

CO-TEACHING: HOW TO MAKE THIS MARRIAGE WORK IN FRONT OF THE KIDS

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The demands placed on school districts have galvanized the development of a relatively new educational kid on the block – co-teaching. As a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the even more recent mandates of the newly revised Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, which defines “highly qualified” in new ways, it has become increasingly important for schools to utilize their resources using more effective and creative means. Time has taught us that students pulled from general education classes and taught in a resource setting do not benefit from the instruction of content area teachers. We also know that all general education teachers do not possess the expertise to meet the learning differences posed by students with disabilities. Co-teaching has become one of many collaborative strategies that schools are looking at in an effort to meet the needs of all students within this educational framework that we call school (Villa, Thousand, & Niven, 2004; Snell & Janney, 2005).

As a result of these mandates, there has been a mad scramble to place two teachers in the same room at the same time and call it co-teaching. Despite the fact that specific models exist and that there are a multitude of how-to books and articles on the subject, co-teaching is regarded as a way to address the letter of the law rather than as a really fun, exciting, and valuable

teaching technique to be used in conjunction with other inclusive strategies for the purpose of meeting the needs of all students in an inclusive school community. Co-teaching teams have been forced into the general education classroom where veteran teachers feel insulted to have a special education teacher placed in the room with the expectation that they both teach content area critical concepts. Special education teachers are frustrated because they have been left homeless, having their room taken from them, and have been thrust into a classroom that has been resided in by a veteran language arts, math, history, or science teacher who knows what to teach and how to teach it. The outcome of this dubious union is often a marriage that crumbles in front of the kids because the time and care needed to nurture and sustain it has not been provided.

Research Findings

Research findings have yielded mixed results on the effects of co-teaching. Some studies have indicated that students with disabilities showed larger gains in math and equal gains in reading when compared to students receiving pull out services (Bear & Proctor, 1990), and that consultation plus co-teaching was as effective as other service delivery models (Schulte, Osborne, & McKinney, 1990; Marston, 1996). Boudah and colleagues (1997) found that

performance of students with high-incidence disabilities worsened during co-teaching. Other studies have indicated that for high-risk students (Dieker, 1998) and students with learning disabilities (Rice & Zigmond, 1999; Welch, 2000), co-teaching is an effective practice. Even with these mixed results, 77% of middle schools are using some form of co-teaching.

Teacher Survey

The author conducted a study of the attitudes and concerns of secondary teachers from 15 urban and suburban districts in and around Seattle, Washington. Using a structured interview format, general and special education teachers were asked to reply to a series of open and closed ended questions. Participation was anonymous and interviews were conducted on a 1 to 1 basis. Teachers were asked to share their opinions as well as factual information about the effects of co-teaching. Anonymity protected the views of supporters as well as complainers.

The majority of the teachers surveyed did not participate voluntarily and most had no prior planning before engaging in the co-teaching process. Co-teaching proponents would argue that both of these features are necessary for a successful experience. Seventy-seven percent of the teachers surveyed said that co-teaching influenced student achievement. One-hundred percent of the 77% stated that the impact was positive and that students made academic gains. Only 10% of teachers surveyed said that there was no influence on student achievement.

Teachers were also asked, "What was

the most important feature in a co-teaching relationship?" The number one response was common planning time followed by having a positive working relationship with one's co-teaching partner. The third most important feature in a co-teaching relationship involved shared responsibility and philosophy between co-teachers. Mutual respect, shared resources, similar style and equal commitment were also rated high.

Ninety-seven percent of the teachers said they would participate in a co-teaching relationship if given another opportunity. General education and special education teachers said that co-teaching reaches more students, that it provides for better student care, that it is fun, and that the support of a second adult is invaluable. Those who would not repeat the experience cited need for training and resources as a primary factor. Also, these teachers indicated that co-teaching does not necessarily meet the needs of all students, especially those with significant needs.

Co-Teaching Lessons for Learning

There are no recipes for the development and implementation of a co-teaching model. However, there are lessons that can be learned from this study that will help optimize success in building and sustaining relationships among co-teaching teams. The following recommendations are designed for administrators and teachers thinking about beginning the practice of co-teaching. Most important is for the administrators and teachers to fully support one another from the beginning to the end of the co-teaching relationship.

- **Start small and ask for volunteers.** Many teachers are self conscious and reluctant to allow a peer to watch them teach, especially when the other teacher is an expert in his/her field. One of the benefits of the co-teaching relationship is the opportunity for professional growth that comes from giving and getting feedback from a well-respected peer. What better opportunity for feedback than from teaching with another in the context of the classroom?
- **Place value on co-teaching as one of many inclusive practices.** Discuss inclusion and its benefits. When all students are valued, students without disabilities have the opportunity to develop into more compassionate and caring individuals; students with disabilities feel a part of the entire school learning environment. Inclusive schools hold the belief that all students are full members of the educational community. From school clubs to ball games to school programs and class make-up, diversity should be valued and celebrated.
- **Find time for mutual planning time.** There is an old adage, "You get what you pay for." This adage is most applicable to the practice of co-teaching. The relationship is no bigger than the investment of time it reflects. A minimum of 45 minutes a week is a must. How can two

teachers practice their craft simultaneously in front of a class full of students without having time to plan? If the co-teaching team fails to plan together, co-teaching should not be used. Schools should make mutual planning a high priority. It is that important!

- **Practice parity.** The general education and special education teachers should treat one another as equal partners. Parents should have equal access to both during open house meetings and parent-teacher conferences. Both teachers should be represented on report cards, on the name plate that identifies the classroom and in conversations about the classroom. Both teachers are responsible for all the students in the classroom, therefore both teachers should be fully represented when it comes to all aspects of classroom identification. This includes the ownership of materials, supplies, books, and arrangement of the physical environment.
- **Have fun.** Co-teaching offers many wonderful opportunities for collaboration and exploration of the practice of teaching. All teachers experience those wonderfully funny, rich, teachable moments where one's fondest desire is to have someone else see it too. Here is the chance to share some of the best teaching moments with someone else, someone who understands the context and the participants.

- **Don't Overlook the Small Stuff.**

As a result of training hundreds of teachers, one message continues to ring loud and clear: the small stuff becomes big stuff and can potentially jeopardize a relationship if not attended to. Teachers come to work with different beliefs, values, and thoughts about students and how lessons should be taught. Perspectives vary on everything from discipline to bringing necessary materials. When two adults interact in the context of students, issues that were not previously thought of will invariably surface. Take these as they come up and come to mutual agreement on how to resolve them. Do not allow a small issue to fester into an open, mortal wound!

- **Communicate, communicate, and communicate.**

It is imperative that two teachers working in the same classroom have ongoing dialog about what bugs them, their pet peeves, the good parts, the tough parts, the struggles and the victories. Communication needs to be open, honest, confidential, and continuous. There is no substitute for daily, sometimes gut-wrenching and cathartic, yet cleansing and growth-causing communication.

- **Measure student progress over time.**

Little data exists that supports the practice of co-teaching and its effects on student learning. The Seattle study suggests that students profited from the practice. This is

evidenced by the overwhelming number of teachers reporting that the practice was beneficial to students. Additional outcome data with emphasis on both formative and summative measures must be gathered in order to truly determine the effectiveness of this widely used practice.

- **One size does not fit all.** Although co-teaching seems to be a promising practice, this does not mean that every student can have his/her educational needs met this way. The Seattle teachers indicated that students whose disabilities were severe sometimes did not profit from being in a co-taught classroom. Careful attention to each student's needs must still be the standard on which all decisions are made.

Final Thoughts

The practice of co-teaching has the potential to be a wonderful strategy for meeting the needs of all students. Working in partnership with another teacher, bouncing ideas off of one another, planning and orchestrating the perfect lesson, having two pair of eyes and four hands, creating something that is better than that which each partner brings ...what better way is there to teach?

The results of this study are encouraging. Even considering that most of the participants were told rather than asked to co-teach, the overwhelming majority said they would do it again, and that it had a positive effect on student achievement. Further

study is needed to determine the exact effects on student achievement in a variety of subjects and classrooms, and to examine the effects on students with significant needs.

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