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ABSTRACT

This paper describes collegial coaching as a means of providing general and special educators with the collaboration, materials exchange, and emotional support needed to teach all children in an inclusive setting. A brief review of the literature precedes a discussion of prerequisites for collegial coaching (such as self-confidence and respect for the collegial partner). An action plan is outlined, involving staff development through group building activities; instruction in nonjudgmental mediational competencies; observational techniques; and the policies, procedures and theoretical-conceptual aspects of inclusion. The action plan's guidance for collegial pairs includes developing a mission statement, establishing generalized goals, and identifying specific objectives. The final stage of the action plan is implementation of an inclusive classroom approach that stresses individualization, alternate assignments, and collegial evaluation of progress. (Contains 17 references.) (DB)

Collegial Coaching, Special Needs, and the Nontraditional Classroom

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Introduction

Providing inclusive education, effectively and confidently, challenges educational professionals to versatility beyond the pages of a teachers' manual or the undergraduate education courses of the past. Diversity within the classroom necessitates active, individualized intervention to address the learning needs of all students. But, preparatory education courses for preservice teachers often fail to include the specialized background knowledge and techniques to provide teachers with the confidence to become versatile. Gone is the era when children come to school with full stomachs, healthy emotions, and circumspect passage to and fro. Gone is the classroom where students sit quietly in symmetrical rows, rotely responding to standardized questions posed by the teacher. Whether the challenge of meeting individual needs arises from cultural differences, disabling conditions or societal misfortunes, the classroom has evolved into a puzzle box of diversity. Our changing society has determined a changing role for America's teachers as they seek to piece together versatile solutions that facilitate learning for each child.

Traditionally, classroom teachers were responsible for educating the physically and cognitively "average" student. Before 1975, most students falling outside the norm were educated at home or in specialized schools. Neither the general education teachers nor their students interacted greatly with students with disabilities; teachers continued to provide learning experiences for the average child.

Then passage of federal laws and a multitude of resulting court decisions directed public schools to provide for the "free, appropriate" education for all qualifying special needs students. Special classes were formed and regulations were issued. Two parallel educational systems

coexisted to educate the children in America's schools: general or "regular" education and special education.

General education was minimally affected by the genesis, as the majority of disabled students were served on a path that ran parallel to the "mainstream", with separate funding, separate curriculum, and separate teachers with separate certification requirements (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Although the special education trail was visible to the travelers on the general education track, few pioneers attempted to travel together. Garmstom (1987) reported low rapport and less contact between segments of the school staff in schools with exceptional education centers. The paths of general education and special education became more divergent, contrary to the intent of the legislation. Approaches to teaching special education became as varied as the students; the range within each disabling category was broad. Law stipulated that special education teachers implement an individualized educational plan to document the educational progress of every child under their care. Concurrently, general education appeared more traditional in curriculum with group instruction taking priority over individualized learning and progress represented by a structured grading scale from "A" to "F".

Shifting Responsibilities

The first fifteen years following the passage of Public Law 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, children with disabilities were minimally mainstreamed into general education classes. Rogers (1993, p. 1) defined mainstreaming as ". . . the selective placement of special education students in one or more "regular" education classes". Personal experiences with mainstreaming usually connoted admission to general education classes if the disabled child could maintain progress equivalent to other students in the class.

Inclusion, however, demonstrated a shift in perspective, and ". . . involves bringing support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students.)" (Rogers, 1993, p.1). Placement reviews of disabled children resulted in a movement to include them with higher frequency in general education settings. While the introduction of disabled students necessitated an examination of their special needs, teachers found that the needs were not greater than the needs of some general education pupils, albeit different in scope (Rogers, 1993). What must not be forgotten is the fact that the reintroduction of special needs children into general education does not allay the needs that formed special education and necessitated special education laws in the first place (Singer, 1988). Modifications must be introduced to encompass the needs of all students. Inclusion without a web to support it will deny every partaker the opportunity to experience this rainbow of diversity available in the reintroduction movement.

Mounting research now indicates that the avenues of teaching, both special and general, prosper from similar educational practices (Cannon, Idol, & West, 1992). Teachers, previously functioning in solo from other teachers (Beyer & Cuseo, 1991), are finding that collaboration, materials exchange, and emotional support are prerequisites for successfully teaching every child. The focus of inclusive teachers must dually embrace students and colleagues to insure a successful educational practice.

Collegial Coaching

Traditionally, all teachers found themselves isolated within their classrooms although physically surrounded by other teachers in the building (Costa, 1993; Lyman, 1993; Keedy & Robbins,1995). Alone, teachers made choices that influenced both classroom climate and

learning environment. They were the primary decision makers within "their" classroom and came to feel comfortable in that role (Lyman, 1993).

The restructuring movement in education has now broadened the decision-making environment of teachers to include school-based leadership and management positions. Teachers find themselves in positions of leadership; the realm of dominance spreads beyond the classroom (Costa, 1993). Teachers share decisions with other teachers, providing valuable technical support. Joyce and Showers (1982) first mentioned the term "coaching" to reflect a technical support system among teachers.

Garmston (1987) delineates between the two most common forms of coaching: technical and collegial. Technical coaching possesses a component of peer evaluation, supervision, or accountability (Hanson, 1992; Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993; Nolan, Hawkes, & Francis, 1993). Collegial coaching refers to peer-centered collaboration, usually in pairs, where experiences are shared, knowledge is pooled, and observations and neutral feedback are combined to build a nonjudgmental awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each participant. As reported by Colton and Sparks-Langer (1993, p. 50), "Collegial environments feel safe and nurture thoughtful practice. In such settings, trusting relationships blossom and reflective dialogue begins."

Although the methods of collegial coaching are site-based, certain guidelines universally define its purposes: raising student achievement and producing insightful teaching. Research into collegial classrooms has shown academic success in specific grade levels. Collegial sharing has invited new teaching methods to encourage problem-solving and increased writing activities in middle and junior high school students (Cook & Karr-Kidwell, 1993; Johnson, 1993). Along with the interpersonal support that characterizes collegial coaching, sharing within the classroom

serves as a catalyst to insightful teaching. Teachers can relate prior experiences that function convergently to aid in addressing individual needs. Collegial coaches may bring an agglomeration of knowledge, familiarity, and training to the collegial relationship; pedagogy prospers. The combined body of teaching experiences can be compared to serve as a database of problem-solving and instructional decisions (Losee, 1993). The partnership can spark creativity and strengthen individual accountability in educating all students (Lyman, 1993), regardless of student need or depth of disability. Keedy and Robbins (1995) report that their review of the literature indicates that teacher productivity, expertise, and cohesiveness increased subsequent to collegial coaching. Special education teachers, formerly isolated from their general education peers, may find they have many particularized techniques that are valuable within an inclusive classroom.

Prerequisites for Collegial Coaching

Collegial coaching can provide a means to exchange information about classroom management, instructional methods, and conceptual frames. The benefits, however, may not be realized without certain convictions. Collegial coaching pairs must volunteer to share a mission and a degree of commitment. Each partner should believe that the inclusion of special needs students into a general education setting can benefit all students by preparing them to take a productive position in an inclusive society. The weight of exchange must not rely on a single member of the team. Both persons must value an equivalence in classroom modifications and adaptations.

Each member must arrive at a collegial coaching experience with self-confidence, mastery of the subject matter, and respect for the collegial partner. They must understand that their interaction is personal, unique, and particular to their circumstances. Each collegial pair

will be different from others simply due to the experiences and expertise that each partner brings to the classroom. They are mowing a new path for their students; they must feel that an inclusive classroom can effectively operate through the blending of multiple perspectives.

Action Plan for Collegial Coaching

Staff development

Collegial coaching can be initiated in many different ways to take many different turns. One first step is to teach teachers to successfully collaborate. Promoting this spirit of cooperation can be either formal or informal, but the concluding goal is to inform the collegial pioneers about techniques to build consensus. Lyman (1993) suggests group building activities based on cooperative learning strategies to foster a mutual respect and understanding of individual strengths, weaknesses, and styles. Cooperative learning exercises can serve to build trust and reliance between partners.

Garmston (1987) relates several nonjudgemental mediational competencies of a coach that can be used as a training curriculum: learning to paraphrase what the partner says; questioning for clarification; probing for specificity, clarity, elaboration, and precision; waiting in silence for a response; and, collecting data and presenting it objectively. By understanding the passive or active verbalizations of a collegial partner, interpretations of scenarios are clarified. Such an understanding by partners facilitates effective collaboration; neither partner feels threatened by constructive criticism nor additional solutions. Active learning by both partners in mediational strategies can ease transition and minimize misunderstandings in collegial coaching within the inclusive classroom.

Another helpful staff development session might be specialized training in observational techniques to lend an empirical mien to the collegial relationship. Documenting the frequency

and/or duration of identified teaching and learning behaviors provides initial data to assess target goals. A basic cognizance of behaviors can supply valuable information for goal-setting and strategic planning.

Further training components to be discerned within a staff development sessions include training in policies, procedures and theoretical-conceptual aspects of inclusion. Collegial personnel should be aware of their ethical responsibilities toward all students to secure equal opportunities to learn. Sessions may include legal and historical frameworks regarding the integration of special needs populations.

Developing a Mission

Subsequent to training in collaborative techniques, collegial pairs need to determine their mission for the school year or designated period of time. They need to feel that they own a common goal and that they can make a difference (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993). Ideally, the collegial coaching program for inclusive classrooms should begin at the beginning of the school year, although the program can be initiated at any time throughout the term as needs dictate. Mission statements should be general and represent a mind set or commitment of philosophy. For instance, a global mission statement could be stated as follows: "The general education classroom will be accountable in the education of children with special needs."

The mission statement is further defined by generalized goals and refined by specific goals or objectives. Determining how each child learns best and reflecting the preferential choices within the classroom are site-specific. The modifications in the delivery of instruction result from the synergy of the collegial pair and are correlated to the students' needs. The collegial teams draw upon their experiences, knowledge, and creative thoughts to make the classroom a genuine learning place for the students.

For example, general goals may include:

- Alter the ecology of the classroom to permit total physical access to learning materials, and to encourage individualization through area definition.
- Provide learning alternatives to traditional paper-pencil tasks for all students to demonstrate knowledge in different ways.
- Design appropriate assignments with primary sources to measure that learning is taking place through valid and reliable methods.

Only through exchanging information about students via techniques learned in the collaboration phase can the collegial pair determine a course of action for distinct students. One universal plan will not work for every situation; frequent collegial exchange is vital to individualize learning. The ecological and instructional modifications, managed through collegial intertwining, should ensure that segregation of special needs students does not persist within the inclusive classroom. Specific goals for encouraging active learning are not predetermined prior to the arrival of the students, unless one member of the collegial pair has extensive experience with any specific student. Rather, the strategies for altering the traditional classroom environment and instructional practices must undergo frequent formative evaluation for efficacy. Adaptations must be flexible and measurable.

When special needs students are present in an inclusive classroom, explicit care must be taken when making assignments that demonstrate that learning is taking place. Collegial pairs should monitor their assignments by previewing and altering them, if necessary. Concern should reflect awareness of individual learning styles and modalities, language-appropriate wording, multiple options for feedback, and merited complexity. Appropriate assignments are essential to

measure, document, and evaluate both teaching and learning. Suggestions of alternative assignments for students' learning and evaluation may include some of the following:

- Building collections
- Oral reports by an individual or as a member of a group
- Performances or plays
- Role-playing
- Taping a report
- Demonstrations before the class
- Building a model
- Photography
- Making telephone calls
- Simulations or real situations
- Video or multimedia presentations

Changing the Approach

Upon learning the techniques for collaboration as suggested in the first stage in collegial coaching for inclusion, and formulating a mission or philosophy for encouraging equity in learning opportunities for all children, the third stage involves the actual classroom. The inclusion movement directs the teachers' new roles, vital in the education of special needs children in general classroom settings. No longer are all students receiving exactly the same lesson at the same time and learning it at the same rate. To present material in the best way for all students, classes can be flexibly divided into subgroups: one person working independently, a

student and a teacher working together, and several small student groups of varying sizes depending on the purposes of the work.

Individual activities may be handled by the teachers in a number of ways. From a more traditional teacher-dominated classroom, slowly begin to introduce other ways of conducting class. Students may need to learn to function somewhat independently from their teachers. The process must be consistent as students may have prior training to rely on a teacher-directed classroom. This is a time of adjustment for teachers and students alike as independence is necessary to thoroughly tap the potential of individualized learning. Students require time to learn to function in another way. As in a traditional classroom, they will make mistakes, feel insecure, and draw exiguous conclusions, but their failure simply reinforces the need for consistency. With repeated encouragement yet subtle stubbornness, the teachers can present their class with autonomous learning skills.

The teachers may begin individualization by offering alternate assignments for one or two students or by trying a project with a small group while the traditional instructional format is continued with the remainder of the class. The children with special needs are to be considered contributing members of any group with pursuits to facilitate their learning. Documentation of processes and procedures should be collected throughout the initiation of individualized teaching and the process of collegial coaching. The data can supply information for future replication.

Teachers may wish to organize the class into committees to share in planning for specific parts of the week: an outside speaker, oral presentations, an experiment, a new topic, or a test. This avenue of organization encourages leadership. democracy, and responsibility. Committees may be permitted to assume as much responsibility for routine functioning as possible to maintain an exciting, equitable and diverse learning adventure.

Both collegial teachers evaluate the teaching successes or failures through collected data, drawing upon their previous experiences, critiquing the teaching practices of the partner, practicing constructive criticism, making judgments, and altering the procedures as necessary (Beyer & Cuseo, 1991). Collegial coaching innovatively revitalizes the classroom as the successes and problems are shared; collective knowledge multiplies.

Conclusion

The movement to involve children with special needs has shifted teacher practices from an autonomous setting to a collaborative approach. Special education teachers and general education teachers have many ideas and experiences to share. In a non-threatening manner, collegial coaching can provide the opportunity to maximize teacher exchange.

Pioneers in the inclusive education movement must document and share their results with other professionals through empirical data and objective narratives that document both successes and failures in instruction and professional interaction. Collegial coaching provides a support system to face the multitude of diverse requirements in the modern classroom. Askins and Mezack (1994, p.7) state, "We now seem to share a common language as we discuss our school."

Inclusive classrooms mirror society . . . diverse and varied. Inclusive classrooms prepare students for life beyond the classroom where cooperation, compromise, and understanding flourish. Inclusive classrooms empower students to reach their potentials and measure success by the joy of learning. If a designated method of collegial coaching can facilitate the successes of all students and maximize learning, our classrooms can reflect society with all of its excitement and diversity.

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