

Collaborative Professional Development for Identifying English Learning Potential in Elementary Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This systematic narrative review investigates the impact of collaborative professional development (CPD) models—including co-teaching and inclusive instruction—on the capacity of elementary educators to identify and nurture English language learning potential in students with intellectual disabilities (ID). Drawing on a comprehensive synthesis of peer-reviewed empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and case studies published between 2006 and 2025, the review reveals that effective CPD significantly shifts teacher perceptions from deficit-based to potential-oriented mindsets, thereby enhancing teacher self-efficacy and the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices. Key findings demonstrate that interdisciplinary collaboration—particularly through Child Study Teams (CSTs)—supports teachers in differentiating between genuine language acquisition challenges and intellectual learning disabilities, thereby enabling more accurate educational placements. Despite these documented benefits, persistent systemic barriers hinder CPD implementation, including inadequate planning time, budgetary constraints, and inconsistent administrative support. This review concludes that cultivating a culture of shared professional responsibility, supported by structured, job-embedded development programs, is essential for establishing equitable learning environments in which students with ID can achieve their full educational potential.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have witnessed a fundamental reorientation in global educational policy toward inclusive schooling, enshrined in landmark frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Buchner et al., 2021; Waisath et al., 2024) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which mandates equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all (Antoninis et al., 2020; Unterhalter, 2019). Yet despite this policy consensus, practitioners on the front lines of

inclusive classrooms continue to encounter profound challenges—particularly when supporting students with intellectual disabilities (ID) who simultaneously require English language instruction (Pérez-Valverde et al., 2021). The gap between inclusive policy intent and everyday instructional reality remains substantial, and it is at this nexus that collaborative professional development (CPD) emerges as a critical enabling mechanism.

Intellectual disability is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, with onset during the developmental period (Bertelli et al., 2022; Purugganan, 2018). In inclusive settings, students with ID co-learn alongside their typically developing peers, requiring educators who possess both specialized knowledge of disability-related learning profiles and competence in English language pedagogy (Young, 2024). The challenge is compounded when these students are also English language learners (ELLs), as educators must disentangle language acquisition processes from disability-related learning differences—a distinction that demands sophisticated diagnostic acuity (Burr et al., 2015).

Professional development occupies a pivotal role in shaping teacher capacity, yet isolated, one-shot workshops have consistently demonstrated limited lasting impact on instructional practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2016). Collaborative models—encompassing co-teaching, interdisciplinary consultation, and job-embedded inquiry—represent a more promising paradigm. As Breaux (2024) argues, collaborative teaching configurations not only improve the effectiveness of instruction but also create adaptive learning environments that produce stronger academic outcomes and a heightened sense of classroom community. Collaboration, however, extends beyond dyadic teacher partnerships; Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) describe a multi-level continuum spanning one-on-one partnerships, professional learning communities, and cross-institutional collaboration with external specialists.

The UAE Ministry of Education's inclusive initiative—articulated through the slogan 'School for All' (Coker et al., 2023)—exemplifies a governmental commitment to dismantling discrimination in educational settings. Internationally, Hornby (2015) conceptualizes inclusive education as a multidimensional construct that integrates students with special needs while honoring cultural diversity, rights, and socio-political realities. Rosenberg et al. (2024) further defines inclusive education as an approach where students with diverse disabilities learn alongside non-disabled peers with the guidance of well-trained educators—underscoring that the quality of teacher preparation is indispensable to realizing inclusive goals.

Despite the burgeoning literature on CPD in inclusive education, there exists a notable gap in systematic syntheses specifically examining how collaborative professional development models influence elementary teachers' ability to identify and foster English language learning potential in students with ID. The present review addresses this gap through a systematic narrative analysis of the relevant scholarly literature, offering a theoretically grounded and evidence-based synthesis to inform both research and practice. This review is guided by the following research questions:

- How do collaborative professional development models influence elementary teachers' beliefs and self-efficacy regarding students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive classrooms?
- What identification strategies emerging from CPD enable teachers to differentiate between language acquisition challenges and intellectual learning disabilities in ELL students with ID?
- What systemic barriers and facilitators shape the implementation of collaborative PD for inclusive education?

2. METHOD

This study employed a systematic narrative review design, which combines the structured search and selection transparency of systematic reviews with the interpretive depth of narrative synthesis. This approach is appropriate for heterogeneous bodies of literature where meta-analytic aggregation is not feasible due to variability in study designs, populations, and outcome measures. The review followed PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) principles to ensure methodological rigor and reproducibility.

PRISMA-ScR FLOW DIAGRAM FOR SYSTEMATIC NARRATIVE REVIEW: COLLABORATIVE PD ON INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES & ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING (2006-2025)

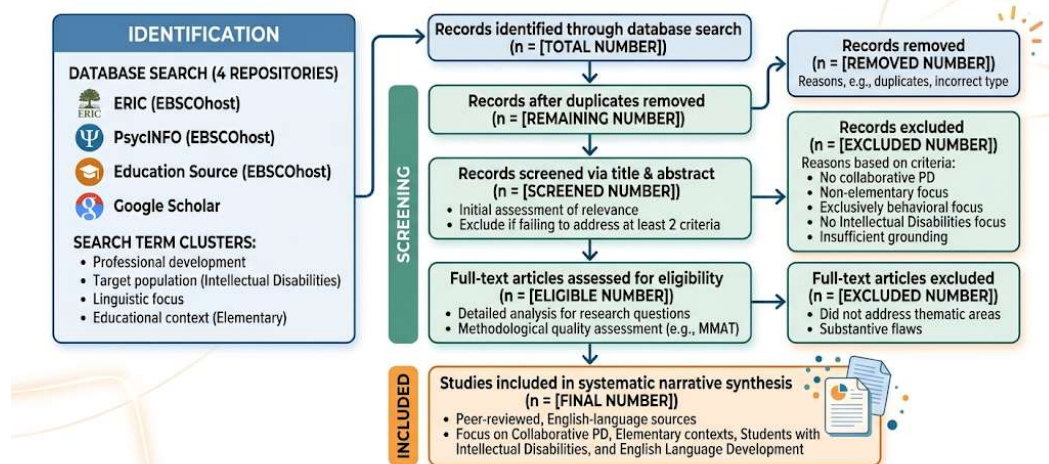


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR

A comprehensive database search was conducted across four major repositories: ERIC (EBSCOhost), PsycINFO (EBSCOhost), Education Source (EBSCOhost), and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their breadth of coverage across education, special education, teacher development, and developmental psychology. The search encompassed publications from 2006 to 2025 to capture both foundational scholarship and recent developments, with a focus on peer-reviewed, English-language sources.

Search term clusters were organized around four conceptual domains:

- Professional development: "teacher training" OR "teacher professional development" OR "collaborative professional development" OR "co-teaching"

- Target population: "intellectual disabilities" OR "learning disabilities" OR "developmental disabilities"
- Linguistic focus: "English language learning" OR "literacy development" OR "language acquisition" OR "ELL" OR "ESL"
- Educational context: "elementary teachers" OR "primary school educators" OR "inclusive classrooms" OR "general education setting"

Studies were included if they: (1) examined collaborative professional development models involving two or more educators; (2) focused primarily on elementary or primary education contexts; (3) addressed students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive educational environments; (4) explored teacher capacity for identifying learning potentials, strengths, or English language development in students with ID; and (5) comprised empirical studies (qualitative or quantitative), theoretical discussions, or in-depth case studies.

Studies were excluded if they: (1) did not involve collaborative PD components; (2) focused exclusively on secondary or tertiary education without clear elementary relevance; (3) addressed only behavioral interventions without reference to learning potential identification; (4) omitted intellectual disabilities from their scope; or (5) lacked sufficient empirical or theoretical grounding.

The selection process proceeded in two stages. During the initial title and abstract screening phase, records were assessed for relevance against the stated inclusion criteria. Articles failing to address at least two of the five inclusion criteria were excluded at this stage. In the second stage, full-text screening, the remaining articles were subjected to detailed analysis to determine the extent to which they addressed the overarching research question and contributed substantive insights to one or more of the identified thematic areas. Methodological quality was assessed using criteria appropriate to each study type: the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for empirical studies and critical appraisal frameworks for theoretical and review-based contributions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The systematic search identified 247 potentially relevant records. Following title and abstract screening, 89 articles proceeded to full-text review, of which 28 met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. Analysis of the included literature yielded five overarching thematic clusters, summarized in Table 1 below, each addressing a distinct dimension of the relationship between collaborative professional development and teachers' capacity to identify ELL potential in students with ID.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Included Literature

Theme	Key Insight
Characteristics of Collaborative PD	Co-teaching and inclusive instruction modify content and pedagogy for diverse learners, improving teacher practice and student outcomes.

Theme	Key Insight
Shifting Teacher Perceptions	CPD moves educators from deficit-based to potential-oriented beliefs, strengthening self-efficacy and inclusive instructional commitment.
Identification Strategies for ELL Potential	Child Study Teams enable differentiation between language acquisition challenges and genuine intellectual disabilities, guiding appropriate interventions.
Direct Impact on Identification Skills	Collaborative inquiry-based PD deepens teachers' conceptual repertoire and broadens recognition of diverse student abilities.
Challenges & Facilitators	Barriers include insufficient planning time and budgetary constraints; administrative support and job-embedded PD are key facilitators.

Theme 1: Characteristics and Models of Collaborative Professional Development for Inclusive Settings

Several CPD models emerged as particularly promising within inclusive educational contexts. Inclusive instruction provides access to general education curricula for students with ID through systematic modification of content, instructional methods, and assessment frameworks (Breux, 2024). Taylor et al. (2021) found that participation in inclusive instructional environments generated reciprocal benefits for students with and without disabilities, the broader classroom community, and teachers' own professional growth. This mutual benefit structure reinforces the logic of inclusive instruction as a systems-level intervention rather than merely a student-level accommodation.

Co-teaching—a structured partnership between general and special education teachers—represents one of the most frequently studied collaborative models (Friend et al., 2010). Co-teaching enables teachers to develop an in-depth understanding of the learning needs and strengths of students with ID through continuous sharing of pedagogical expertise, instructional planning, and formative assessment data. Rodríguez Herrero et al. (2023) emphasize that co-teaching interactions extend beyond classroom logistics, serving as a vehicle for mutual professional and personal development. Paulsrud and Nilholm (2020) further distinguish between cooperative teaching, special educational consultations, and mixed forms of cooperation, noting that each configuration entails distinct benefits and communicative challenges that must be navigated through clear role delineation and shared goal-setting.

Theme 2: Shifting Teacher Perceptions and Beliefs Through Collaboration

A robust body of research demonstrates that teachers' beliefs about the learning capabilities of students with ID exert powerful influence on their instructional practices and their propensity to seek out and recognize student potential (Xin et al., 2021). Teachers holding limiting beliefs may perceive students with ID as incapable of achieving in general education settings, which translates into lower expectations, reduced instructional differentiation, and diminished student opportunity to demonstrate competence. Notably, Xin et al.'s (2021) study of Chinese elementary schools found that

beliefs about students' abilities are often more central to a teacher's belief system than beliefs about their own pedagogical capabilities.

Collaborative professional development constitutes a powerful mechanism for belief revision. [Weiss et al. \(2018\)](#) note that while beliefs can be resistant to change, they are nonetheless susceptible to transformation through positive environmental conditions and supportive collegial relationships. [Wilson et al. \(2018\)](#) found that a supportive school environment and positive peer relations are linked to teachers' beliefs about their capacity to work with students with ID and implement inclusive strategies. [Suprayogi et al. \(2017\)](#) further established that higher teacher self-efficacy is predictive of greater engagement in inclusive instructional practices. [Breux \(2024\)](#) argues that collaborative instruction requires teachers to develop the metacognitive disposition to question their own assumptions about struggling learners—a disposition cultivated through structured, reflective collaborative engagement.

Theme 3: Collaborative Development and Use of Identification Strategies for English Learning Potential

A core challenge confronting inclusive educators is the accurate differentiation between learning difficulties attributable to language acquisition processes and those arising from genuine intellectual disability. [Burr et al. \(2015\)](#) confirm that no single assessment method has achieved empirical validation for this diagnostic purpose, making the differentiation inherently complex and susceptible to error. Such misclassification carries significant consequences: students may be placed in programs misaligned with their actual needs, foreclosing pathways to appropriate support and impeding educational achievement.

Child Study Teams (CSTs) emerged across the literature as a critical collaborative mechanism for addressing this challenge. Comprising specialists in second-language acquisition, cultural competence, learning disabilities, and specific content domains, CSTs function as advisory bodies to classroom teachers, generating evidence-based instructional recommendations and facilitating data-driven decisions about intervention and referral ([Burr et al., 2015](#); [Klingner & Harry, 2006](#)). Crucially, the cross-disciplinary composition of CSTs enables a more holistic and ecologically valid appraisal of student performance than any single educator could achieve independently.

Theme 4: Direct Impact of Collaborative PD on Teacher Identification Skills

Several studies examined the mechanism by which CPD directly enhances teachers' identification capacities. Collaborative inquiry-based PD—in which teachers systematically investigate shared challenges related to student learning potential—was identified as particularly effective ([Jao & McDougall, 2015](#)). [Butler and Schnellert \(2012\)](#) observed that teachers engaged in such inquiry cycles demonstrate significant improvements in their ability to construct, monitor, and adapt context-specific approaches targeting individualized student goals.

[Holmqvist and Lelinge \(2021\)](#) documented that CPD engagement fostered meaningful professional dialogue and collective sensemaking around the construct of

'learning potential' for students with intellectual challenges. This collaborative meaning-making allowed educators to transcend conventional deficit-focused framings and recognize a broader repertoire of student abilities and talents. The establishment of interdisciplinary collaborative networks further enabled teachers to develop more inclusive instructional programs attuned to the specific needs of diverse learners.

Theme 5: Challenges and Facilitators in Implementing Collaborative PD

The literature consistently identifies a constellation of systemic barriers that constrain the implementation of effective collaborative PD. Inadequate teacher preparation emerged as a primary barrier, with [Aktan \(2020\)](#) documenting that teachers insufficiently trained in disability-responsive pedagogy are ill-equipped to identify the learning potential of students with ID. [Howser \(2015\)](#) identified the lack of structured collaborative planning time as a frequently cited impediment, noting that collaborative planning—while pedagogically indispensable—is rarely embedded as standard practice in school schedules.

Budget constraints and the unavailability of qualified substitute teachers further hinder the release time required for PD engagement. [Orosco and O'Connor \(2014\)](#) underscore the necessity of administrative commitment: school leadership must proactively allocate resources, facilitate planning time, and cultivate a positive school environment that endorses the inclusion model. [Vedder-Weiss et al. \(2025\)](#) offer complementary evidence from Israel that CPD programs designed to satisfy teachers' psychological needs for autonomy and competence generate stronger motivation and a heightened sense of professional accomplishment. [Robertson \(2019\)](#) highlights the particular importance of collaboration between special education teachers and ESL specialists, whose combined expertise is essential for developing culturally and linguistically responsive instructional strategies.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic narrative review converge on a central conclusion: collaborative professional development constitutes an evidence-based and theoretically coherent mechanism for enhancing elementary teachers' capacity to identify and nurture English language learning potential in students with intellectual disabilities. This conclusion, however, must be understood within a nuanced appreciation of the complexity of collaborative processes, the multidimensionality of teacher belief systems, and the systemic constraints that shape what is possible in any given institutional context.

Conceptual Clarity: Distinguishing Collaboration from Co-Teaching

A critical conceptual distinction that emerges from the literature concerns the relationship between collaboration and co-teaching. [Robertson \(2019\)](#) defines collaboration as a style of direct interaction characterized by voluntary engagement, shared decision-making, and mutual goal-orientation—qualities that constitute a disposition rather than a structural arrangement. Co-teaching, by contrast, is a specific

instructional delivery model involving the partnership of two teachers within a shared classroom space (Breux, 2024). While co-teaching employs collaborative practices, it represents one instantiation of a broader collaborative disposition that may manifest across multiple configurations and contexts. Conflating the two risks narrowing professional development efforts to structural arrangements while neglecting the relational and epistemological foundations that make collaboration educationally transformative.

Belief Systems as Proximal Determinants of Identification Capacity

The evidence reviewed underscores the centrality of teacher belief systems as proximal determinants of identification capacity. When teachers hold potential-oriented beliefs about students with ID, they are demonstrably more likely to engage in deliberate assessment practices that surface linguistic and cognitive strengths rather than documenting deficits (Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021; Xin et al., 2021). CPD's efficacy, therefore, is not reducible to the transmission of new assessment techniques; its deeper mechanism operates at the level of epistemic reorientation—shifting the conceptual frameworks through which teachers perceive and interpret student behavior.

Breux's (2024) findings that participation in structured collaborative planning sessions promotes shared ownership for supporting students with disabilities further illustrates this point. The belief that student success in inclusive settings is a collective professional responsibility—rather than the exclusive domain of special educators—represents a fundamental attitudinal transformation with far-reaching implications for instructional equity.

Assessment Ecologies and the Role of Child Study Teams

The literature's convergence on Child Study Teams as a pivotal identification mechanism warrants particular attention. CSTs operationalize what Klingner and Harry (2006) describe as a multi-source, data-driven referral process that guards against the subjectivity biases inherent in single-educator assessments. By pooling expertise across linguistic, cultural, psychological, and pedagogical domains, CSTs create what might be termed an assessment ecology—a dynamic, multi-perspectival evaluation environment in which the complex interplay of language acquisition and intellectual functioning can be more accurately appraised.

The formative assessment emphases cultivated through CPD further complement this ecology. As teachers internalize CPD-derived frameworks for ongoing student monitoring, their capacity for early identification of both learning difficulties and learning strengths is progressively refined. This iterative, assessment-enriched professional practice aligns with Butler and Schnellert's (2012) model of collaborative inquiry as a self-regulating professional learning cycle.

Systemic Barriers and the Imperative of Administrative Leadership

The systemic barriers documented in the literature—insufficient time, limited budgets, and inadequate training infrastructure—are not incidental impediments but

structural features of institutional environments that have not yet fully adapted to the demands of inclusive education (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). Their resolution requires not only institutional goodwill but proactive leadership capable of reconfiguring organizational priorities. Administrative commitment to the inclusion model—expressed through resource allocation, policy-level mandates, and the cultivation of a professional culture that values collaborative inquiry—is a necessary precondition for CPD effectiveness (Howser, 2015).

Vedder-Weiss et al.'s (2025) findings on psychological need satisfaction within CPD programs introduce an additional dimension: the motivational architecture of professional development programs matters as much as their content. Programs that honor teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness generate more robust engagement and a more durable sense of professional agency—qualities essential for sustaining inclusive practices over time.

Table 2. Implications for Practice and Future Research by Stakeholder

Stakeholder	Practice Implication	Research Priority
School Administrators	Institutionalize structured collaborative planning time; allocate budgets for interdisciplinary CPD.	Evaluate long-term impact of administrative support on CPD fidelity.
Teacher Educators	Embed co-teaching practicum and inclusive instruction modules in pre-service preparation programs.	Examine how pre-service CPD training shapes in-service identification practices.
Policy Makers	Establish clear policy guidelines for Child Study Team mandates in inclusive settings.	Investigate cross-national variability in CPD policy and its effect on ID student outcomes.
Researchers	Prioritize longitudinal mixed-method designs measuring both teacher and student change.	Include student and family perspectives in CPD effectiveness studies.

Limitations of the Review

Several limitations of this review warrant acknowledgment. The primary reliance on English-language publications may have excluded important findings from non-Anglophone research traditions. The narrative synthesis methodology, while enabling interpretive depth, does not permit the statistical aggregation achievable through meta-analysis, and the heterogeneity of included studies precluded direct comparison of effect sizes. Additionally, the focus on elementary education settings limits the generalizability of findings to secondary or tertiary contexts. Future reviews should incorporate multilingual search strategies and employ mixed-method synthesis approaches to address these limitations.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic narrative review has examined the impact of collaborative professional development on elementary teachers' capacity to identify and foster English language learning potential in students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive

classrooms. The synthesis of 28 peer-reviewed sources reveals that CPD—when designed with intentionality, supported by institutional structures, and embedded in ongoing professional practice—constitutes a transformative mechanism for inclusive education at multiple levels. At the belief level, CPD generates epistemic reorientation, shifting educators from deficit-based to potential-oriented frameworks and cultivating the self-efficacy necessary for sustained inclusive engagement. At the identification level, CPD equips teachers with multi-source, data-driven assessment approaches—exemplified by Child Study Teams—that enable more accurate differentiation between language acquisition processes and genuine intellectual disability. At the instructional level, collaborative models such as co-teaching and inclusive instruction create dynamic learning environments that benefit all students while providing targeted support for those with ID.

The realization of these benefits, however, is contingent upon the resolution of persistent systemic barriers. Schools must institutionalize structured collaborative planning time, allocate adequate professional development resources, and cultivate administrative cultures that champion inclusive education as a shared professional commitment. Teacher education programs must integrate CPD competencies into pre-service preparation, and policy makers must establish clear, enforced guidelines for collaborative support structures in inclusive settings. The knowledge produced through collaborative inquiry does not merely improve individual teacher practice; it accumulates within professional learning communities, reshaping institutional cultures and generating virtuous cycles of inclusive improvement. Future longitudinal research—incorporating student and family perspectives and examining cross-national variability in CPD implementation—will be essential for deepening understanding of these dynamics and ensuring that the benefits of collaborative professional development reach all students, regardless of ability, language background, or educational context.

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