As a teacher, it is my duty and responsibility to encourage, motivate, and support my students so that they become positive and active citizens of our world. I believe that all children should have the opportunity to learn and be successful, and it is vital that we recognize and understand what each student needs to grow and flourish. That is why collaboration in special education is important. In order to support our students, we must be advocates for them, which means we need to work together to help them reach their goals.

Key players involved in collaboration vary per student; however, one key factor stays constant: the child. Of all possible members in our collaboration, the following could be on the team: parents, guardians, other family members, principal(s), therapists or doctors, paraprofessionals, classroom teachers, school nurse and/or counselor, the administrative team, peers, and of course, the student. In order to reach our mutual goals for the student, we must communicate effectively and focus on the positive outcomes of our teamwork.

My ultimate goal is to ensure the success of my students, and to do that I must consider factors that revolve around our collaboration. These factors are willingness, positivity, motivation, drive, flexibility, and heart. We must be willing to work together despite any differences. We must be positive because our actions carry through to the student(s). We must be driven and motivated to help our student(s) so that we reach our goals. We must be flexible in how our mutual goals are achieved so that the best possible route is taken. We must have the student at hand in our heart because they are the very reason we are collaborating. I realize that all of these factors must be in place to ensure successful collaboration in special education.

Though our hope and dream is to not have any barriers in our path, that is not always (if ever) the case when collaborating. There are always different experiences and perspectives brought to the table as well as differences of opinions and education. However, no matter the barriers, the goals for our students remain of most importance. Potential barriers may be unwillingness, time conflicts, roles on the team, purpose of the team, how to achieve the goals, power or authority, communication skills, language barriers, and any other possible obstacles. Nonetheless, knowing and understanding potential obstacles can better prepare us to move forward in helping our students. In doing so, we will identify the best way to collaborate.

This brings me to the various ways we can collaborate. We have committees, teams, and groups working together for our students. We formulate IEPs, BIPs, 504 Plans, and other plans to meet the needs and achieve the goals of our students. Sharing responsibility, time, and resources ensure that we find the most beneficial route. Co-teaching, consulting teaching, and utilizing other classroom assets such as PLCs, RTIs, School Reform Teams, and Consultation Models, further support collaboration that is within our reach. There are a multitude of options when supporting our students and that is why it is imperative we collaborate to opt for the best path.

Another aspect of collaboration to consider is the time in a student’s education and life in which collaboration should occur. In order to meet the diverse needs of our schools and students, collaboration should happen consistently and evolve as time passes. It is the level or depth of collaboration that changes as we identify or become aware of students who need additional support or attention. This can occur at any time during a student’s life and education. As we learn what our students need, we can adapt and help them transition from one step to the next.

Last but not least, we need to consider how culture and power affect collaboration. The environment of our school can greatly impact the sense of community required for positive and effective collaboration. Teachers, administrators, and students should integrate understanding and acceptance into core values of the school so that no person is isolated or misunderstood. Communication ought to be encouraged as well as safe environments within the school should be created. With our power as educators, we need to ensure the invitation and expectation to be honest, kind, accepting, and understanding so that our students have a sense of family, equality, and respect.