

**Voices of Special Education Teachers in an Inclusive High School:**

**Redefining Responsibilities**

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Abstract

Because of recent changes in general and special education policies, special educators who previously worked with secondary students in self-contained academic classes, resource rooms, or in cotaught classes find themselves assigned to new roles that demand different collaborative skills. Based on 2 years of interviews, field notes, and observations in an inclusive high school, this study focused on the perspectives of two special educators who redefined their daily practices in partnership with a university professional development specialist as they implemented an unusual collaborative-consultation model. Their responsibilities and relationships with teachers, students, and administrators are examined in light of the literature on collaborative models for inclusive education of high school students.

**Keywords:** Collaboration/Consultation; Inclusive Practices; Secondary Schools

Since the inception of federally-mandated special education services, school systems and educators have struggled with how to include students with disabilities in general education settings while ensuring provision of individualized, special services. Recent mandates have intensified the quest for effective service delivery models. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and The Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 required that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment, have access to the general curriculum, participate in accountability assessments, and reach the same academic benchmarks as peers without disabilities. Increased attention to low performing students with or without disabilities as a result of high stakes accountability assessments and response to intervention initiatives has pushed greater accountability for students' progress and outcomes into the general education domain (McLaughlin, 2006). Further, requirements that all students be taught by highly qualified teachers have created additional pressures on secondary schools to reconsider how special educators and special education services can best be deployed to help academically diverse students learn content-heavy curricula (Deshler, Schumaker, Bui, & Vernon, 2006).

A common response to the challenge of including all students in general education has been to promote collaboration between content experts in general education and pedagogical experts in special education (Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 2005; Friend & Cook, 2007). Over the years, several forms of collaboration have been touted: resource programs, itinerant services, problem-solving consultation, cooperative co-teaching, and teacher-supervised instructional assistants and peer supports. Within each approach different models and delivery modes have been developed. While few studies have investigated the effectiveness of these collaborative models at the secondary level, research has spoken to their perceived benefits and conditional uses (Boudah, Schumacher, & Deshler, 1997; Idol, 2006; Laframboise, Epanchin, Colucci, & Hocutt, 2004; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay, 2002).

### **Collaborative-Consultation Model**

Although special education consultation models have a long history, West and Idol's (1987) survey of the literature noted that research on the implementation and effects of special education consultation was sparse. Little had been added to the research base when Sheridan, Welch and Orme (1996) reviewed the special education consultation literature. They noted that approximately three-fourths of reviewed studies had favorable outcomes for targeted students or systems; behavioral consultation being the most common model reported. After early interest in consultation as an alternative to resource room placement (Gutkin, 1996; Huefner, 1988), research on special education consultation seems to have given way to research on other forms of collaboration such as problem-solving teams and coteaching. However, practitioners continued to endorse the consultation approach (Dettmer et al., 2005; Friend & Cook, 2007).

Consultation is defined as a voluntary, interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually-defined problems (Idol, Paolucci-

Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1987). The consultation process should result in solutions that are different from those that individual team members would produce independently. Consultation has been used to address a variety of student, system, and teacher needs including prereferral intervention and prevention; support in general education settings for students with special education needs as well as others; and the incorporation of academic, behavioral and special service interventions into general education instruction (Friend & Cook, 2007; Gutkin, 1996; Knackendoffel, 2005). Typically, consultative services are triadic; a specialist (e.g., speech-language pathologist, school psychologist, special educator) works with another individual (e.g., general education teacher) who has responsibility for providing direct services to a student. The consultant is responsible for facilitating and monitoring the outcomes of a collegial problem-solving process. The *collaborative*-consultation model in particular is based on parity and reciprocity between experts; other consultation models are less concerned with establishing professional equality (West & Idol, 1987). The consultant's relationship to the student is indirect. Less often, a consultant may provide some direct services to a student (Schulte, Osborne, & McKinney, 1990; Schulte, Osborne, & Kauffman, 1993).

Studies of special education consultative services at the elementary level have shown comparable or improved student benefits over resource room arrangements (Schulte et al., 1990; 1993). Collaborative consultation may increase professionals' joint ownership of student learning and increase general educators' confidence and skill with including diverse students (Sheridan et al., 1996; West & Idol, 1987). General education teachers tend to view the service positively, and its use may rise as teachers perceive its applicability to various formative situations throughout a student's career (Schulte et al., 1990; 1993; Sheridan et al., 1996). Despite perceived benefits of consulting services, research studies have identified some challenges to this model of service delivery. For example, teachers may prefer full-time availability of a special educator or assistant or resource room services (Idol, 2006; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Consultation is likely to be ineffective if participation is coerced or the participants have not mutually identified relevant problems (Kampwirth, 2003; Vaughn & Schumm, 1995).

Like all collaborative efforts, planning time for consultation seems to be more often desired than available (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Laframboise, 2004). Collaborative consultation may not be as effective if school administrators are not engaged in monitoring the process, particularly at the secondary level (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Wallace et al., 2002). Finally, the mix of a consultant's responsibilities and caseload size may be of concern, especially if consultation is an added responsibility for a special educator who already has full-time direct teaching responsibilities (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Idol, 2006).

### **Investigating a Variation on the Collaborative-Consultation Model**

The purpose of this study was to extend the few studies of collaborative models of inclusive education in high schools and the sparse research on special education consultation at the secondary level by examining a case in which special educators combined an indirect

collaborative-consultation approach with occasional coteaching and direct supports to students. Using insider perspectives, the study examined the special education teachers' responsibilities and relationships as well as perceived benefits and limitations of the model.

## **Method**

### *Context for the Current Study*

The findings presented in this article were drawn from data collected during the first 2 years of a longitudinal case study of a new technical high school. The school was the fourth in a vocational-technical high school district providing full-day academic and technical education to students from multiple school districts across a single county. The newest school resulted from more than 10 years of planning and was intended to meet the high demand for enrollment in district schools. According to administrators involved in the new school's development, the district planning committees and school board determined that the newest school should be a "break the mold" school in at least two ways. First, the school curricula and facilities would be designed around a career academy model. Each of four academies would enroll no more than 250 students to promote a sense of community and regular engagement among students and staff. All were housed in the same 255,000 square foot building, but each academy had its own area. At the physical center of each was a teacher center that provided shared meeting, office, and lunch facilities to promote collaboration among the assigned academic, career, and special education teachers.

The second innovation promoted by the district was to provide inclusive academic classrooms and to not establish any self-contained or resource classrooms, which were the norm in the district's other schools. The district had a long tradition of providing inclusive career education, but had not shifted to more inclusive arrangements for academics. The district elected to institute a collaborative-consultation model in which learning support coaches (special education teachers) would be assigned to each academy. The planners believed this consultative model would provide the school with more flexibility in deployment of its teaching resources than would be possible with a coteaching model during the first years of operation when entire cohorts of students and teachers would be brought on board annually. During the first 2 school years, which were the focus of this specific study, the school hired one learning support coach each year.

In the summer before opening, the school adopted a third initiative – a professional development partnership focused on inclusive secondary education. With state funding, the partnering university established a professional position with responsibilities for regular "in-house" professional development for teachers at the school and in the district as well as new course and field-based experiences at the school for the university's secondary education undergraduates. The intent was to create models for supporting in-service and preservice teachers to meet the needs of academically diverse students at the secondary level, an area of

great interest to the state because of shortages of secondary special education teachers and the low performance of secondary students with disabilities on accountability assessments.

### *Overarching and Specific Research Questions*

The school and district administrators also agreed to a research partnership with the university; initially defined as a 5-year case study built upon interviews, observations, student records and other document reviews. The overarching questions of interest focused on (a) factors affecting the school's implementation and development of a collaborative-consultation model, (b) the role of the university-school professional development partnership, (c) experiences of students and teachers at the school, and (d) academic benefits and transition outcomes for students.

The study reported here focuses specifically on the experiences of the first two learning support coaches. In the first 2 years of the school, a key issue emerged within the larger study: redefining the special education teacher role in the adopted model of inclusive education. The issue came into sharp relief as the coaches reflected upon how their different prior teaching experiences and their initial beliefs about a consultative approach interacted with the evolving expectations for their work as the new technical high school came into being.

### *Data Sources and Analyses*

Using grounded theory techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the coaches' experiences were explored through iterative analyses of field notes, monthly project reports, and interview transcripts. Field notes documented the regular (i.e., at least weekly) informal conversations between the professional development specialist and the learning support coaches. Also, monthly project reports created by the specialist documented her activities with the school, which she further discussed with the other researchers monthly. In this way, the specialist served as a participant observer for the study. Additionally, interview transcripts generated from audio files of four formal interviews with the coaches (two individual interviews each) over the course of ten months spanning the school's first 2 years were a rich source of information about the coaches' experiences. These data were supplemented by material from the larger study, including field notes and transcripts of interviews with 21 general education teachers at the school, 10 current and former administrators associated with the school and district, 8 focus students with individualized education programs (IEPs), and 4 parents of those students.

As the first step in the formal analytic process, the researchers independently juxtaposed the voices of the coaches and the specialist, as represented in field notes, monthly reports, and interviews with them, and themes suggested by the literature on collaborative approaches at the secondary level. Then, through multiple rounds of discussing the match between themes in the literature and those that emerged from the study, the researchers identified preliminary organizing themes (*responsibilities, relationships, knowledge/skills, supports*) and related examples from the coaches' and specialist's interviews that illustrated each theme. The organizing themes were discussed with the coaches, who agreed these represented important

dimensions of their evolving work. As a further check, the researchers reviewed the supplemental data from the larger study to confirm the nature of the coaches' and specialist's activities and interactions with others.

Next, the researchers independently revisited the initial organizing themes and supporting data to search for a unifying theme that would serve as an anchor for presenting other themes. As a result of multiple discussions about how well alternative constructions of the themes and data represented the essential experiences of the coaches, the researchers selected a core theme of *redefining responsibilities* and revised the major themes to include *relationships*, *supports*, and *perceived benefits*. The coaches believed that the most important of their new *responsibilities* was negotiating and nurturing different kinds of *relationships* with teachers and students. The coaches believed the nature of those relationships distinguished their work and responsibilities from that of special education teachers in more familiar instructional arrangements, such as self-contained or co-taught classes. In addition, the coaches called upon a variety of *supports* in the process of redefining their work and their relationships. Further, the coaches *perceived benefits* from their redefined work that would provide the foundation for successful inclusion of students with disabilities in the high school academic and career classrooms. As the last step in the analytic process, the coaches and specialist reviewed the draft findings and verified that the themes as presented were consistent with their experience, confirmed that selected quotes as used in the study narrative conveyed their intended meaning, and offered additional commentary.

## Results

First, the school and student demographics, the two coaches, and the specialist are introduced. Then, themes are presented: shifting understanding of responsibilities, negotiating and nurturing relationships with teachers and students, support for the coaches, and perceived benefits for teachers and students. The themes and subthemes are supported by extensive quotes from the coaches and specialist as a means of conveying their experiences, the focus of this particular study. Finally, redefining the role of a secondary special education teacher is discussed in light of the relevant literature on collaborative models of inclusion.

### ***Clearview Technical High School: Student and Teacher Demographics***

The school opened with 240 freshmen, 20 of whom had IEPs. This was a smaller percentage of students with IEPs compared to other schools in the district (about 15%). The principal attributed this lower enrollment to the fact that the school was new and many parents and students with special education needs might have been reluctant to move into an untested school setting. Those with IEPs at Clearview were being served primarily under the categories of specific learning disabilities or other health impairment (attention deficit disorder). In the second year of operations, the school expanded to serve 517 ninth and tenth graders; 42 had IEPs. The same major categories of disabilities were represented with the addition of students served under the autism and physical disability categories. Teaching staff expanded from 17 in the first year to 37 in the second. Additional demographic information is provided in Table 1.

### ***The Learning Support Coaches***

The first learning support coach, Mary, came to Clearview with 22 years of special education teaching experience in multiple subjects across elementary, middle, and high school. During her 13 years in high schools, she taught social studies and mathematics. She was highly qualified in mathematics. Virtually all her teaching assignments had been in resource or self-contained classes. She had cotaught occasionally with high school mathematics teachers for content-training purposes. She had a bachelor's degree in special education and a master's degree with a concentration in secondary special education.

Mary had been invited to some of the early district planning meetings about the special education model to be used at Clearview. After leaving one of those meetings where they were describing the leadership qualities and skills needed by the first special educator, she remembered thinking

that sounds like me and I got butterflies or a feeling of knowing that this is me they are talking about... "uh oh"...I may need to step up to the plate here...I didn't really want to, because I was very happy teaching in my own classroom. I knew how much work it would be...and it was risky...scary...my fear factor kicked in... many people were saying that this is never going to work.

However, she began to believe that, although she was secure and comfortable in her previous school, she was ready for a new challenge: "You see this thing that you could be part of -- a vision or a possibility -- and you take a leap of faith, and that's what I did."

Sara, hired as the second Learning Support Coach at the beginning of the second school year, had a different background. Her undergraduate degree was in psychology and business; her first career was advertising. However, she soon decided that she was more interested in teaching and pursued her master's degree and certification in elementary education. She completed additional coursework in reading and special education. Her primary role for the first 5 years of her teaching career was as the general education half of coteaching teams in a middle school. Later, she became solely responsible for working with a paraeducator to teach classes of up to 30 fifth-grade students, a third of whom had IEPs or 504 plans.

She wasn't actively looking, but was encouraged to consider the position by a friend of a friend who knew about the opening. She noted that she had observed many different teaching configurations over her 10-year teaching career, and

I ended up wearing a lot of hats ... – educational diagnostician, team leader, para[professional], and you name it. But I thought this would be an amazing opportunity for me to wear all those hats in one day.... I would be applying [my] knowledge and experience to help a variety of kids as well as working as a team player -- I've always enjoyed the team approach to teaching.

### ***The Professional Development Specialist***

Anna had recently retired after 35 years, serving as an English teacher, special education teacher and chair, transition specialist at district and state levels, and as professor and director of special education programs at another university. Returning to the field as a professional development specialist, she was charged with providing technical assistance to administrators and teachers in the development an effective model of inclusion at Clearview Technical High School. She noted,

I was thinking about retiring, but wanted to be involved in something challenging that was closer to the front lines. When I heard about the opportunity at Clearview and met the principal, I knew it would give me a chance to be part of a team creating something I believed in. I would be able to use much of my experience, but I would be able to grow and learn along with my new partners.

### **Themes: Responsibilities, Relationships, Supports, & Benefits**

#### ***Becoming a Learning Support Coach: Shifting Focus of Responsibilities***

Mary and Sara had many responsibilities that would be familiar to most special educators: designing student-specific instructional interventions; teaching learning strategies; providing accommodations; assessing and monitoring student progress; collaborating and problem-solving with other teachers, specialists and administrators; managing the IEP process; and completing required paperwork. What challenged them in their new role as coach was managing the ever shifting demands on their time, which were no longer constrained by an assigned class schedule.

No day is ever the same. ... I do everything in pencil ... I like Mary's analogy: I feel like my day is a series of 'just five minutes.' (Sara)

There's not enough of me to go around. I mean it's obvious with the responsibilities I have, especially with the amount of paperwork that I have. Many times I'm tied up in meetings. And that's the part of my job that's really challenging - is how to balance the two different jobs. One is very administrative and the other is very teacher-like, and I have to switch gears all the time.... (Mary)

I remember the first day for students. Mary looked at me and said, "What do I do all day if I don't have a schedule?"(Anna)

Furthermore, they had to redefine their instructional role. No longer were they responsible only for student support. They also had a responsibility to support other teachers. As Sara explained,

In taking this job I didn't realize how much I had to give up being the teacher and learn to be a coach. ...I'm trying to make the shift between being a teacher or a coteacher ... I envisioned more of my time on the job being a coteacher, but [that's] minimal. It's more as a coach, coaching the teachers as to how they might use my suggestions, how they might create accommodations for the entire class, how they might present information in a way that's less teacher-centered and more student-centered. .... I'm used to [thinking], 'Okay, what's my lesson plan going to be this week?' or 'I've got grades due.' Or 'I have to call these parents.' And some of those things as a coach I still do – the parents calling and e-mailing, in contact with the kids. But the grades I don't have control of; the lesson plans I don't have control of. The teaching strategies, I have to plant seeds. (Sara)

This was a difficult adjustment for Sara. She had been accustomed to being the general education teacher, responsible for instruction and assessment, and she had become skilled at adapting for students with IEPs. At Clearview, she had to learn to step back, to ask herself what that teacher needed to be empowered to meet the needs of the students. (Anna)

Mary highlighted the fact that negotiating multiple relationships across classrooms on a daily basis had become a central feature of their work. "Coteaching you have to get along with one person. I have to get along with everybody – parents, teachers, students. And we all have to work side-by-side with open doors and open hearts and open minds." Anna affirmed, "this was an important aspect of the collaboration. The learning support coaches had to recognize each teacher's instructional style and then play into their strengths. That took a lot of juggling."

### ***Negotiating and Nurturing Relationships: Teachers***

***Coaching across disciplines.*** Mary and Sara each worked with approximately 15 different teachers in any given semester depending on where the students with IEPs were assigned. Mary was part of the 9th grade academy, which included academic teachers in all subjects and four career/technical teachers who provided exploratory career education and life skills instruction. Sara joined the 10th grade teachers who were all new to the school (except one mathematics teacher who shifted from 9th to 10th grade) and all entered at the same time as she. These included academic teachers in all subjects and the career/technical teachers who were responsible for establishing the shops, which would later become the three career academies.

I'm expected to coach teachers on helpful learning strategies, modifications, fair instruction, differentiate instruction at different levels – the product, yes maybe the assessment tool.  
(Sara)

***Learning from general educators.*** As a former upper elementary and middle school teacher, Sara found she needed to become conversant with high school-level content across academic and technical disciplines. This meant getting comfortable with shifting into a consultee role with the general education teachers.

On the flip side, learning content, I work with [them] not so much me coaching them, but them coaching me on content to get me up to par. And I don't expect that to happen overnight, but just to get some of the ideas, the vocabulary, and tools they might use in class. ... And I stay after school or I see the teacher on the planning period. By and large the teachers have been very forthcoming with that.... If I'm going to coach the kids to become independent learners, I have to know the content that they're expected to know.

***Sharing accountability.*** Mary noted that an equal partnership focused on student learning and based on trust helped to define their daily work.

The [general education] teachers...are very good about working with me and the student. ...Basically they're working with the student every single day. They're the key, and they're doing a fantastic job.... There are not attitudes [such as] 'that's your student, that's not my student' – nothing like that.... It's like we're in this together. There's a trust there. I can go to any classroom, open the door and go in any time I want. There's no threat. They know what I'm about. I'm not there to evaluate.

***Developing shared practices.*** Important to building that trust and focus were the twice weekly thirty-minute meetings attended by all staff and facilitated by Anna, the professional development specialist, or the district reading specialist. Mary stated, "We started creating a culture.... we started to collaborate, really collaborate in what we called these Teach & Learn Talks in the morning. And then it started really coming alive." During the morning sessions, the general education teachers and coaches would tackle a learning problem (e.g., student note-taking difficulties, formatting a test to promote readability). Instructional techniques (e.g., learning strategies, content enhancements) suggested by a teacher or specialists would be discussed. Several teachers would volunteer to test the technique in their classrooms over the next week and report back to the group with suggestions, samples of their work, or related student products.

I found that the teachers were developing into an informal learning community. They stopped me in the hall to ask questions about reaching particular students. More often they invited me into their classrooms to share their excitement about some instruction that was working. I'd use their questions and their creativity as the basis of the next professional development session. The more they shared their professional practices with others, the more the collaborative culture grew. (Anna)

***Being physically accessible.*** Mary also credited the physical arrangement of the teacher centers as supportive of their successful collaborations. The coaches' desks were located next to the centers' main doors so they were highly visible and accessible to the other teachers in their academies.

We're in the teacher center – a collaborative area where we kind of live so to speak... [Everybody] has their own cubicle, a place to put their coat, lock things up, a docking station there and in their classrooms. ... I'm centrally located...so I'm like the hub... teachers come to me and communicate with me at all times...it's an atmosphere that creates that because you're all together all the time. ...it's really awesome. It's a huge part of the program.

***Orchestrating and anticipating service needs.*** The coaches each kept an appointment book on top of a file cabinet near their desks. The book was left open so that the teachers could sign up for coach time in their classes or for a meeting. "It's all individual and when needed" (Mary). The coaches also could show when they were not available, such as during IEP meetings. Sometimes the coaches would anticipate teacher concerns and block out a regular time for that teacher. For example, Mary made a special effort one semester to be regularly in the class of a teacher who had five students with IEPs – which was more than the typical three or fewer -- because she and the teacher began to notice a lot of behavior issues. Also,

there are a lot of things I do that they don't see, but the kids are supported. Whether it's e-mailing home or staying after school. That affects the kid when they go into the classroom. They're prepared; they have their work. Whatever I'm doing behind the scene in homeroom, it shows up in their class and how they behave .... The teachers tell me that 'my students' are some of their better students.

***Facilitating teacher-administrator communications.*** Being perceived by the teachers as an administrative liaison was an unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable role experienced by the coaches. Because the coaches moved around the school constantly during the day, coming into contact with everyone, they were sometimes seen as vehicles for relaying information that an individual teacher might otherwise feel uncomfortable sharing.

I let [the administration] know [what the teachers need], and I let both sides know I'm not exactly comfortable. So I put on my Norma Rae hat for a couple minutes. I'm okay as long as the goal is for communication.... Sometimes I feel like I'm caught in the middle, ... A very important aspect of my job is to make a connection and gain trust of these teachers. And when I do tell administrators, teachers know. ...I clearly ask them, 'do you mind if I say? Do you want me to use your name?' And if they say 'no,' I respect that.

But sometimes I feel like I get bogged down with an administrator's concerns rather than focusing on the pile of concerns that are my reality every day. (Sara)

### ***Negotiating and Nurturing Relationships: Students***

***Supporting all students.*** Mary and Sara each had student caseloads of 20 or more students. However, when they went into a classroom to work with students, they made themselves available to all students in the class who might need help.

What I do is go into [the general education teacher's] realm, and I support whatever they're doing that day. ... I am an equal and it's great. It's fun. You go in and you actually can support kids, and I support all the kids. I love it. ... like I was in English classes last week, and I made sure every single kid in every class had an introduction written by the end of the class period. (Mary)

Students became so used to the availability of the coaches that sometimes those without IEPs would ask teachers for permission to work with Mary or Sara on an assignment or to go to their rooms for some quiet time during a test. Mary commented that some students had approached her to ask if they could be transferred into her homeroom. She noted, "When I ask students why they like our school, they most often say that the teachers are caring. I can't help but think that what we are doing with inclusion has contributed to this perception."

***Coaching students with IEPs.*** "I feel that much of my job is spent working with the student outside of class as a mentor to them. I think this shows up in the classroom...someone is in their corner, someone believes in them." (Mary) The coaches met with their assigned students every morning during a twelve-minute homeroom period. They used the time to

touch base...go over their goals, what they need to do. I keep track of every teacher, what test they're giving, what project is due. I have a two week look-ahead calendar that lists assignments due, I list what is going on in the school community, I list who needs to stay after school, I tell them what my schedule is and how I will be providing support that day. ....It's 12 minutes but every minute is used for the program. That's been extremely effective. I call it mentoring session with learning support. It's actually in their IEP as an accommodation. (Mary)

In homeroom, I try to touch base with all the kids at least once a week, one on one... the focus is on a specific goal. For example, ... using a [written] agenda to boost capabilities...using them for make-up work and deadlines, whether they be academic or somebody's birthday. I try to get them to use it as a life skill as a tool. Making a checklist, a shopping list of what they need over the weekend for a project. I use it as well

and I model it. I also write a weekly schedule on the board, with a weekly overarching goal. For example, the goal this week is organization, specifically of their notebooks. (Sara)

When I drop into either Mary or Sara's homerooms, I'm impressed with the extent of collaboration and information they have gathered from their colleagues. It's apparent that they have been in touch with all the grade-level teachers to know upcoming deadlines as well as current student progress. They use those 12 minutes to keep all their students on track. (Anna)

***Supporting students' strategic learning.*** Both Mary and Sara devoted time during homeroom to teaching students how to write and monitor goals. They also took advantage of down time during state accountability testing weeks to work with small groups on learning how to write measurable goals for their IEPs. They also rehearsed scripts students could use as part of a student-led IEP. Further, students charted and discussed their progress.

There's constant discussion about progress and what you're doing, what you're not doing, what you need to do, how can you do this better. ...[At the IEP meeting] these kids have so much knowledge about themselves, because we're constantly talking with them about who they are, where they're going, their goals are in there. ... We're all rallying around this [IEP] document - and the student, of course. ...They set goals. I stress to the students that this is what successful people do, they set goals for themselves. They're learning in life, that it's about setting goals and how to achieve them. Highly effective people do this. I view the IEP as this type of goal plan now. The IEP is real and meaningful. (Mary)

The use of goals in the IEP has moved way beyond mere compliance that I've seen in so many schools. The goals written by the students are actually goals that the students are committed to achieve because with coaching, they've taken the lead in writing them. These goals stay alive because the students examine teacher reports on their goals each quarter and rededicate themselves. The other benefit is that [the general education] teachers know they are reporting on goals that are important to these students. That means they can be part of the mentoring/ supporting process towards achieving those goals. (Anna)

Mary and Sara believed their role as a coach to students was an important addition to their teaching responsibilities, but acknowledged the challenge if students acted passively in regard to their own education.

I guess that's what I kind of focus on in homeroom when I have that 12 minutes with them - to focus on a positive, one good thing you did – I post it on every kid's desk at least a couple times a week. And something they might need to work on. I don't perceive it as a negative, but as an area of growth. As a teacher, here's something you did good, now where do we go from here. And I know that for some kids that drives them crazy. They want to be complacent.... Looking at them as young adults, going out on their own in less than 3 years, the mom in me I guess is concerned that they won't speak up for what they have a right to have. And that they are evolving as independent learners as well. There's a balance there. And the line between my helping and enabling them is a fine one. (Sara)

***Finding instructional time.*** Another challenge the coaches faced was limited time in the day for intensive one-on-one or small group instruction with students. Because students were earning course credits for a high school diploma and a career certificate, the daily schedule did not provide for study halls or a resource period. Students with or without IEPs who wanted extra help attended afterschool tutoring sessions at which coaches and general education teachers volunteered. The coaches advocated for a reconsideration of the school's and their schedules in future years to support more opportunities for small group and individual instruction during and after school.

### ***Supporting the Learning Support Coaches***

***Building on a vision.*** As is the case in most schools where inclusive educational practices have taken root, Mary and Sara noted the fundamental importance of supportive administration.

We have great leadership. ... you know [the principal] has a vision, that's why I came here....working with a principal who has a vision and a strong one and that I believe in and that I'm inspired by. So that's number one. (Mary)

The [administration] truly expect a team or collaborative approach to helping all students. ... They truly believe that we're all here as team players. (Sara)

The administration at Clearview has made it clear that the whole faculty is accountable for the success of all students. Early on, it was decided not to use the term "special education" because of the stigmatizing separation and attitude that implied. The term learning support coach affirms that all students can learn and that coaching will be available to teachers and students alike. I provide professional development to support this vision. I do not provide answers to the dilemma; instead I focus on them identifying the issues and provide tools so they can solve the problems. (Anna)

***Tapping into expertise.*** Beyond that vision, finding support for day to day problem-solving also was critical to their sense of success. Sometimes that came from typical sources such as the special education team leaders at the other district schools or the district's special education supervisor, especially when procedural and compliance issues arose. However, because no other schools in the district were using a consultative model, Mary and Sara often turned to Anna and to each other. During her first year at Clearview, Mary said,

That partnership [with the university] has been my support because I had really nobody in-house. I'm out here all alone and creating a program and really not knowing what that looks like.... We would sit and brainstorm, and [Anna's] an idea person, and I am, too. So we would get ideas in the middle of the night, and we would come in the next day and be excited and say 'how can we do this', and go over our creative ideas and then we would go and do it. And it was just like that -- one idea after another, one creative solution after another. Anna was part of this idea factory.

Sara also noted the value of having a learning support team.

[Anna and Mary] are my foundation, my go-to people every day, probably more so than they realize. ... Anna is the idea factory. She has what I see as a more academic background. I see her as a little more objective with some of my concerns and making me look at the flip side or alternatives I might not have considered because of my lack of experience, lots of reasons. ... And Mary is very systematic in her approaches to things. If there's a concern, she'll mull over it an hour, maybe a day, maybe a week before she'll come back with some tangible options on how to solve it. And she reminds me to sometimes step back.

Anna added,

I love working with the learning support team. Their commitment to student growth and achievement is strong, but so is their determination that teachers will be successful in their instruction. It's amazing to see how they think through problems. Usually, we start with a gripe session about some problem, but it soon turns to a discussion of the underlying issue. We ask, 'What exactly is the problem?' Once we can delineate it, we consider what we need to know more about and that's where I come in. I make phone calls and jump into the research. Sometimes we let it rest for a few days, but shortly one of us has a brainstorm – usually some way of looking at the problem that opens new possibilities for us. We come up with a game plan and agree to tasks.

***Shifting responsibilities to others.*** When asked about what would help to support their work, the Coaches suggested clerical support to manage their paperwork. They also suggested more professional development for general education teachers. Mary elaborated,

I would like [new general education teachers] to understand the mind of a student with a learning disability. Understand the different disabilities...what is it like to be in that kid's shoes... That would be the first thing and the second thing, 'what is an accommodation? ... Understanding the law and what is an accommodation and what it teaches the kid, how it levels the playing field and how they can really be successful when these things are in place. ... The [general education] teachers can provide a lot of the strategies and accommodations in class, I think. ... They rely a little too much on me...that would be another thing I would recommend that we work on – what's the difference between content enhancements and strategies, specific strategies for specific students. I don't think they know the difference. So we have to work on that.

Sara also commented on her need to get more comfortable with the coaching role as opposed to being a full-time teacher.

Whereas in the consultative model here we're finding that there's more planting seeds and hoping that the seeds come to fruition. Whether it's my working with teachers to help them help students, or working with students to help them help themselves. So I think that's the tricky part and I have to keep remembering that a lot of my successes may not be as obvious immediately as they were in a co-teaching situation. As a coach a lot of what I'm doing now I'm going to see positive results down the road and that's what I have to keep my eye on – that ball, rather than right in front of me. So there's a balance there. To try to look, each day at what tasks I need to accomplish and then looking down the road ... kind of waiting in anticipation to see some of my hopes come into fruition and that's a tough balance.

### ***Perceived Benefits for Special Education Teachers***

Reflecting on the differences between coteaching and the consultative model, the coaches highlighted the themes of teacher equality and resource flexibility as benefits of the consultative model.

I see co-teaching as not really working that well. I think that it's really difficult to have two people, strong personalities, which teachers tend to be, in the same classroom and that to be an equal situation without one person or the other feeling like it's not their classroom.... I think one person ends up being the teacher and the other one circulating or whatever. I think the consultation, what's so great about it is that you're not always needed in the classroom. So when you're co-teaching, you might be there twiddling your thumbs. You could be doing other things. [In] the consultative, I think, you go where you're needed. Although, sometimes you're needed in too many places. And that's the problem. So there probably needs to be more of us. But, I like the fact that ... I have the

flexibility to go where I'm needed. ... Maybe there's a critical student I need to go in and follow for a while or a critical class. So I have flexibility to go where I'm needed in the critical areas and it's usually based on requests by teachers. They want you there. (Mary)

In the collaborative-consultation model [at Clearview], the learning support coach is viewed as another professional educator. There are opportunities for them to share their instructional strategies expertise with general educators without them having to become highly qualified in each subject. They are respected for their professionalism and are acknowledged for their commitment to student learning. There is none of the "second class" teacher regard that frequently happens in a co-teaching situation, especially when there is no common planning time. (Anna)

### ***Perceived Benefits for Students***

***Academic opportunities and success.*** As noted earlier, the coaches recognized that being a consultant across classrooms allowed them to work with many students who did not have IEPs or 504 plans, but who benefited from additional strategic support in their academic classes. Also, as the general education teachers became more confident in their use of content enhancements and learning strategies, students with and without IEPs experienced those instructional benefits even when the coaches were not present.

In the first 2 years of the school, students with IEPs had a high rate of acceptance into their top three choices of career areas for their 10th grade year, and several received their first choice. Getting into a first choice career area depended heavily on academic progress and grades. In high demand career areas where enrollments were limited, teachers ranked students on grades and behavior.

It was a slow start with grades and the transition [in the first year], then we just 'shot up'. Every single student began to improve by year's end. It's just astounding... I can't even explain the feeling... It's kind of miraculous because this is an experiment that nobody thought would work, and it's working. You can see it in the grades and the data. In the beginning of the year about half the students were doing poorly in two or more subjects and half of those were failing all subjects. By year's end, only a few students had to go to summer school. (Mary)

***Self-knowledge and integration.*** Although not all students passed every class or were selected into their top choice career areas, the coaches observed that an important outcome for students with IEPs was increased self-knowledge that arose through coaching and mentoring opportunities in general education classrooms.

And that's what this program does for them. They're just like everybody else. And I know that they see kids in their classes who have the same or worse problems .... So I think their eyes are open to the fact that, 'I'm just lucky I have a plan to help me.' So, the self-knowledge as well as being able to communicate what they need so that when they get out there in the world they don't get taken advantage of, so they don't become less successful than someone else because they have this crutch or this disability. Change it around. It's not really a disability, it's just knowing yourself and being able to be self-determined, to be a self-advocate. Turn your strengths into something – a career or whatever you want to do with your life. It is being aware of the bigger picture that has significance. It's a different approach, which the inclusion program supports, where I couldn't probably say that as well in a self-contained setting because you're not a living example of the program. It is segregated. You are special. You are different. In this case they learn so much about themselves just by being with everybody else. It is on-the-job training, in-the-classroom training-real life stuff. The lessons that they learn every day in class interacting with all the students teach them more about themselves than I could without those daily experiences. As a coach I just take the lessons they are learning and point them out and emphasize them, using their experiences as examples. (Mary)

Students and their parents have reported what a relief it is to be at Clearview where they are not identified as special education students. Instead, they are humanized and treated as young adults with strengths and learning needs – but so are all the students in the school. Because they are in classes with students where the norm is high expectations, the students with IEPs generally achieve at higher levels than they had in the past. (Anna)

## **Discussion**

Studies of instructional arrangements that support inclusion of secondary students with high incidence disabilities have most often focused on co-teaching (c.f., Boudah et al., 1997; Scruggs et al., 2007; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002) or schools that employ an array of co-teaching, resource, and self-contained arrangements with consultation being a minor element in the mix (Idol, 2006; Laframboise et al., 2004; Wallace et al., 2002). Research studies of consultation by special education teachers have focused almost exclusively on elementary schools or provision of indirect services by specialists who have responsibilities across multiple schools (Schulte et al., 1990; 1993; Sheridan et al, 1996).

### ***A Different Approach***

The instructional arrangement at Clearview was different from those usually studied in two ways. First, while the primary responsibilities of the special education teachers (coaches)

involved a typical arrangement of indirect services to students through general educators' instructional activities, the coaches also had responsibility for direct services of frequent, brief coaching of students with IEPs, occasional coteaching with general educators, and afterschool tutoring. Further, these services were delivered in-house to grade-level cohorts of teachers and students. Second, the problem-solving focus of most special education consultation models is an individual student who is experiencing difficulties in the general education classroom, with a secondary goal of school-wide changes in instruction. That focus was reversed at Clearview, where the school culture established that the primary problem to be solved was implementation of effective instruction for all students, with problem-solving on behalf of individual students playing a supportive role.

This approach was a new experience for the two coaches who in their previous jobs had been primarily instructors in co-teaching, resource, or self-contained classrooms. They noted that the mix of indirect and direct consultation services required them to cultivate and negotiate multiple, instructional relationships with teachers and students. As coaches, they constantly navigated between voluntary interactions requested by teachers or students and mandated interactions such as progress monitoring and IEP development.

The approach at Clearview embodied the ideals of a collaborative-consultation model in that the coaches established equality in their professional relationships with general educators. Shared accountability for student success and development of shared teaching practices were made possible by the school's leadership, an emerging culture that valued collaboration, physical arrangements that facilitated access, and opportunities to tap into expertise of other teachers, the professional development specialist, and district colleagues. Although managing ever-shifting responsibilities could be overwhelming, the coaches valued the flexibility afforded to them for allocating their instructional expertise in ways that they perceived as increasing students' strategic learning opportunities and academic performance.

### ***Strengths and Limitations***

This study of special education teachers' experiences of a different approach to inclusive education benefited from prolonged engagement across two years by a participant observer at the school and external researchers. Because the collaborative-consultation approach was new to these teachers and the school itself was in the first 2 years of operation, there was a unique opportunity to purposively capture the teachers' experiences as they defined their new roles and contrasted their experiences with prior ones. Triangulation of themes occurred across multiple data sources and researchers. Further, findings were presented through extensive use of the teachers' voices, and member checks ensured appropriate use of their voices.

As is true of all case studies, transferability is dependent upon others' judgment of whether features of the case are relevant and help to illuminate their own situations. The newness of the school and the uniqueness of the teachers' roles are likely to limit a broad and direct application of lessons from the study's findings. Instead, the value of this case is likely to rest on comparisons with more typical situations, which can serve to prompt consideration of alternative

approaches to inclusion in secondary schools. Additionally, although evidence from student academic records and other interviews appeared to support the teachers' perceptions of benefits for students, this particular study was not designed to investigate the efficacy of this school's modified collaborative-consultation approach. That task is taken up by the larger study, which will follow targeted students and overall school performance across multiple years. Given these strengths and limitations, the study points to potential benefits and challenges of a modified collaborative-consultation approach in high schools.

### ***Implications***

***Flexibility of Instructional Arrangements to Capitalize on Shared Expertise.*** The modified collaborative-consultation model used at Clearview allowed the special and general education teachers to alter the intensity and duration of instruction as needed based on their shared assessments of individuals and groups in a particular class. Adjusting the instructional arrangement to ensure that students with IEPs are meaningfully engaged in the curriculum is a critical element of effective inclusion; both general and special educators must be flexible and quickly adaptable to alternative forms of instruction, assessment, and expectations in meeting the needs of diverse classrooms (Beattie, Jordan, & Algozzine, 2006; Boudah et al., 1997; Brigharm, Cobb Morroco, Clay, & Zigmond, 2006; Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Wallace et al., 2002; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

A modified collaborative-consultation model may help to address the common problem of under utilization of special educators as monitors and aides in some co-taught classrooms (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2007; Simmons & Magiera, 2007; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). However, to ensure that the expertise of special and general educators are fully realized in the classroom, both should be equipped with knowledge of various collaborative problem-solving processes and skills in interactive communications and evaluation (Knackendoffel, 2005; West & Cannon, 1988).

A potential drawback to the collaborative-consultation model used at Clearview was the limited ability to offer frequent, intensive specialized instruction, such as could be offered in a resource room. Having in-house access to a flexible continuum of services is one strategy often used by high schools that successfully support students with disabilities (Brigharm et al., 2006). Not having other special services at the school raised the stakes for teachers and students. Teachers were motivated to make the collaborative-consultation model work, because the only back-up for failure was moving the student to a different school in the district where self-contained academic classes were the norm. This happened just once in the first two years of the school. In that case, the student had previously attended private schools where he had never been identified for special education services. After a half year at Clearview, during which a variety of instructional supports were implemented without success and a formal eligibility evaluation was completed, the student's IEP team agreed that he would be better served in another school in the district where he could participate in an alternative curriculum and the state's alternate

assessment. Clearview had not yet explored the possibility of modifying curriculum in ways that would permit inclusion of students with significant intellectual disabilities.

***Enhancing Instruction by Establishing a Professional Learning Culture.*** Enthusiasm for adoption of an inclusive model may be affected if teachers feel it is a top-down directive in which they have little or no say, and which, especially at the secondary level, may appear to not respect the intricacies of content-specific instruction (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Vaughan & Schumm, 1995). At Clearview, the school hired only those teachers who would commit to supporting students with IEPs in the general education classroom. Importantly, the school then supported the general education teachers with on-demand consultant services of the coaches as well as the weekly professional development activities facilitated by the Specialists. The focus of these consulting and professional development efforts was consistently on expanding the instructional repertoire of the general education teachers based on their self-identified concerns and also on creating a shared repertoire of content enhancements and learning strategies that could be used across classrooms. This approach acknowledged the content expertise of the general educators who were charged with evaluating the merits of different instructional approaches within the context of their classroom while ensuring their access to evidence-based practices that were likely to meet the needs of students with IEPs and other students who might be struggling with the content. Further, the special education teachers also saw themselves as learners, and they actively worked to expand their knowledge and skills by working with the general educators to better understand subject matter and with each other, district colleagues, and the specialist to explore alternative instructional practices.

As a result, the school promoted the ideal of shared ownership of students and instructionally-focused collaboration that is a hallmark of effective inclusive secondary schools (Brigharm et al., 2006; Laframboise et al., 2004; Wallace et al., 2002). The school also seemed less likely to experience a dilemma inherent to collaborative models that rely solely on the special educator to actually deliver the instruction to students with disabilities; in those cases general educators are less likely to provide adapted instruction when the special educator is not present (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). An important secondary function of the school's approach was to demystify and minimize the stigma of receiving specialized instruction while preserving access to special educator expertise (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Laframboise et al., 2004; Wallace et al., 2002; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

***Planning for and Managing Collaborative Responsibilities.*** In addition to opportunities for professional development, teachers involved in inclusive practices cite such challenges as time for adequate planning and the need for assistance from their principal, consultants, fellow teachers, and parents to seek problem resolution (Beattie, Jordan, & Algozzine, 2006; Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 2005). Additionally, teachers and administrators have expressed concern about maintaining a manageable caseload of students and teachers in a consultative model in which special educators also have direct service or administrative responsibilities (Carpenter &

Dyal, 2007; Idol, 2006; Laframboise et al., 2004.) The Coaches at Clearview also struggled with finding the right balance of attention to collaborative planning and problem-solving, direct service provision, and administrative responsibilities such as compliance-oriented documentation of special education procedures and services.

Although their individual caseloads of 20-plus students taught by 15 teachers fell within the ranges recommended in older literature on consultative services (Huefner, 1988), they felt stretched and overwhelmed at times. In part this was because the school was in its first years of operation. Everyone at the school found themselves taking on additional tasks to help establish school procedures and set up a new building; an effort made more complex by adding an entire cohort of teachers and students the second year. Also, because the school was not yet fully enrolled, limited funding was available for clerical and paraprofessional support.

In the first 2 years of the school, no formal planning time was established for the coaches to work with individual teachers. They had the flexibility in their schedules to do so, but found themselves torn by a desire to respond quickly to the many incidental ideas and interactions resulting from their physical availability to other teachers. While teachers in inclusive schools can make do with limited and informal planning, intentionally building in formal structures that support collaboration is recommended (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Knackendoffel, 2005; Wallace et al., 2002). Given the layers of activity associated with building collaborative inclusive relationships, special educators in a mixed collaborative-consultation model must be supported by colleagues and administrators to arrange mutually conducive meeting times and purposes. Doing so recognizes and respects the many demands on special educators' time (Friend, 2000).

***Promoting Student Self-determination.*** Collaborative-consultation that includes coaching students on goal-setting and self-monitoring, as it did at Clearview, may be a path to increased student self-determination (Schumacher & Deshler, 1995; Wallace et al., 2002). Coupled with instruction on the use of learning strategies across academic classes, a coaching approach can help to transform students into active, independent learners (Deshler et al., 2006; Kloo & Zigmond, 2008). The coaches at Clearview perceived their roles as supportive of these outcomes, because they provided coaching on goals directly to students and worked with general educators to promote strategic learning across settings. They also recognized challenges to coaching students toward greater self-determination: they had limited time with individual students for any curriculum or instruction that could not be integrated into the brief homeroom period or the students' programs of study. It remains to be seen whether Clearview will adopt extra-time practices that have been used at other inclusive schools, such as learning resource periods for all students (Idol, 2006; Wallace et al., 2002).

## **Conclusion**

In a climate of increased accountability for student achievement and given the limited empirical research on the use of collaborative-consultation models in high schools, this study offers useful

insights into an alternative model of inclusive education that has potential benefits for students and teachers. Additional research that examines how to deliver regular, systematic collaborative-consultative coaching to students and teachers, the impact on students' self-determination and attainment of desired postschool goals, as well as the overall efficacy and sustainability of the model would be welcome.

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Table 1 *Demographics Years 1 and 2*

	Year 1 (%)	Year 2 (%)
Students (n)	240	517
Minority Identification	38 %	41 %
English Language Learners	<1 %	<1 %
Low Income	21 %	25 %
IEPs	8 %	8 %
Teachers (n)	17	37
Minority Identification	21 %	15 %
Master's Degree or Higher	58 %	42 %
Ten Years Experience or More	63 %	49 %