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# Inquiry into Co-Teaching in an Inclusive Classroom

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Two heads are better than one. It is difficult to dispute the logic of this statement which asserts the value of collaborative work over individual thinking. Two people engaged in the same task seems efficient; pooling expertise and resources a sound idea. Therefore, it is not surprising that co-teaching has gained prominence as a “best-practice” methodology in inclusive classrooms and schools (Schwab Learning, 2003; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004; Walther-Thomas, 1997). However, the pedagogy of co-teaching, or two teachers working as an instructional team, is not a new idea (Bair & Woodward, 1964) nor is it exclusive to inclusive classrooms (Roth & Tobin, 2004). Within the particular context of inclusive schools, co-teaching has been described as: “an educational approach in which general and special educators work in a co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly teach academically and behaviorally heterogeneous groups of students in educationally integrated settings (i.e., general classrooms)” (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989, p. 18).

As a teacher educator, I prepare special education teachers to work in a variety of settings including inclusive classrooms with co-teaching models. I teach courses in curriculum, methods, and collaboration, and the pedagogy of co-teaching is threaded into each course. My graduate students are both in-service and pre-service candidates and the former group generally includes co-teachers working in inclusive classrooms. The experiences of the co-teachers enrich our class discussions and inform my understanding of co-teaching pedagogy. In an effort to broaden my knowledge of this promising pedagogy, I conducted a year-long inquiry into the work of a fourth grade co-teaching team in an urban school.

In preparation for the inquiry process, I reviewed the professional literature on the topic of co-teaching. The literature includes an array of topics related to co-teaching such as efficacy research (Murawski & Swanson, 2001) and explorations of the method in relation to particular content areas (Schnorr & Davern, 2005). However, I was most interested in the critical issues of collaborative planning (Bessette, 2008; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Walther-Thomas, 1996; Walther-Thomas, 1997) with particular emphasis on lesson planning (Dieker, 2002; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004; Vaughn, Schumm, Arguelles, 1997); methods and instructional strategies (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1995; Bauwens & Hourcade, 1997; Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend 1989; Cook & Friend, 1995; DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004; Vaughn, Schumm, Arguelles, 1997); and the development of the relationship between co-teachers (Cook & Friend, 1995; Gately & Gately, 2001; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004).

In addition to reading the professional literature, my work in teacher education has also been informed by supervising student teachers in public elementary schools. This work brings me in direct contact with co-teachers in inclusive classrooms. In this capacity, I have become aware of both the potential

and the challenges of the co-teaching model. There are classrooms where students and teachers are clearly benefiting from a productive co-teaching partnership. However, I have also witnessed inclusive classrooms where there is little collaboration resulting in a special education teacher instructing only students with disabilities while the general educator works exclusively with the typically developing students.

There is a common complaint from co-teachers that they have not received sufficient training and preparation for the role. My observations support the work of Cook and Friend (1995) who found that co-teachers received little or no training to co-teach. More recently Kamens (2007) found that even student teachers in co-teaching settings were "...left to figure out it for themselves" (p. 163). In the public schools, I noticed that teachers were being supported by literacy and math coaches, new teachers were provided with mentors, but co-teachers were provided with little support and guidance on how to implement and deal with this complex model. I began to question if the types and levels of support available to a co-teaching team impacted their productivity and effectiveness.

Teaching is about relationship, the one that inevitably develops between a teacher and his/her students (Intrator, 2006). A caring and committed teacher has the capacity to build relationships based on "having solidarity with students" (Nieto, p. 207). In the case of an inclusive classroom with a co-teaching model, there is also the relationship between the special educator and the general educator that warrants attention. The forging of a relationship between co-teachers has been described as a developmental process (Gately & Gately, 2001; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004); co-teachers moving through necessary stages over time that ultimately results in a meaningful and productive partnership. I also questioned if gaining insight into the development of the co-teachers relationship would reveal ideas of how to effectively support their collaborative work. All of these ideas and experiences were the impetus for this inquiry into co-teaching methodology. The following focusing questions framed the inquiry process: How does the relationship and teaching practice of a new co-teaching partnership evolve throughout the course of a school year? How can a consultant support the work of a new co-teaching partnership?

### **Philosophical Framework: Fields of Influence**

In an effort to thoroughly explore the proposed questions about the pedagogy of co-teaching, I realized I would need to get close to the work of teachers. With this understanding, my exploration into co-teaching was influenced by several particular fields of study: descriptive inquiry, collaborative consultation, and practitioner research. My knowledge of inquiry is grounded in the work of the

Prospect Center (Himley & Carini, 2000) and their descriptive processes that value looking closely at the work of children and educators with an emphasis on attending to particular details. Carini (2000) describes the process of descriptive inquiry as: “starting from the commitment to examine our own practice, we were oriented from the first toward noticing, with a possibility to record, reflect on, and describe those noticings” (p. 16).

To be able to *notice, record, reflect, and describe*, I was committed to spending time in public schools with co-teachers. Having taught courses on descriptive inquiry at the university, I was aware of the time intensive nature of the work but was particularly interested in the benefits that rich detailed description would have on my learning about the pedagogy of co-teaching. The focusing questions I posed seemed a good fit with the process of descriptive inquiry. “Disciplined description as inquiry aims to come to understand albeit partially...a teaching practice in its fullest expression of meaning” (Himley, 2000, p. 129). Once committed to an inquiry process, I recruited the participation of a new co-teaching team and offered to spend time with them over the course of their first year together to gain collective insight into the development of their pedagogy.

As a former special education teacher, I had benefitted from a team approach to service delivery so I was committed to incorporating a collaborative consultation model into the inquiry process. Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb (2000) describe collaborative consultation as an “interactive process that enables groups of people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems [issues]. The outcome is enhanced and altered from original solutions that group members tend to produce independently” (p. 1). I did not want to enter the collaboration in the role of “expert” but rather with all participants on equal footing. As Kampwirth (2003) states “...consultation can take place between or among two or more people with the role of expert shifting periodically among the partners in this enterprise” (p. 6). Alongside the collaborative consultation model, I also planned to utilize a co-generative dialoguing process by, “collectively generating a discourse about classroom events and designing changes that teachers can enact the next time they teach” (Roth & Tobin, 2004, p. 164). This process had proven a useful tool in my own teaching in special education classrooms and I hoped to use this strategy with co-teachers in this inquiry study.

Although “very few university people think of themselves as practitioners,” I identify myself as “having a practice” and I regard my “professional work as a site for inquiry” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 117). Clearly, co-teachers working in a public school are readily identified as practitioners. All three of us were seeking to improve our own teaching practices and in the co-teachers’ case their collective, collaborative practice. As such the field of practitioner research

has also influenced this particular inquiry. In this case the teachers were the *knowers*, I would be an observer and when asked by the teachers would be a facilitator, guide, and consultant. The site of our inquiry would be a local public school. We planned to question, observe, and act using “data of practice to investigate those questions critically and collaboratively” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.121). The traditions of descriptive inquiry, collaborative consultation, and practitioner research guided me and provided a framework as I began to plan the details of the project.

## **Context**

### **School/Class**

Prior to the inquiry study described here, I was invited to conduct a year-long inquiry group on the topic of inclusive schooling at a public school in a large urban city. The school, whose primary mission is dual language education, is comprised of mostly Latino children who range from being proficient in both Spanish and English to being English Language Learners (ELL's). In addition to bilingual classes, dual language classes, and monolingual general education classes, there were several self-contained special education classes, a few bilingual special education classes, and one fifth-grade Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) class. The CTT class was taught by a special education and general education teacher. In terms of the student membership, this large urban school system mandated that the CTT model not exceed a 60/40 ratio (typically developing children/children with disability labels).

The administration in this public school was interested in growing the CTT program and hoped the inquiry group would generate interest among the staff. At the end of the year it was planned that a new 4<sup>th</sup> grade CTT class would commence the next year. The teachers who had each volunteered to be part of the new team were seeking support and resources. Given the questions that I was interested in pursuing and the new CTT partnership's need for support and resources – our collaboration was born.

### **Teachers**

The special education teacher who volunteered for the new CTT class, Carl, had one year of teaching experience and had entered teaching through an alternative certification teacher education program. Carl had an undergraduate degree in romance languages and then decided on a change in career paths and entered the field of special education. Throughout the year of the inquiry, Carl was in his second and final year of attending graduate school to obtain a master's degree in childhood special education. Ana, the general education teacher in the new 4<sup>th</sup>

grade CTT class was a veteran with eight years of teaching experience. She had earned an undergraduate degree in pre-law and a master's degree in teaching literacy (K-12).

At the time of the study, Carl, a twenty-three old white male, was a new resident to this large city having arrived from a smaller and more rural home state. Ana, a twenty-eight year old Latino woman, was born and raised in the community where the school was located. For both Carl and Ana this would be their first co-teaching experience.

Although genuinely interested in collaborating in this inquiry into co-teaching pedagogy, Carl and Ana declined the offer to co-author this manuscript. They requested anonymity in the writing hence the names used are pseudonyms. However, they did read and approve drafts of the manuscript. As a new co-teaching team, they were most interested in the support, resources, and feedback they received from the collaboration. “Action *without writing* was their preferred outcome” for the inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 103). They privileged improving their practice over creating a work of scholarship. Ana and Carl's rationale for their level of participation in the inquiry project is mirrored in the findings of Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009): “when school-based practitioners take on roles as researchers, different kinds of tensions and problems emerge, including the concern that research steals time and energy away from the more important activity of teaching” (p. 43).

I was concerned that the work between the co-teachers and I be reciprocal. I wanted to ensure that the inquiry reveal “democratic validity – honoring the perspectives and interests of all stakeholders” (Andersen, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 44). I believed that I had something to offer the co-teachers but I also firmly viewed them as equal contributors to this inquiry process; I believed that I could learn from their experiences.

## Methods

### Role of the Consultant: Data Collection and Analysis

The co-teaching team and I agreed to meet bi-weekly for ninety-minute sessions from September through May during their first year as co-teachers. Most of the meetings took place at the end of the school day so the teachers would not be distracted by the demands of the classroom. Each of the twenty sessions was audio-taped and I also wrote anecdotal impressions of these bi-weekly meetings. In an effort to stay connected to the life of Ana's and Carl's classroom and to witness their co-teaching methods, I conducted two full-day observations in their fourth grade inclusive class. The first observation was conducted in December once I felt I had established some trust and rapport with the teachers, and the final

observation took place in early April. The teachers were hesitant to agree to a more frequent observation schedule. In their first year together, they seemed apprehensive to make their work visible to the scrutiny of an outsider but were motivated and eager to discuss and problem solve aspects of their co-teaching practice. Each time we met I documented the occurrence of the teacher's shared and individual planning time. Email communication was established for the weeks I was not present in the school as well as for any need or question that required immediate attention.

Throughout the course of the school year, the co-teachers completed several surveys to determine their effectiveness and unearth topics for discussion. The teachers completed the surveys and discussed their findings; I facilitated the process and the conversation. The following surveys were selected and used based on the particular needs and context of the fourth grade co-teaching partnership: "Reflecting on the Collaborative Process" (DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000, p. 76); "Are We Really Co-Teachers?" (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004 pp. 86-87); and "How is Our Classroom Climate?" (DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000, p. 21). The surveys, implementation process, and findings are described in a later section of the manuscript entitled, *Consultant Strategies*.

All the different forms of data, survey results, audio-recordings of meetings, anecdotal impressions of meetings, observation notes, email communication, and weekly documentation of planning time, were reviewed for the purpose of this inquiry into co-teaching practices. As I read, listened, and sifted through the data, particular ideas resonated from and across the different sources. Triangulation of the multiple data sources verified the critical issues that emerged in this inquiry study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I then synthesized recurrent, significant ideas that emerged from the data into a descriptive time-line format. Based on this data collection and analysis, what follows is my interpretation of the process and outcomes of the inquiry conducted with the co-teachers.

### **Structure and Implementation of the Collaborative Inquiry**

At the outset, I provided a structure for the inquiry based on issues that were grounded in my previous work with teachers and schools and that were also supported in the professional literature. Ana and Carl readily agreed to begin by exploring the topics of relationship building; scheduling and structuring shared planning time; lesson planning; and co-teaching instructional strategies. I worked, not to privilege my interests and needs over those of the co-teachers but rather, to provide a starting point for the project. I had an opportunity to ponder and wonder about co-teaching before the start of the project; the public school teachers were new to the pedagogy, the inclusive classroom setting, and each other. Therefore, it

took them some time to formulate their questions and sort out what they needed and wanted from our collaboration. The section *Emergent Issues* reveals the priorities, needs, and questions of the co-teachers in their first year as partners. The following section of the manuscript is organized to reflect the time line of activities implemented and topics addressed as they occurred in the inquiry process.

### **Forging a Relationship**

Ana and Carl were aware of their new co-teaching assignment for the next fall at the end of the previous school year. This early knowledge motivated them to meet in the summer before the start of the school year. The purpose of the first two meetings of the team was to begin the process of forging a relationship. A review of the literature on co-teaching unearthed suggestions, questions, and talking points for a beginning conversation that would create a spirit of collaboration between the two teachers (Cook & Friend, 1995; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). Talking points were distributed to the co-teachers prior to the first two meetings so that they would have an opportunity to reflect and come prepared to discuss their ideas. For the first meeting I created talking points particularly for Ana and Carl and their specific school environment (Refer to Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Talking points for initial meeting between co-teachers**

- Describe your philosophy about the roles of teachers and teaching.
- Describe your philosophy about the roles of students and learning.
- Describe a Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) class (i.e., purpose, rationale, structure).
- Describe advantages of the CTT model.
- Describe disadvantages of the CTT model.
- Why and how did you get involved in the CTT 4<sup>th</sup> grade class at PS XX?
- What are your hopes for the CTT 4<sup>th</sup> grade class? Concerns?

The talking points for the second meeting were ideas taken directly from another source (Cook & Friend, 1995, pp. 8 & 10) and minimally reworded and reorganized to make them meaningful for these particular co-teachers and their specific context (Refer to Table 2).



**Table 2**  
**Talking points for second meeting between co-teachers**

**Readiness for Co-teaching**

- To what extent am I willing to let someone else carry out teaching tasks at which I am particularly skilled?
- How willing am I to allow a colleague to see aspects of my teaching in which I am not particularly skilled?
- To what degree do I believe that there is more than one right way to carry out almost any teaching/learning task?
- How willing am I to tell a colleague when I disagree about an issue or have a concern?

**Classroom Management**

- What is acceptable and unacceptable student behavior?
- Who is to intervene at what point in students' behavior?
- What are the rewards and consequences used in the classroom?
- What noise level are we comfortable with in the classroom?

**Unity**

- How will we convey to students and others (i.e., teachers, parents) that we are equals in the classroom?
- How can we ensure a sense of parity during instruction?

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Essentially, the early conversations were an opportunity for the teachers to share their philosophies of teaching and learning, teaching style, and their ideas about the basics of teaching such as management strategies, class routines, etc.

The initial meeting between the co-teachers revealed their philosophies of teaching and learning. This sharing of ideas was an opportunity for the co-teachers to become familiar with each other's professional values and beliefs. The conversation was the foundation for the relationship building process; it was a window into each other's professional priorities. The following is an excerpt from the first meeting:

Carl: As a teacher - not just giving students information but teaching them how to use the information – active learning – find out what works best for them and then teach in that way.

Ana: That is *exactly* what I was writing down. Important to get to know students, build from what they have, what they are interested in, they need to be at ease with you...I don't want them listening only to me...I'm not the only authority; their words are just as important as mine.

Carl: Conversation is great – when they are talking - they say important things. I want them talking...I want them to be independent and to be heard in the classroom. [We are] pretty similar in terms of style.

Clearly, the co-teachers found common ground in their first meeting; similar thinking was the basis for continued conversation.

In the second meeting, the conversation moved to the topics of “Readiness for Co-Teaching, Classroom Management, and Unity” (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 10). This set of questions was a bit more particular with the hope of adding more details to the portrait that was developing of each teacher. For the relationship to develop, the co-teachers needed to explore their professional lives and make their thinking visible. In the first question (refer to Table 2) they were asked to consider their feelings about sharing teaching responsibilities.

Ana: I expected to share everything. Every content area, every lesson – just because that's part of it (co-teaching). I don't think I'm going to take over one area that I'm really good at teaching and just teach that and he teaches everything else. I expect that there may be something I really want to teach – it is just fair that he does it because I did it last time or however it works. I know it may not always feel that great because I may rather teach it – but I expect that to happen – so I'm fine with that.

Carl: I'm always leaving room for compromise too – even if she really likes literacy – I can say – Which unit do you enjoy most? Then that can be hers then I can take one that I really enjoy. There is always a way to split things up.

The ability to share and compromise within a classroom are clearly important qualities for these co-teachers. These ideas were explored in Ana and Carl's second meeting and this conversation laid the groundwork for a productive partnership. After spending three hours over the course of two meetings having conversations that revealed their professional beliefs and philosophy, the co-teachers were now ready to begin discussing their shared instructional responsibilities within the classroom.

In January I asked Ana and Carl to reflect on our work together by asking the question, “What aspect of our work has been satisfying?” Each of the co-teachers recalled our initial work on relationship building.

Carl: ...it was reassuring to know that we were on the same page in terms of philosophy and how we wanted to deal with students and what to expect in the classroom from each other.

Ana: Our beginning work together was very helpful in getting started...I think the initial dialogues were *really, really* crucial to getting us off to a good start.

As the on-going work of forging a relationship between the teachers was well underway and continuous it was time to move into new territory. The teachers were still not posing their own questions so I felt it was my responsibility as the consultant to provide direction. Shared planning, lesson plan formats, co-teaching strategies, and documenting student work were interrelated topics that seemed critical for the co-teachers.

### **Crafting a Co-Teaching Practice**

**Shared planning.** In one of the first meetings in the summer prior to the beginning of the school year, we discussed how the teachers would schedule shared planning time throughout the year. The literature is clear on the necessity of scheduling common preparation periods for co-teachers (Bessette, 2008; Leatherman, 2009; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). “Experienced co-teaching teams reported an hour or more of co-planning time with their partners each week. Planning sessions were viewed as priorities by both teachers; they refused to let other competing responsibilities interfere with their planning sessions” (Walther-Thomas, 1996, p. 260). In a later work, Walther-Thomas (1997) reported that elementary schools in particular experience a serious lack of shared planning time for co-teachers due to the organization of the school day into short segments of time which precludes in-depth planning sessions. Guided by this information, I documented the frequency, duration, and location of both shared planning time and individual planning time of the co-teachers each week. I wanted to explore with the teachers the quantity and quality of their weekly face-to-face planning time and its impact on their co-teaching practice.

Perhaps the fact that I was documenting the occurrence of planning time influenced these teachers to consider this aspect of co-teaching more carefully. However, their commitment to shared planning was evident throughout the year. Shared planning time ranged from thirty minutes per week to four hours per week

with the more time-intensive efforts scheduled earlier in the year. The average amount of time Ana and Carl devoted to shared planning each week was ninety minutes. Each teacher also spent an average of two hours a week individually creating and reviewing instructional plans.

At the start of the school year Ana and Carl usually met after school for planning as they felt they needed to attend to other paperwork, administrative tasks, and grade level planning during their scheduled preps. By January of the academic year, Ana and Carl seemed to be using their prep times more efficiently and were able to plan together at those scheduled times during the school day. In our biweekly meetings, Ana, Carl, and I would discuss the nature of their planning efforts as well as ways to protect their prep time for its original purpose – instructional planning.

In the first shared planning session scheduled between and by Ana and Carl, they wrote process and procedures for tasks that students would undertake daily in the classroom such as: requesting to use the bathroom and getting a drink of water; accessing pencils and supplies; listing and producing homework assignments, following class rules, seating arrangements at desks and on the rug area, and dismissal protocol (i.e., lining up/walking in the hallway). In this way, they shared their ideas and came to a mutual agreement on the implementation of daily tasks in the classroom. Another task they undertook in their early planning was co-authoring a letter of introduction to the parents and families of their students explaining the structure and philosophy of the CTT class. Later in the year, planning sessions revealed a shift in topics from tactical and logistical to more substantive and complex issues. Profiles of individual children, modifying and adapting curriculum, and grouping for instruction were topics addressed in later planning sessions and will be described further in the section *Emergent Issues*.

***Lesson plans for co-teaching: Creating a common language.*** Developing a process and format for lesson planning seemed to be an appropriate next step for the co-teachers. Ana and Carl each kept a traditional plan book with a sketch of the weekly activities. Although all three of us agreed to explore a lesson plan format that could be particularly useful for co-teaching teams, it turned out that I was clearly more enthusiastic and motivated by this task than the co-teachers.

There were several variations of lesson plan formats available in the literature for review each including the common feature of documenting the specific method of co-teaching to be used in each lesson (Dieker, 2002; Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). The co-teachers and I reviewed each format identifying the unique features of each: weekly format by content area (Dieker, 2002); daily format that requires documenting learning standards addressed (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004); and daily format organized by questions as opposed to traditional categories (Vaughn, Schumm,

Arguelles, 1997). The teachers identified features and language from the different formats that would be useful to them for planning and I created a computer generated weekly planning format. The form was copied and placed in a binder; six forms per week one for each of six major subject areas (math, reading workshop, writing workshop, read aloud, social studies, science). I thought it would be more efficient if the co-teachers shared one planning tool.

I believed that the format, which required documenting the co-teaching methods for each lesson, would be the impetus for the teaching partnership to explore the range of available co-teaching methods. At each of the biweekly meetings we discussed the usefulness of the lesson plan format we had devised. Quickly, it became evident that each teacher was reluctant to give up their own plan book and they were not using the collaborative system we had devised. The blank pages of the elaborate binder system were a message to me as the consultant that this format was not meeting the needs of the teachers. We abandoned the binder and custom-made lesson plan forms and Ana and Carl agreed to document their co-teaching methods in their traditional plan book. In the end this final compromise was not realized either. Clearly, Ana and Carl were verbally discussing their methods in shared planning time but they did not see the need to write down their particular methods. This documentation would have been useful for me as a window into their co-teaching practice but I would need to find another point of entry.

***Evolution of co-teaching methods.*** A close look at the available literature on co-teaching methods revealed an abundance of detailed descriptions of various forms of pedagogy (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1995; Bauwens & Hourcade, 1997; Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend 1989; Cook & Friend, 1995; DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000; Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). Ana, Carl, and I were provided with an array of possibilities in terms of available co-teaching methods. At each of our meetings I would ask the co-teachers to describe in detail how they were teaching lessons in particular content areas. During the course of the academic year through these conversations we came to identify six different forms of co-teaching that Ana and Carl utilized. All six methods did not emerge simultaneously for this co-teaching team; broadening their teaching practice seemed to be a developmental process.

In early November after working together since September, Ana and Carl identified three methods of co-teaching in their repertoire. Of course they were influenced by the literature they had read so the terms and ideas may seem familiar. However, in most cases the teachers invented the names of the methods they used as they were hybrids or variations of the methods found in the professional literature. They defined *Team Teaching* as contributing equally to instruction of the whole class simultaneously which is similar in spirit to a method of the same name as described by Villa, Thousand, & Nevin (2004) and Cook and

Friend (1995). Also, DeBoer and Fister-Mulkey (2000) describe a similar teaching method as “duet” while Bauwens and Hourcade (1997) broaden team teaching to include six variations.

Carl and Ana mostly used the team teaching approach during mini-lessons when they were introducing concepts and ideas that the children would ultimately work on independently or in pairs or small groups. Strategies they infused into team teaching included: having informal discussion between teachers/back and forth conversation; modeling (e.g., demonstrating how to play a math game by competing against each other); and role-playing. Carl and Ana used team teaching methods in the content areas of social studies, math, science, and reading (particularly book clubs).

*Two Teachers - Two Groups* was another co-teaching method that Ana and Carl used early in the year. The class was divided into two groups and organized in different areas of the classroom. Each teacher worked with a specific group on the same content area. Sometimes the groups were organized by ability such as math groups and sometimes the students were assigned to groups randomly such as for reading test preparation. Grouping practices will be addressed later in the paper. Parallel teaching is the term frequently cited in the literature to describe a method that closely resembles *Two-Teachers – Two Groups* (Cook & Friend, 1995; DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004).

When teaching reading and writing, Ana and Carl often used the method: *One Teach - One Conference*. One teacher assigned to a small group would be teaching no more than six students while the other teacher would circulate among the rest of the students and conference with individual children. A variation of this practice that they began to explore was to team teach to a small group while the rest of the students worked independently. Ana and Carl experimented with this method but did not have the opportunity to analyze the process and describe it fully before the end of the year. Although not identical in nature, this method has similar attributes to those described by Bauwens and Hourcade (1997) as a “supportive learning activity.”

A method that they added to their co-teaching practice in early December they referred to as, *One Teach - One Support*. In this method one teacher was the main speaker while the other interjected by adding ideas, calling on students, and writing down ideas on charts. Ana and Carl were quick to point out that both teachers are essential to this process and need to be present for the entire lesson. This differs from the “tag-team” method where one teacher instructs and the other engages in an unrelated task such as completing paperwork (Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997). Ana and Carl were clear that *One Teach – One Support* is not an opportunity for one of the teachers to take a break!

For this team, the lead teacher had usually taken the lead in the planning of the lesson. Ana and Carl stated that they used this method to teach complicated

subject matter, a large volume of content, and/or multi-step problem solving to be used such as in explicit strategy instruction (i.e., story mountain/literacy). They used *One Teach - One Support* when teaching writing, reading and math. Variations on this method are popular in the literature with names such as: Complementary Teaching (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989; Bauwens & Hourcade, 1997) One Teach, One Assist (Cook & Friend, 1995); Speak and Add; Speak and Chart (DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000); and Supportive Teaching (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004).

In early March, Ana and Carl added two new co-teaching strategies to their practice: *Small Groups* and *Stations*. In the former, students were organized heterogeneously into collaborative groups of 4-6 and both teachers moved among the groups assisting as needed. All groups would work in the same curriculum area but each would have a different topic. For example, the small group structure was used for a social studies project on Native Americans where each group was exploring a different tribe.

Using *Stations* as a co-teaching method, Ana and Carl would group students heterogeneously into small groups and stations would be created at different tables each providing resources on a specific topic. The students would travel with their assigned group from station to station to interact with the variety of materials and topics. Each teacher would circulate among the children and assist as necessary. This method was often utilized for science, social studies, and reading. Usually station teaching followed a mini-lesson where the children were introduced to the topic and structure through *Team Teaching* methodology. Bauwens and Hourcade (1995), Cook and Friend (1995) and DeBoer and Fister-Mulkey (2000) also advocated for Station Teaching as an effective co-teaching method.

For Ana and Carl their co-teaching practice evolved throughout their first year together as an instructional team. Perhaps the time they spent planning together, coupled with regularly scheduled meetings with me to discuss their practice, facilitated reflection on their work and hence the confidence to try new methods. Clearly, trial and error and recursive reflection were critical to the broadening of their co-teaching practice.

### **Emergent Issues**

Within the collaborative consultation model, Carl, Ana and I continually posed questions and areas of interest in regards to the work of co-teaching in an inclusive classroom. Several issues emerged organically from our work together such as: addressing the needs of individual children, modifying and adapting curricula, facilitating the work of paraprofessionals, and grouping practices for instruction. Although initially the work with the co-teachers was guided by my

ideas and priorities, eventually their needs and concerns became the focus of the collaboration.

**Profiles of individual children.** Using the process, Descriptive Review of the Child (Himley & Carini, 2000), that builds on children's strengths and results in a narrative description, the co-teachers and I discussed and problem solved around the unique needs of individual children. For example, the Descriptive Review for B, a fourth grade girl with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), was focused on the following questions: How do we integrate B into all the classroom activities so she is working alongside the other children? and How can B more active in her learning?

The Descriptive Review process revealed that B was a child who was very different from the other children in the class; she was always on the periphery of the group. The teachers described her as being at a "very low level" particularly in math. Through this process, Ana and Carl came to understand B's need for physical space and time to be successful. This information helped the teachers to create an environment and atmosphere that could optimize her learning experiences. This was a beginning for meeting her individual needs.

Looking closely at children proved to be a valuable aspect of the collaborative consultation between the co-teachers and me evident in the following comments:

Carl: The individual work with the kids has been real helpful...just being able to talk with someone having an outside perspective about problems, concerns, successes.

Ana: The work we have done looking closely at students has been helpful...what to expect from certain students...how to look at what they can produce in a different way...

**Modifying and adapting curricula.** Alongside the Descriptive Review process, the co-teachers and I began to address the particular instructional needs of students with IEP's and several general education students who were being evaluated for special education services. One adaptation suggested for C, a young boy who experienced difficulties with written expression, was the use of a word processing program. C was struggling with writing on both a perceptual-motor as well as conceptual level. Building on his strength in drawing we discussed encouraging C to illustrate his idea before he began writing as a motivational tool. Creating a detailed outline was another method for promoting written expression for C. The teachers described C rushing when he writes and not using punctuation. Therefore another beneficial modification was double time for writing assignments and tests.



We found many useful tools for modifying and adapting curriculum and instruction in the professional literature. Janney and Snell (2000) offer an array of practical reproducible formats that assist with organizing the work of modifying/adapting curricula/instruction as well as providing an impetus for thinking critically about all aspects of the process. We also reviewed a comprehensive “Checklist of Sample Supplemental Supports, Aids, and Services” to ensure that we were knowledgeable of all possibilities related to modifying and adapting curricula and instruction (Villa, Thousand, and Nevin, 2004, pp. 126-130). Our work to ensure that all the fourth grade students in Ana and Carl’s class had access to general education curriculum was ongoing throughout the year.

**Role of the paraprofessional.** A paraprofessional was assigned full-time to the fourth grade inclusive classroom to support the students and the teachers. From the outset, the relationship between the co-teachers and the paraprofessional was not productive. The teachers and I discussed strategies for creating a more productive relationship and explored our assumptions about the role of a paraprofessional. I encouraged the teachers to spend time guiding the work of the paraprofessional assuring them that this effort was necessary and would reap benefits. Leatherman (2009) found that to ensure that all students’ needs are met there is a need for more collaboration time between the general education, special education, and instructional assistants. We did a shared a reading (Giangreco & Doyle, 2004) on the topic of working with paraprofessionals and completed a 12 item Self-Assessment Preview (Giangreco, 2001) which allowed the teachers to reflect on the strategies they used to direct the work of the paraprofessional. Despite these efforts, the relationship between the teachers and the paraprofessional remained strained throughout the year and as a result the paraprofessional did not make a significant contribution to the classroom. The co-teachers did not believe that they needed the support of a paraprofessional and this belief may have influenced their attitudes and behaviors.

**Grouping practices.** During our work in the first few months of the academic year the topic of *grouping for instruction* came up in different ways. The co-teachers had formed two groups for math instruction and students were homogeneously grouped by ability. Carl, the special education teacher, consistently taught the lower functioning group while Ana, the general education teacher, worked with the higher achieving students. We discussed the practice of ability groups used for math instruction and students’ reactions to this instructional decision. It seemed to me that ability groups were incompatible with the philosophy of an inclusive classroom. Therefore I thought we needed to explore heterogeneous versus homogeneous (ability) groups more fully. In preparation for a meeting in February I asked the co-teachers to consider the following points for our discussion:

- List the assumptions that you hold about the children in the lower performing group and those in the higher performing group.
- List your assumptions about math teaching and learning.
- How did you plan the math program for the fall term?
- What did you learn about your students as mathematicians over the first several months of the school year?
- Share your experiences (as a student) with tracking or ability grouping that are interesting and worth remembering.

Despite the time we devoted to exploring the drawbacks of grouping students by ability for instruction, the practice remained intact for the duration of the school year.

## **Consultant Strategies for Facilitating and Documenting Change**

### **Reflective Conversation**

I believed that, in my role as consultant, I was responsible for encouraging the teachers to continually reflect on their co-teaching work. In this spirit, I facilitated conversations between the co-teachers by providing them with topics that I thought would yield important feedback. For example in late September after working together for several weeks, I asked them to jot down some ideas about their partner's strengths and share their observations. The following is an excerpt from that conversation:

Ana: Carl is a very careful planner. A lot of times he is unsure of which route to take with a lesson because he is so concerned with...Is it going to meet their [the students'] needs? ... and ... Are they going to get it? I appreciate that.

Carl: Ana is really good at discipline without actually disciplining. She has a look - *I'm really disappointed in you!* – subtle, a very good way of approaching problems. Ana has been very receptive to my ideas – I appreciate that. In terms of how we work together, things seem to flow naturally, it has been very collaborative.

This type of conversation helped the co-teaching partners to identify and appreciate the positive attributes of one another. It seemed to me that this early positive emotional climate was important to the development of the spirit of generosity and trust which developed later in the co-teaching partnership.

## **Reflective Notes**

After each meeting and observation, I wrote anecdotal impressions. I referred to these notes throughout the year to help me reflect on our collaborative work and unearth patterns and issues that needed to be addressed as well as to determine any changes in practice or shifts in thinking. The evolution in the working relationship of the teachers was clearly present in these notes. In early November of the academic year my anecdotal notes reveal the following subtle shift in the co-teachers interactions: “I noticed that Ana and Carl speak much more directly to each other than to me at our meetings.” This observation confirmed that my role was not interfering with the relationship that was developing between the teachers which was a major concern for me at the outset of the inquiry. Several months later the notes revealed even more qualitative shifts in their communication: “Ana and Carl seem more playful, [there are] more knowing glances, laughter, inside jokes [as they discuss their students and classroom life].” On another occasion in one of our triad meetings, before launching into a story about one particular student, Carl respectfully consulted Ana to determine if she felt comfortable with his sharing as she would be included in the description. These details in the reflective notes revealed that loyalty was developing between the partners. Clearly, the reflective notes were critical to identifying change throughout the inquiry process.

The notes also proved to be a useful tool for reflecting on my role in the inquiry process. Early in the school year when discussing strategies for shared planning time, Ana and Carl worried that their scheduled preparation periods each day would not be sufficient. Initially, I thought about taking this issue to the principal to advocate for additional planning time for the co-teachers. After reading the summary notes of the meeting described above, I realized I did not want to become a mediator between the administration and the teachers. Rather, we discussed strategies for protecting their allotted shared planning time as well as ways to use the time efficiently. I also encouraged them to advocate for themselves directly with the principal. Reflecting on my notes caused me to change my course of action from advocating directly for the teachers to facilitating their self-advocacy and problem solving skills. As I defined my role and responsibilities in this inquiry work, writing notes became important to my reflective practice.

## **Tools and Resources**

With the goal in mind of facilitating and documenting the development of this team’s work, I turned to the professional literature on co-teaching practices and found a variety of tools for assessing the effectiveness of an instructional

partnership. Salend, Gordon, and Lopez-Vona (2002) offer suggestions for interview formats, observations, and portfolios for documenting and assessing the work of co-teaching teams. There are also rating scales (Gately & Gately, 2001; Noonan, McCormick, & Heck, 2003) and self-assessment tools (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004) available for co-teachers to facilitate conversations about the performance of the partnership.

***Evaluating the co-teaching team.*** I chose a nine-item survey created by DeBoer and Fister-Mulkey (2000) entitled, “Reflecting on the Collaborative Process (p. 76)” to use with Ana and Carl. It would be easy and quick to administer and yet would provide us with information in regard to the functioning and effectiveness of the co-teaching process. This survey is based on a Likert Scale that ranges from 1/not at all to 9/completely. Refer to Table 3 for a copy of the survey.

**Table 3**  
**Reflecting on the collaborative process (DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000, p. 76): Nine item survey**

I feel that my knowledge and skills are valued.  
 I believe that information and materials are freely shared.  
 I believe that I am an equal partner in the decisions that are made.  
 I am frequently acknowledged and reinforced by my partner.  
 I believe that we are using sound instructional practices.  
 I am learning as a result of our collaboration.  
 My time is used productively when I am in the classroom.  
 I am satisfied with our roles and responsibilities.  
 I am satisfied with the way we communicate with and coach each other.

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I used this survey twice during the year with Ana and Carl, once in mid-October and then again in mid-January. I supplied each teacher with a copy of the survey during one of our regularly scheduled meetings and they individually read and scored the survey and then we discussed the results.

Scores for Ana and Carl ranged from 7-9 in both administrations of the survey. Clearly, this partnership was strong and very consistent from one administration of the survey to the next. It was important to administer the survey the second time, despite favorable scores on the first administration, to be certain that the first high scores were genuine. If the first administration of the survey had

revealed low scores it would have been an opportunity to discuss important aspects of the partnership that needed attention and a second administration would have been an opportunity to demonstrate growth.

The final item on the survey, “I am satisfied with the way we communicate with and coach each other” revealed an interesting pattern. Although all scores were high on this item Ana responded with a 9/completely in October and then lowered her score to an 8 in January. When I pointed out the change, Ana responded, “I am not really concerned; nothing is perfect.” Ana believed that communication and interaction was still an area that she and Carl could improve but clearly was not an area of concern. The survey by DeBoer and Fister-Mulkey (2000) proved to be helpful in our work together as it provided an opportunity to acknowledge their success as a productive team.

Towards the end of the school year in early May I was interested in a more in-depth, summative form of assessment of the functioning of the co-teaching team. I selected a comprehensive self-assessment created by Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004 entitled, “Are We Really Co-Teachers?” (pp. 86-87). This self-assessment includes 35 statements that relate to instructional responsibilities and decision making of a co-teaching team and each statement requires a yes/no response. Cramer and Nevin (2006) found that this scale “may have some merit in explaining co-teacher relationships *and* actions” (p. 270). Each of the co-teachers individually read and responded to the self-assessment and then discussed their findings together with me at one of our regularly scheduled meetings.

Ana and Carl had agreement on 31/34 items such as we share responsibility for: deciding how to teach; who teaches which part of a lesson; and differentiating instruction. They responded differently to only three items one being: “We include other people when their expertise is needed.” Carl responded “yes” to this statement while Ana stated “sometimes” because she felt that they should reach out more to their science coach for assistance with this specialized area of the curriculum. Overall, the self-assessment provided a profile of a healthy co-teaching partnership and also revealed particular ideas that they agreed needed to be addressed in the future (i.e., utilizing support services more effectively; creating a process for resolving disagreements; addressing curriculum standards in their lessons).

***Establishing an inclusive atmosphere.*** When co-teachers are interested in determining if their “current practices promote a sense of belonging for *all* students” they can refer to a 14 item survey by DeBoer and Fister-Mulkey (2000) entitled, “How is Our Classroom Climate?” (p. 21). I shared this survey with Carl and Ana in early November and they individually read and responded with yes/no answers prior to discussing their findings together with me. They concurred affirmatively on nine out of fourteen items including: Do we refer to all students as “our” students as opposed to “yours” and “mine”? and “Do bulletin boards and

charts on the wall display the names and work of all students?" (DeBoer & Fister-Mulkey, 2000, p. 21). I think it was important for Ana and Carl to be validated on these basic practices essential for inclusive classrooms as they were the frontrunners in this model and only one of two Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) classes in their large elementary school.

When confronted with the item, "Are disability and diversity issues imbedded into the curriculum to help heighten awareness?" each of the co-teachers responded "no." However, exposure to the survey raised this important issue and it became a goal in their action plan for the next school year. For example, titles of children's literature with themes of difference/disability were shared with the co-teachers for consideration in the next year's curriculum. Another item, "Do all students rely on peers for on-going support (e.g., cooperative learning groups, peer tutors, etc.)?" caused the partnership to respond, "sometimes." This item led to a more intensive investigation into grouping practices in the classroom (i.e., heterogeneous vs. homogeneous) and collaborative methods such as cooperative learning that might facilitate more active learning experiences for the children. Clearly, this survey by DeBoer and Fister-Mulkey (2000) proved to be a useful tool that caused the teachers to think deeply about their teaching practices and underlying beliefs and philosophy of inclusive schooling.

### **Re-Visiting the Focusing Questions: Discussion of Critical Issues**

In the spirit of descriptive inquiry, I offer no answers or conclusions but rather my thinking around several topics.

### **Evolution of a New Co-Teaching Partnership**

Anna and Carl developed a productive co-teaching relationship in their first year together in an inclusive classroom. For Carl and Ana, their professional relationship and teaching practice grew and strengthened in tandem. The improvement and development of each of these processes seemed interdependent in strengthening the overall capacity of the partnership. They focused on forging their professional relationship at the same time that they worked to improve and grow their teaching practice. They were able to address their affective/interpersonal skills and needs alongside honing their instructional practice. As their professional relationship grew and strengthened so too the teaching practices of this co-teaching team.

For these co-teachers respect and trust developed over time. As they became familiar with each other, understood each other's core beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning, their communication and interactions were more

frequent, comfortable, and efficient. The process of developing a relationship for this co-teaching partnership seemed developmental in nature (Gately & Gately, 2001; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004).

Co-teaching or *teaching at the elbow of another* provided a “way of learning to teach” for Ana and Carl (Roth & Tobin, 2002, p. 244). They were able to share and learn from each other. Co-teaching provided them with a forum to think about their teaching and to discuss critical issues that emerged such as the diverse needs of individual children, differentiating instruction, group practices, etc. Although the co-teaching model provided a stimulating intellectual lens for viewing their work, making their thinking visible to one another was a time and labor intensive process.

Clearly, Ana and Carl were satisfied with and committed to their collaborative work; they willingly went on to co-teach for a second year. However, their first year was not without challenges evident in the following goals they set for their second year: include paraprofessional in the teaching team; consider ways to infuse ideas of disability/difference into the curricula; think more deeply about accommodating the different learning styles of our students through instruction (i.e., tactile-kinesthetic; visual components; cooperative learning); and be thoughtful about the levels of support provided to students (i.e., promoting learned helplessness vs. a sense of accomplishment). These goals reveal that Ana and Carl recognized that they still had much to learn as co-teachers in an inclusive classroom.

### **Consultant Support for a Co-Teaching Partnership**

Although the collaborative consultation model did prove fruitful it did not always ensure mutual agreement between me, the consultant, and Ana and Carl, the co-teachers. Rather the collaborative consultation model described in this article provided an opportunity for all parties to discuss and critique issues and ideas critical to the inclusive classroom. For example, despite conversations and debates in relation to grouping students homogeneously for instruction vs. the inclusive practice of grouping heterogeneously, instruction remained mostly homogeneous in the fourth grade classroom. I hoped the teachers would revisit this critical idea at another point in their co-teaching practice.

There were several other times throughout the year when we identified and discussed issues that needed attention but ultimately they remained unchanged. The working relationship between the teachers and the paraprofessional did not improve, the teachers did not document their co-teaching methods in their planning, and a student with an IEP was referred to a more restrictive setting. All of this I hoped would change, however, all of this did not change. As a consultant and an outsider to the school community, I quickly realized and accepted that I

had the power to influence but no real decision making authority. However, I was heartened by the idea that our collaborative inquiry work had the potential to inform Ana and Carl's thinking and decision making in their future teaching endeavors.

My work with Ana and Carl was satisfying, engaging, and at times challenging. My written reflections throughout the year reveal a range of comments and emotions such as, "I feel rejuvenated with this team. It feels worthwhile – like we are all benefitting from this work" to "There wasn't much energy today; they have not made many changes; not sure if I should let this go or continue to pursue this topic." I was careful to offer suggestions and advice as possibilities and alternatives as I did not want the teachers to feel criticized. As I came to understand the school setting I was very aware of the competing demands on the co-teachers. My notes reveal worries that they were tired, frustrated, and beaten down by clerical tasks, and the tension that comes along with high stakes testing. I did not want the inquiry process to make the teachers feel pressured or tense.

In my efforts to support and validate the teachers and respect their ideas and role in the collaboration, I was successful in helping them to strengthen aspects of their practice that they were motivated to change (i.e., planning time strategies; co-teaching methods; relationship building). However, when I met resistance from the co-teachers I backed off and deferred to their wishes, leaving several aspects of their practice that warranted intervention unchanged (i.e., role of the paraprofessional, grouping for instruction, etc.). In retrospect, we needed to be more diligent in attending to the issues that were uncomfortable for me and the teachers. For example, more classroom observations could have provided me with critical insight into the pedagogy of co-teaching however; this new team in their first year of practice was reluctant to be observed. Respecting their wishes resulted in missed opportunities for me to observe firsthand the teachers instructional relationship and ultimately limited my role in the collaboration. We should have uncovered the root cause of our reluctance to confront the issues. We needed to work through our discomfort to come to new understandings. In future inquiry work I will be more persistent in working directly with resistance to change.

As I was privy first hand to the complicated school lives of the teachers, I realized that the support I could provide needed to be a good fit with the needs of their everyday professional reality. I came to realize that they would filter our co-generated dialogue through their experiences and use only what would be useful in their particular context. I had to learn quickly that they were truly the *knowers* in their school environment. My ongoing written reflections throughout this inquiry process revealed that to be a successful consultant I needed to fully



embrace my outsider status and bring *humility* to the role of supporting co-teachers in inclusive classrooms as well as tools, resources, and advice.

### **Lessons Learned: Impact on My Practice**

Looking closely at the lived experiences of a fourth grade co-teaching team in an inclusive classroom has informed my work as a teacher educator. I share stories of Carl and Ana's co-teaching partnership to enrich courses I teach about instructional strategies; curriculum; and collaboration and consultation. I share resources and tools with my students which were used in this inquiry project. I model how we used the surveys and self-assessments described in this project and share details of Ana and Carl's responses and how they used these findings. As a direct result of this inquiry project, my graduate students facilitate conversations between co-teachers for an assignment in the collaboration and consultation course. My work with Ana and Carl around co-teaching has made me a credible source of knowledge on the topic with my teacher education candidates. Overall, the knowledge I co-constructed with Ana and Carl has had a positive impact on my teaching practice in higher education.

Through the process of analyzing these findings, I had to confront some misguided professional judgment I made that creates limitations to this inquiry study. I originally accepted the co-teachers' decision to actively participate in this inquiry project without contributing to the writing believing I was being respectful of their wishes and obvious time restraints. However, despite my good intentions I inadvertently elevated my status of university professor over their roles as school-based teachers. In a sense I "perpetuated existing hierarchies" and "privileged academic over local knowledge" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, pp. 103, 127). Clearly, not my intention but nonetheless problematic, this inequity is at odds with the philosophic underpinnings of this inquiry study. The findings would be more robust with the presence of the co-teachers active voices, rather than the passive. In the future I will be more mindful of power relations and their implications in my collaborations with school-based practitioners.

### **Afterthoughts**

Working closely with Ana and Carl through their first year of co-teaching in an inclusive fourth grade classroom, highlighted the complexity of this best practices instructional model. Co-teaching is dynamic work that seemed in this case to provide the teachers with a forum for analyzing issues of teaching and learning. The partnership between Ana and Carl seemed to thrive under the tutelage of a consultant although no direct correlation or cause-effect finding can be made based on this one descriptive inquiry. Perhaps they would have been successful

without the support and intervention available through the collaborative consultation model.

This exploration into co-teaching reveals only a sample of the resources available on the topic in the professional literature. Teachers, mentors, and administrators interested in this work can access the many existing resources describing theory, research, and practice that can be used in whole or modified to fit the needs of a particular team and context. Those embarking on co-teaching or supporting the work of co-teachers should be heartened by the existing resources and literature. This descriptive inquiry offers insight into the particular experiences of a new co-teaching team in an urban elementary school thereby broadening the existing body of literature. For Ana, Carl, and me, collaborative inquiry proved to be a meaningful way to learn about the pedagogy of co-teaching.

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