Co-Teaching: An Effective Professional Development Tool

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Abstract

Effective models of co-teaching enhance the quality of instruction in dynamic classrooms, contribute to increases in student achievement, and assist teachers in building their capacity to meet the diverse needs of students in today's classrooms. Additionally, co-teaching provides teachers with regular opportunities for collaboration, expertise sharing and reflection. When executed as a mutually beneficial and valued partnership, co-teaching should be considered as an effective professional development model for teacher enhancement.

Today's educators faced the heavy responsibility of educating students with a wide range of abilities and needs in their classrooms. Schools are becoming more and more diverse, and the task of providing each student with individualized programing that meets each specific need is a very daunting task. Dedicated teachers spend countless hours planning for their students; and yet many feel that they have only scratched the surface with regards to meeting the needs in their classrooms. In the face of this seemingly unattainable task, teachers are often evaluated on their ability to meet the needs of each learner in their classrooms, through their planning, instruction, and assessment practices. Administrators often find themselves in supervisory positions, where they are expected to observe and evaluate teachers' abilities to achieve this goal, while also providing professional development opportunities to assist teachers in developing their abilities and increasing their capacities to meet the evolving needs of their students. Finding effective professional learning opportunities can be a challenge, given the unique characteristics of each teacher's classroom, experience, and needs. One style of professional learning that has proven to be successful for many teachers is known as the co-teaching model; this model has taken on many forms throughout the years, but it is founded on the premise that two teachers work together to teach a group of students, while sharing the responsibilities of planning, delivering, and assessing the instruction, as well as organizing the physical space (Bacharach & Heck, 2007; Friend & Cook, 2004; Kamens, Susko, & Elliott, 2013). This article explains the co-teaching model, discusses ways in which co-teaching provides an opportunity for teacher enhancement, and identifies some considerations for improving the success of co-teaching as an effective professional development tool.

Co-teaching is an idea that has been around for decades; as early as the 1960's, educators have been exploring the possibilities of this collaborative teaching model (Cook & Friend, 1995). The model of co-teaching has changed and evolved through the years, from a team-teaching model in which teachers share the responsibilities of instruction and assessment while continuing to teach separately, to a collaborative and shared teaching experience in which both professionals co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess a group of students (Kamens et al., 2013). In the latter model, instruction is provided by both teachers on a consistent basis, such that neither teacher is considered the main teacher of the class (St. Cloud State University, 2012b). The latter model is also characterized by the understanding that co-teachers are "peers with equivalent credentials and status in the classroom . . . [and] are partners in the instructional process on behalf of all of their students" (Simmons & Magiera, 2007, p. 2). This shared delivery model of instruction is the focus of the term "co-teaching" in the remainder of this paper.

Through a variety of different methods, including (but not limited to) supportive co-teaching in which one teacher takes a lead role while the other teacher provides support, parallel co-teaching in which both teachers instruct two different groups of students at the same time, and complementary co-teaching in which instruction is provided by both teachers to the same group of students at the same time, teachers are better able to focus on the essential components of the curriculum while providing differentiated instruction to all students in the class (Nevin, Villa,

& Thousand, 2009). Co-teachers are jointly responsible for differentiating instruction, assessing student achievement, and maintaining classroom climate, which "provides a greater array of dynamic structures than is possible when only one teacher is present" (Rahmawati, Koul, & Fisher, 2015, p. 395). This collaborative method of teaching creates an atmosphere in which all students can receive improved instruction, develops a foundation of support among teachers, and has been proven to be an effective model for supporting the achievement of students with disabilities (Altieri, Colley, Daniel, & Dickenson, 2015; Friend & Cook, 2004).

Many researchers have concluded that the co-teaching model has a positive effect on student achievement for all students, including students who are academically gifted, average-ability students, at-risk students, and students with identified special needs (Bacharach & Heck, 2007; Cook & Friend, 1995; Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; St. Cloud State University, 2012a). One reason for this observed success has been attributed to the merging of expertise in the classroom (Ahmed Hersi, Horan, & Lewis, 2016; Altieri et al., 2015). Co-teaching offers an opportunity to bring general education, special education, and content-area specialists together to collaborate; each professional brings their own unique perspectives and strengths of their specialization into the partnership, combining their complementary teaching competencies to enhance instruction and better meet the needs of all students (Beamish, Bryer, & Davies, 2006; Cook & Friend, 1995: Kamens et al., 2013). Mainstream students in co-taught classrooms benefit from the combined expertise of multiple teachers, and students with disabilities benefit from "working with a content specialist, as well a professional who can modify instruction to meet their individual needs" (Kamens et al., 2013, p. 167), in the structure of an inclusive classroom (Bacharach & Heck, 2007; Cook & Friend, 1995; Shin, Lee, & McKenna, 2016). The merging of professional teaching expertise offers obvious implications with regards to student achievement; however, the benefits of this teaching model extend to the professionals as well.

Co-teaching offers a unique opportunity for collaborating teachers to participate in high quality professional learning (Friend & Cook, 2004). The shared planning time, the opportunity to examine and discuss student learning, teaching methodologies, curricular content, and classroom management approaches, and the self-reflection that results from co-teaching can "increase teachers' knowledge and change their instructional practice in ways that support student learning" (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 100). Effective co-teaching addresses many of the indicators of high quality professional development, as identified by Darling-Hammond (2013), including a focus on student learning of specific curriculum content, practical application of real challenges, sustained over time, supported by modelling, reflection and feedback, and connected to teachers' collaborative work. Co-teachers have the ability to improve their instructional practice, develop their content knowledge, and increase their capacity to meet the needs of their students by participating in opportunities to try new techniques in a supportive environment, receive peer-coaching, and reflect on shared experiences. Of particular value to co-teachers, is their distinct ability to discuss and analyze the learning of their shared students, increasing their ability to identify needs, recognize mastery of skill, and develop instructional strategies to support struggling learners. In addition, co-teachers work in a system of shared expertise which promotes collaboration and knowledge sharing, and this is a "key aspect of an effective system [of teacher evaluation]" (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 111) that facilitates continuous learning (Bacharach & Heck, 2007).

Various factors impact the effectiveness of co-teaching, and these factors must be carefully considered in order to maintain an effective systemic approach to professional learning. The most effective systems create time for co-teachers to plan, discuss, and reflect on their teaching, to ensure that all teachers have a shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the system, as well as their direction (Cook & Friend, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Kamens et al., 2013). Time is also needed for professionals to form collaborative working relationships with each other (Friend & Cook, 2004). Professional learning

is more likely to occur when strong working relationships have been developed, creating a sense of trust and receptiveness to constructive feedback (Darling-Hammond, 2013).

Effective co-teachers must be willing and able to work as members of a team; they most often demonstrate flexibility, strong interpersonal and communication skills, and an ability to collaboratively solve problems and make decisions (Cook & Friend, 1995). Compatibility should not be disregarded as an important factor in successful co-teaching relationships (Kamens et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2016). The collaborative nature of co-teaching presents an opportunity for teachers to examine their own beliefs about teaching and learning, reflect on their teaching styles, and dialogue about the routines and structures in their classroom (Rahmawati et al., 2015). In an effective system of evaluation, administrators need to consider a teacher's willingness to participate in a collaborative co-teaching environment before assigning them to do so (Friend & Cook, 2004).

Teacher expertise and training should also be considerations for co-teaching, as a tool for professional development. In order to provide the best professional learning possible, experienced co-teachers must take on mentorship roles, and these mentors must have the skill, knowledge, and capacity to consistently model strong teaching in a range of roles, in ways that improve teacher practice, both during teaching and before and after instruction (Gardiner & Weisling, 2016; Heck & Bacharach, 2013). Another key consideration is in the amount of training that co-teachers receive. Research suggests that the variability in the implementation of co-teaching, due to the lack of proper training and ongoing support from administration, causes gaps in the professional learning process (Simmons & Magiera, 2007). These gaps can be diminished by providing frequent and in-depth training on the methods and principles of co-teaching, as well as by providing administrative support for co-teaching practices, based on a modelled understanding and shared belief in its value (Ahmed Hersi et al., 2016; Kamens et al., 2013; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016).

Effective co-teaching models, which provide content-rich, differentiated, multi-level instruction for all students, as well as daily opportunities for teachers to collaborate, share expertise, optimize on each other's strengths, and reflect on their own beliefs about teaching and learning, contribute to increased levels of student achievement and improve teachers' capabilities to meet the needs of their students (Beamish et al., 2006; Rahmawati et al., 2015). Moreover, effective co-teaching provides a platform for rich, professional learning when collaboration is focused and expertise is shared (Darling-Hammond, 2013). When value is placed on protecting time for shared planning, reflection, and relationship building; understanding each person's readiness and compatibility for working as a member of a team; identifying the expertise of teachers; increasing the availability and quality of training opportunities; and establishing a shared belief in its philosophy, co-teaching can be an effective professional development tool.

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