

Making Sense of Collaboration in Pre-service Teacher Education

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The purpose of this paper is to offer a perspective on the use of sensemaking theory (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) as a useful foundation in creating better teacher preparation programs and ultimately effective collaborative practices between general education teachers (GETs) and special education teachers (SETs). Moving towards more effective teacher preparation, we consider the complexities of the increased demands on collaborative practice and look for a framework that may help to guide the process. A foundation supporting the development of complex communities involved in the collaborative practices of GETs and SETs could create the potential to allow more students to achieve better academic outcomes.

Introduction

In today's diverse classrooms, student needs are complex and challenging to even the most experienced teachers. Each child has unique qualities and attributes in any given classroom. Collaboration between general education and special education teachers can lead to successful inclusion of all students and to ensure all students' needs are met effectively (Friend, 2005). Collaboration should be a targeted set of skills between general education teachers (GETS) and special education teachers (SETS) to better create inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers (Arthaud, Aram, Breck, Doelling, & Bushrow, 2007). More collaboration between GETS and SETS could create the potential to allow more students to achieve better academic outcomes. However, teachers must learn strategies that can create opportunities for students to respond and generalize their learned skills into practice.

Effective pre-service teacher education programs include collaboration, student management, and active learning (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Murphy, 2012; Pugach, Blanton, & Correa, 2011) in order for pre-service teachers to apply classroom skills into their teaching practice. Effective pre-service teacher development programs create opportunities for GETS and SETS to learn effective teaching skills, apply them into practice through field base experiences, case studies, and role play (Arthaud et al., 2007; Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005; & Leko et al., 2012) and work in collaborative partnerships in an effort to create the best possible student outcomes. As we move towards more effective teacher preparation, we consider the complexities of the increased demands on collaborative practice and look for a framework that may help to guide the process.

Making Sense in a Complex Community: Sensemaking Theory

The sensemaking theory, which has its roots in business with Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) and more recently with research from Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005), may prove a useful foundation in creating better teacher preparation programs and ultimately effective collaborative practices. Weick and colleagues (2005) identified the central features of sensemaking theory which include (a) a social process, (b) noticing and "bracketing" questions, (c) labeling and categorizing, (d) multiple reflections, and (e) taking action. Weick's features of sensemaking can be applied to the process of teaching.

Naturally, the practice of teaching involves a network of professionals who work toward improving the learning of students- this is the **social process**. When an event or situation takes place, such as a new student arrives to the classroom, a group of teachers (e.g., lead teacher, co-teacher, special education teacher, administrator, art teacher)

notices the situation and asks questions to bring clarity to the complex situation, such as, “What school did this student come from?” or “What’s the student’s story?” When these questions are asked, a teacher(s) brings the event (i.e., how to handle a new student to the class) into existence and perpetuates the next question which is “Now what should we do?” This is **noticing and “bracketing.”** From here, the teachers start to figure out what to do next, for example finding out the student’s present level of performance and what classes or groups the student would learn best in. This is the teachers’ attempt to create **labels or categories** to help the student succeed. After the group of teachers observes and spends time with the student, they may ask themselves, “How is this student doing?” “Are any changes in the groups, instruction, schedule, etc. necessary?” Such questions allow the teachers to think about what has happened or what is happening that affects the student, classroom environment, or other. This is when teachers engage in **multiple reflections.** From these questions and answers created the teachers will decide what to do next and **take action.**

Sensemaking theory simply is when individuals or groups of individuals come together to have conversations about a complex or ambiguous problem and identifies actions to reduce the problem (Rutledge, 2009). The problem may have to do with an event, issue, or relationship. When using sensemaking, individuals structure their conversation to ensure clarity and certainty, reflect on past actions or behaviors, ask questions, summarize what was discussed and make action steps. From this conversation, individuals then share the results and intended actions of the sensemaking conversation with pertinent personnel, for example, teacher peers, parents, students, mentors, and/or administrators. Since each individual in the sensemaking process may have different perspectives on a given problem, the group uses the multiple theories about what is happening and what needs to be done to create “sense” of the situation (Youngs, Jones, & Low, 2011).

Although it has its roots in the business world, the sensemaking theory can be applied to interdisciplinary events, issues, or relationships that have ambiguity. From tools developed using the sensemaking theory, interdisciplinary fields have been able to make sense of events, issues, or relationships. For example in the medical field, the sensemaking theory was used to create tools to identify defects in patient safety and ultimately decrease patient risks and hazards to patients’ safety (Battles, Dixon, Borotkanics, Rabin-Fastmen, & Kaplan, 2006). Another example in the field of higher education was the hiring of a new president in a large, public university who had specific strategic changes he wanted to make after his induction. First, he made sense of the university with visitations before the official beginning of his appointment. Then, he hired consultants to work together, created seminars to educate university members and stakeholders about change efforts, listened to feedback, and gained opinions from other faculty members of the university. In addition, the other faculty members and stakeholders had to make sense of the new president’s change efforts throughout this process. Some members first met the change effort with resistance, but as they made sense of the strategic change effort such as determining their own roles and the roles of others, their resistance slowly melted away.

If sensemaking theory is effective at reducing risks and hazards in critical need areas, such as patients safety and employee induction, then why are we not using it to reduce the risks and hazards of students with special needs and the teachers that serve them?

Using Sensemaking for General Education and Special Education Collaboration

Research shows that although pre-service teachers have positive attitudes about teaching students in inclusive classrooms they indicate deficits in skills needed to implement effective instruction for inclusion (Cook, 2002). Successful ways to make sense of pre-service teacher training complexity may not occur in teacher preparation programs. Thus, teachers could have difficulty applying learning into practice during pre-service training and ultimately the workforce. Sensemaking theory could be used in teacher preparation programs as a way to frame learning models and/or experiences during required courses, such as content areas (e.g., math, reading, science) or behavior instruction (e.g., positive behavior intervention and supports), and make specific connections to fieldwork.

Pre-service GETs and SETs as social teams could come together to make sense of what their roles and responsibilities would be in the real world context. In order to align theory to practice, teacher education programs can provide models for general and special education teachers to effectively implement sensemaking theory in decision-making. An example could be how decisions are made between GETs and SETs during IEP meetings. Inclusive service delivery models in general education classrooms require extensive collaborative work between GETs and SETs as teachers work together to meet the individual education goals of their students with disabilities. Discussions around appropriate education goals for students served in general education classrooms can be very complex. The roles and responsibilities of both the general education and special education teacher must be clearly defined in deciding the most effective instructional strategies for the student (Rutledge, 2009). The teachers who will be responsible for implementing the IEP must consider what evidenced-based instructional practices have been effective with a student. Instructional decisions should be supported by data on student performance. The steps of sensemaking can support making data-driven decisions, specifically as results are shared with all stakeholders and the instructional activities that support the IEP goals are established (Rutledge, 2009). At the end of viewing, reading, and/or experience the model pre-service GETs and SETs can work together to identify what features of sensemaking were used, why there were effective, and how they can apply these features in their field placements, as well as their daily life.

Working in a Complex Community: Interdisciplinary GET and SET Collaboration

Collaborative teams are created for purposes such as school improvement, instructional needs of students, community events, or behavior strategies. GETs and SETs now work together more often and are redefining their roles in order to meet the needs of all students in order to more successfully implement school wide programs, such as academic and behavioral intervention programs (see Simonsen et al., 2010). Collaboration supported by sensemaking theory can help create proactive school environments, heterogeneous classrooms, and planned time for co-teaching- all beneficial tactics to help students in today's diverse classrooms (insert Figure 1). Teacher education programs may benefit from foundational thinking supported by the use of sensemaking theory as they prepare both GETs and SETs for the rigorous challenges and demands of future classrooms. For example, sensemaking theory may provide a decision-making framework when a GET and a SET come together to plan instruction for an inclusive classroom. When planning for instruction using sensemaking, the GET and SET plan a lesson to meet the needs of all students. The general education teacher may plan the content and the special education teacher may plan for accommodations, adaptations, and/or modifications to support the instruction and meet student needs. Both teachers would have a conversation about how the students may interpret the lessons, problems that may occur with or without the adaptations/modifications, and how to maximize student engagement. Without sensemaking, conversation can be minimal, with scarce problem solving or heated conflicts. When planning, GETs and SETs can use principles of sensemaking to: map out any confusion, provide input of any current or potential problems, provide multiple perspectives, and take action- all in efforts to what happens in the meet the needs and improve the outcomes of all students.

Summary

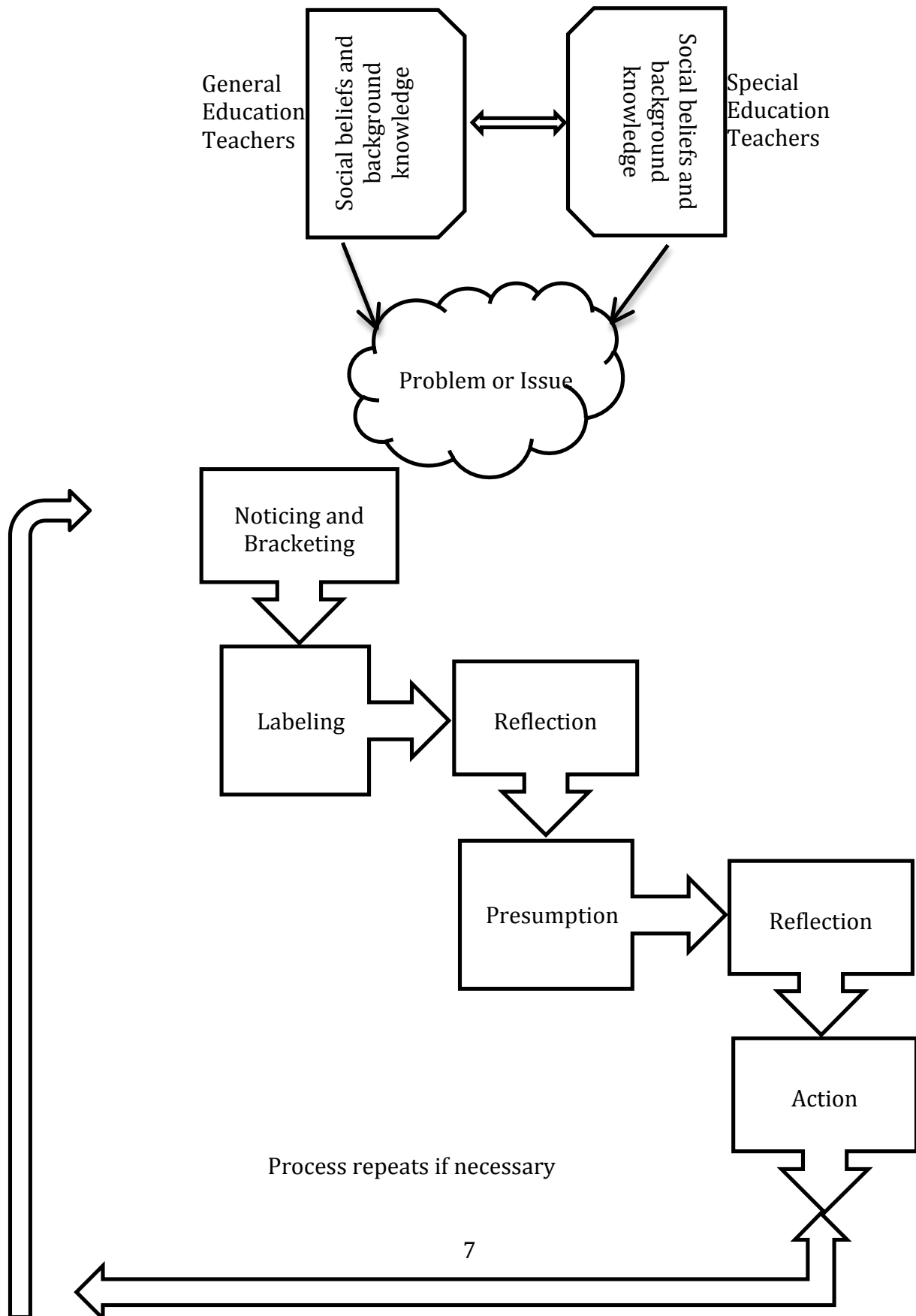
If teachers can be prepared with effective skills needed to confront complex situations with curiosity and productive dialogue then many conflicts that arise from collaborative relationships could be reduced or eliminated. Preparing teachers early in their training on using the sensemaking theory to frame discussions around complex situations is one way to increase effective collaborative relationships and work toward improving student outcomes.

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Figure 1. General and Special Education Teacher Sensemaking and Collaboration



Author Note

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