional studies could investigate the underlying causes of limited communication between these educational groups, particularly in the context of inclusive education. A deeper understanding of the structural, institutional, or cultural barriers may help develop targeted strategies to enhance teachers' effectiveness in collaboration. Furthermore, future research should employ a variety of methodologies to enrich the data and broaden the understanding of the topic. For example, quantitative methods such as surveys or questionnaires could capture the perspectives of a wider and more diverse sample of teachers, including male and female educators across different school levels and geographic areas. Ultimately, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches in future research could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how collaboration operates and aid in developing practical strategies to support inclusive teaching practices.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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