

On the Road to More Collaborative Teaching: One School's Experience

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Abstract

Co-teaching is undertaken because students with disabilities are more likely to have their needs met if their supports are moved to the general education classroom. In co-taught lessons, a special educator and a general educator teach together in the general education classroom during some portion of the instructional day in order to accommodate the needs of students both with and without disabilities.

The purpose of this action research was to provide a more in-depth analysis of co-teaching at one elementary school by individually interviewing a total of twenty staff members. The participants included general education teachers, special education teachers, related service personnel, and administrators. Participants repeatedly described four elements as critical to effective co-teaching: strong communication between the teachers, flexibility in co-teaching practice, respect between the co-teachers, and the organization of the instruction. Faculty also described the process of how co-teaching evolved within the school.

Keywords

collaborative teaching, team teaching

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I am going to treat you the same as I am going to treat the 'A' student over here or the student that struggles over here. I am going to treat you all the same and that is just the only way that I can define inclusion...

-Teacher at C.C. Ring Elementary School

In the 2004 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Congress reiterated that the preferred placement for students with disabilities is in general education classrooms (United States Office of Special Education). Students with disabilities were not only mandated again to have access to the general education curriculum, but were also required to take all the assessments stipulated in the earlier No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (United States Department of Education).

As a result, school districts are including students with diverse needs in general education classrooms at an increasing rate. In order to meet the needs of all those students a variety of teaching strategies are being implemented; one of those strategies is co-teaching. This article describes one elementary school's successful use of co-teaching and shares excerpts from interviews with teachers and administrators in that building.

Introduction

Co-teaching merges general and special education instruction, addressing the need to provide a unified service delivery system for meeting the needs of students of varying abilities (Will, 1986). In co-taught classes, a special educator and a general educator teach together in the general education classroom during some portion of the instructional day in order to accommodate the needs of students both with and without disabilities.

Cook and Friend (1996) emphasize formats within the co-teaching model in which students learn within smaller groups (i.e., not whole class instruction). Although there is descriptive information about what co-teaching should look like in the classroom (Zigmond, 2001), there is a gap in the research on how teachers become more collaborative. Weiss and Lloyd (2002) have described how co-teaching has proliferated in schools, but research has only begun to address the issues of implementation, instruction, and effectiveness.

Caron and McLaughlin (2002) found a common theme in inclusive schools with positive student outcomes. There was a culture of shared responsibility by all teachers for the instruction of all students. Teachers were able to effectively implement instruction for a wide variety of students.

In an interview with Brownell and Walther-Thomas (2002), Marilyn Friend stated that collaboration is an essential strategy for schools today because of the varied needs of the students. Friend went on to describe how special and general educators are under tremendous pressure to ensure high academic standards are met within a diverse student body. Teachers must work together to positively affect the learning of all students. Friend added that collaboration has become a necessity, not a luxury.

In an earlier article, Walther-Thomas, Korinek, and McLaughlin (1999) also described how the ultimate goal in teacher collaboration is to focus on varying the instruction, leading to increased student learning. These authors state that collaborative teachers often develop student success by providing academic supports in typical classrooms. Resistance to co-teaching by school staff is often

driven by limited understanding of the co-teaching process and by lack of experience.

When there is a lack of training among co-teachers, Daane, Beirne-Smith, and Latham (2000) reported that teachers described many difficulties in implementing the model. In teacher interviews, these researchers reported that there was limited communication among the teachers because they were uncomfortable with the co-teaching process

On the other hand, Roach (1995) noted that in successful inclusive schools, teachers were included in the change process brought about by models such as co-teaching. Later, McLeskey and Waldron (2002) recognized inclusive schools as “works in progress.” They noted again that one of the key issues in creating effective co-taught classes is making sure that changes like co-teaching are supported by teachers as well as administrators.

The purpose of this action research was to describe what has been learned about inclusion and how it was accomplished at C. C. Ring Elementary School. The focus of the article is to analyze the co-teaching model implemented at this particular elementary school.

C.C. Ring School is categorized by the state education department as having high student needs in relation to district resources; it is located in an urban area that has several high need schools within the district. Thirty-eight teachers serve approximately 420 students, two-thirds of whom qualify for public assistance. Approximately 74% are White, 12% Hispanic, 13% Black, and 1% other racial/ethnic origin.

The district special education administrator considered the staff of C. C. Ring Elementary School an exemplar of successful collaboration. The staff uses their time and resources well to meet the needs of a diverse

student body. The teachers and administrators were willing to participate in the study and share their experiences.

Methods

An action research group (the second author and selected Ring teachers) was brought together to study what made Ring such a successful inclusive school. A set of questions was developed by the second author and the teachers to determine how Ring evolved into a positive, achievement oriented school (See Figure 1 - Interview Protocol for the entire battery of questions).

The model of inclusion at this school centers on a teamwork approach, with one special education teacher teamed with two general classroom teachers at each grade level. Students with disabilities are divided between the two general education classrooms, with the goal of keeping the numbers of students with disabilities in each classroom to a maximum of 30 percent of the total classroom composition.

Teams "loop" for two years, providing more relationship building and stability for those two classrooms. Teachers who looped at C. C. Ring School taught their students for two continuous school years. The three teachers co-plan, organizing not only their lessons, but also how classroom tasks will be divided and how the teachers will deliver the instruction.

Data for the study were collected from two sources, with the intent of gaining broad-based participation from Jamestown City School District faculty and administrators. Using the protocol that was developed by a group of teachers and the second author, 20 interviews were conducted by the second author similar to a previous study she had conducted (Lawrence-Brown, 2000). Semi-structured interviews (see Figure 1 for the

Figure 1. Interview Protocol

1. Overall (not limited to inclusion), what's going well? (Purpose: To tie inclusive schooling improvement efforts with school improvement efforts overall.)
2. Overall, what would you like to see improvement in?
3. Overall, what are your priorities for change?
4. What factors did you consider in identifying what's going well, and what else is needed?
5. What is your vision for education of students in general at Ring?
6. What is your vision for education of students with disabilities at Ring?
7. How do you define inclusion? (Include who is involved, and intended outcomes.)
8. What is the history of inclusion at Ring?
9. How much experience do you have with inclusion?
10. What models of inclusion have been used at Ring? What has been most effective, and why? Curriculum or instructional modifications?
11. Please say a bit about co-planning (including amount, quality, how it is arranged and supported, etc.).
11. What issues are addressed through co-planning?
12. What type of co-teaching is being used? Examples:
 - a. Complementary: One teacher leads, one supports with strategies, content, etc.
 - b. Station: Teachers divide class into groups that move among stations.
 - c. Parallel: Teachers divide class in half, and independently deliver the lesson.
 - d. Alternative: Support teacher implements supplementary activities (remedial, enrichment, etc.) before or after the lesson.
 - e. Shared: Teachers collaboratively design and simultaneously teach, exchanging lead and support roles throughout.
 - f. Other?
13. How is co-teaching arranged and supported?
14. What's going well with inclusion?
15. What would you like to see improvement in?
16. What are your priorities for change?
17. What factors did you consider in identifying what's going well, and what else is needed?
18. How can the partnership between Jamestown and St. Bonaventure help? What are priorities for partnership activities?
19. What should beginning teachers know and be able to do to be well prepared for inclusive schooling (undergraduate and graduate)?
20. What kind of experiences should they have, including both in-class and field-based projects and activities?
21. What else would you like to add, or what else should I have asked?

interview protocol) were conducted with school personnel most closely involved with inclusion, including administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, and therapists. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to all staff at a regular faculty meeting. The focus of this project was on the individual interview data.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was audiotaped by the interviewer, and later transcribed by a graduate student. The transcripts were analyzed by all of the authors of this article. Interview data were analyzed recursively by the authors to identify emergent themes and patterns. Following the Adler and Adler (1994) model, issues have been included in the article when they were mentioned by at least three participants (15 percent of the total interviews).

Results and Discussion

As noted previously, a total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with school administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, and therapists most closely involved with inclusion. This analysis focused solely on issues related to co-teaching. The majority of participants agreed on a definition of inclusion as children with disabilities participating in the general education setting and accessing the general education curriculum with supports and modifications.

From their analysis, all of the authors came to a consensus on the following categories involving co-teaching: preparing for co-teaching, co-planning, the co-teaching relationship, co-teaching models, and next steps

for the teachers. Each category explains a key component of effective co-teaching.

Preparing for Co-Teaching

In 25 percent of the interviews, teachers described the goal of using willing participants to be co-teachers as part of the inclusion process. If the teachers felt burned out, then another teacher would be found to take their place. Teachers indicated they could take turns being in a co-taught classroom. A teacher describes the volunteer aspect of the whole inclusion process:

Well, it is usually based on if you want it, if you are up for doing it, if you want to do it, and we have been told over and over again if we feel like we are burning out or we need a change, that is fine. Someone else will just fill in for us and we will just move our classroom. I have done it all along because I have been comfortable each year; I feel like every year I get a little more comfortable with the inclusion children and just the whole thing. (1:480-5)¹

Several teachers mentioned that the initial training conducted by Marilyn Friend was important to developing more inclusive classrooms. The teachers received training on the various groupings for co-teaching as well as how to work together as a team. Teachers were trained together as described in one interview:

We went as a team to a workshop, so we were all hearing the same things at the same time, ... I think that made a difference in how everybody welcomed inclusion. (13:181-2)

¹ Numerals in parentheses following quotes indicate the source of the quote (transcript number, along with line numbers in some cases).

Co-Planning

The majority of those interviewed stated that effective co-teaching requires effective co-planning. Co-planning is the time that members of a co-teaching team use to work collaboratively on various aspects of an effective inclusive teaching situation. Teachers looked at student learning within their co-taught classroom and decided how to adjust their instruction to meet student needs.

The amount of co-planning that occurs is, in part, dependent upon the time built into the daily or weekly schedules to allow teachers to meet together. When co-planning time is not part of the school day, co-teaching is not nearly as effective, according to the teachers. Some co-teachers became part of the school's scheduling committee to make certain that common planning time was available.

Those teachers who did not have common planning time or met for only a short period of time did not think they were as effective as a team. Some teachers used paraprofessionals to cover their classes in order to create co-planning time for their team but this was only for a short period of time once or twice a week.

All those interviewed expressed the opinion that common planning time was extremely important for all co-teaching teams, indicating, "inclusion takes more time" (7:559). Co-teaching teams with at least three days of common planning time indicated that they had enough time for effective co-planning. Teaching teams with daily common planning time were most confident about their schedules; the option of co-planning each day allowed them to plan together when they most needed it.

To co-plan well together, teachers had to communicate effectively. Teachers needed time to learn to exchange ideas and work out

differences in planning for classroom instruction. Here, a teacher notes the importance of good communication to effective co-teaching:

Communication, I think is such a major goal of everything; when communication breaks down, everything breaks down. (11:46-47)

Co-teachers mentioned a need to plan for the long-term curriculum and determine what tasks each teacher will be responsible for preparing for the weeks ahead. Only after the "big picture" is established can individual student modifications be addressed.

Teachers were cognizant of their accountability for student performance, and described co-planning time as a way to both reflect on student progress and vary instruction in order to increase student achievement. Critical indicators of student performance are examined and the instructional approach is adjusted accordingly. Teachers can compare notes and come up with grouping variations such as smaller group instruction using alternative teaching. Teachers mentioned changing the approach to instruction to accommodate student learning. Here, a teacher describes the need to continuously improve student instruction:

I think what I do is try to reflect on the performance I am getting from the children to see whether or not the information I am presenting is appropriate ... then I try to reflect on how I can improve the lessons and perhaps get information across to them in a better manner... (12:70-75)

The Co-Teaching Relationship

About a third of the educators mentioned the importance of the relationship between the two teachers in co-taught classes, describing co-teaching as initially challenging. Here is how one teacher described the

beginnings of co-teaching, including the risk of having another teacher in the classroom:

I think it is hard when you are first starting out about teaching in front of other people and am I doing right ... being willing to hear, to get the feedback, how it went. (4:571-574)

Eventually however, the teachers saw their collaborative skills grow as well as their confidence as teachers. In talking about effective co-planning, one person interviewed said,

I think it is always a work in progress, the more you work with someone, the more comfortable you get and the more you know... what is going to work. (6:428-430)

Building trust between the two teachers was considered foundational to the inclusive process. One participant described co-teachers as having developed very fluid systems. Another participant noted the benefits of a close collaborative relationship once they are established:

These real neat, efficient relationships get built between the two teachers-- a big plus. (20:8-12)

In considering what makes for an effective relationship, four elements came out repeatedly. Number one was *communication*; as noted previously, co-teachers have to communicate effectively. A good sense of humor is helpful, along with tact.

The next most important element was *flexibility*. Co-teachers need to be able to give up individual ownership of their schedules, and allow for some differences in teaching style. They need to be willing to listen, compromise, and work well together. Here, an experienced co-teacher commented:

[It] takes a lot of flexibility, it takes a lot of giving up of that ownership of your day and your time, so you have... to be willing to allow for some differences in

teaching styles... you really have to be willing to listen and compromise... (13:446-9)

The third essential element was *respect*. Co-teachers need to be able to trust their colleagues. It is important to respect each other as teachers and understand that everyone is different. Co-teachers are working as a team, so they need to feel free to bounce ideas off one another and to share responsibilities. They need to be willing to bend and try new ways of doing things. The teachers often mentioned the need for acceptance by both teachers. One teacher described it this way:

And if you can't plan together, trust each other, be open and trust that someone is going to do a good enough job and not to look over their shoulder and doubt them... [Y]ou have to accept what you get because you are a team, sometimes you fail and sometimes you are fantastic, you know, you have to accept that because you are a team. (10:335-9)

Finally, successful teams require *organization*. Co-teachers need to work on the same goals and always remember to prioritize the needs of the students above anything else. This teacher summarized all of the characteristics of being compatible by stating:

They [the teachers] need to know that it is a team... You have to be flexible, you have to have good communication skills and you just really need to be able to work with somebody else. It is not all about you [laughing]. You have to learn to work well with somebody and it takes time to do that... I am not one who is afraid to ask any question, any time or make sure you know what is okay with the other teacher-- "Is it okay if they put this in their book bag?" Just to always

be extra cautious. But flexibility and communication because it is a team, an inclusive setting is a team structure. That is very important, if you don't have that team or if you have two teachers who don't/can't work as a team or can't be flexible, the kids are going to pick up on that and it is not going to benefit the children. (5: 612-622)

Co-Teaching Models

In most of the interviews, teachers described using the various Cook and Friend (1996) co-teaching models [See Figure 2]. The teachers mentioned a willingness to try various types of groupings. In about a third of the interviews, complimentary teaching (one teach, one support) was mentioned as a model used by many co-teachers. Although teachers tended to start out with the complimentary model, several teams evolved into using more varied co-teaching models (not whole class). Here, a co-teacher comments on the use of various models:

I really think we use all of them, we do the stations, we do parallel teaching, complimentary, we really do all of it. (11:441-2)

Teachers in co-taught classrooms also needed to be flexible and ready to make adaptations. It was an ongoing process to find out how to get the students to learn. One teacher described the process:

Well, they [the co-teachers] need to be flexible because things happen that we just don't plan [laughing]. That aren't in the plans, you need to be very flexible [to] be a team... not just one person telling everyone what to do. We have to bounce ideas off of each other and be flexible. (1:382-5)

Teachers also indicated that co-teaching was an evolving process. Here is what one teacher said:

I think it is always a work in progress, the more you work with someone, the more comfortable you get and the more you know... what is going to work. (6:428-430)

Figure 2.

What Is Co-Teaching?

Because of the presence of a special education teacher in general education classes, co-teachers are expected to provide a wider range of instructional alternatives, to enhance the participation of students with disabilities, and improve performance outcomes for all students (Cook & Friend, 1996).

These arrangements include:

- ✓ One teach, one drift or observe: One teacher is the primary instructor while the other teacher assists individual students or collects classroom data.
- ✓ Station teaching: Each co-teacher instructs a small group of students on different content while a third group works independently. Students circulate among the stations.
- ✓ Alternative teaching: One teacher instructs a larger group of students, while the second teacher reviews or previews content material or offers enrichment to the students.
- ✓ Parallel teaching: Each teacher instructs half the class on the same content material using their own individualized approach.
- ✓ Team teaching: Both teachers deliver instruction together to the whole class.

Next Steps for the Teachers

The percentage of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms has become a major concern at C.C. Ring School. Reducing this percentage was the most commonly mentioned goal by the participants. A co-teacher explained:

Sometimes I think the classes might be overloaded [in terms of the percentages of kids with disabilities]. I think I'm overloaded. They say 25%, you know and I think I have worked 50-55%. (10:372-381)

Another teacher stated:

There is a higher concentration of IEP kids and that has affected the whole classroom... you need more of those regular kids in there, to make it a balance thing and have it work. (13:316-317, 320-324)

All of the teachers interviewed had concerns about time. The teachers asked for time to plan and time to give appropriate attention to children who required additional assistance. At least three teachers thought that particular children with disabilities could be “short-changed” on skill development. This teacher summarized concerns regarding time issues, especially affecting ability to individualize:

I think number one, there is never enough time. And number two, no matter how you try, you teach more to the group than you do to the individual and you would like to individualize more... It is very difficult to individualize for each student, so you end up focusing your teaching to the major part of your group and possibly missing your “highs” and your “lows.” ... You know you need to spend more time with your lows, but there doesn't seem like there is

enough time to really give them the help they need. (13)

Ongoing staff development was a continuing need for teachers to move toward a more effective inclusive model. Teachers were still learning how to plan and modify lessons to meet student needs. They mentioned a need to revisit some of the basics about the goals of inclusive schooling, such as all teachers needed to be responsible for all students learning effectively.

There still is still a need for clarification among staff about expectations for students with disabilities and their needs based on their Individualized Education Programs. This is how one teacher described the issue:

I think that is the confusing thing, the regular ed. teacher thinks that if [the students with disabilities] are in there, they have the same expectations as a regular education kid and it is hard to always change that mindset. It is okay if they only learned one thing [laughing] - that's more than maybe they would have learned in a special ed. class with no model. (4:159-162)

Finally...

Like McLeskey and Waldron (2002), the C. C. Ring teachers recognized that inclusive schools are “works in progress.” At C.C. Ring School, students and teachers have a sense of belonging to a school community focused on achieving positive student outcomes for all students similar to the inclusive schools described by Caron and McLaughlin (2002). One participant stated it eloquently:

[My] vision is that every student in this district will be embraced as a learner and to truly create environments where all kids feel valued, that they have a purpose in that classroom. So that they

do dare to take those risks, that we develop assets in students and that they can connect with a caring adult, so that we see the fruits of that labor, a student feeling like, "I do matter." (19: 168-172)

The staff at C.C. Ring Elementary School started the co-teaching process by training the teachers in pairs or as a team. This provided a solid foundation for long-term curricular co-planning and implementation of the co-teaching model. Several of the teachers emphasized the growth of the professional relationship between the teachers throughout the year. Teachers described being flexible and taking risks in front of another teacher when delivering instruction to learners with more varied abilities.

There seems to be a real sense of collaboration among the staff at C.C. Ring School. Teachers have ownership over student performance of all students within their classrooms. The staff has truly changed the culture of the school to value the learning of everyone.

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