Co-teaching: An Alternative Model for Educating Special Needs Students

Helpful Hints Series #12
from Dr. Barry Ziff

After many years of successful teaching in two different school districts I was given the unique opportunity to be involved in developing, planning and teaching in a collaborative team. Six teachers were given the responsibility for working with 150 students in grades five through eight in an inclusive setting. The teachers were divided into three teams. Each team was responsible for developing a challenging curriculum in all general subject areas.

What we immediately realized was that in order to be successful each team needed to have a similar educational philosophy and there needed to be ample time for collaborative planning. Another issue that was important to the success of the model was that the parents and administrators were needed to be supportive of the program. The administrators need to provide flexible scheduling to allow for the opportunity to plan, collaborate and build curriculum. Parents need to understand the unique opportunity their children have by being involved in an inclusive setting. In order to have a successful co-teaching situation each teacher must be respectful of the other and there must be an opportunity to build communication skills. As with all relationships there will be times when the two teachers may have a difference of opinion. The two teachers must learn to listen to, be respectful of, and supportive of each other. There will be times when each teacher may need to compromise his or her ideas for the benefit of the team and the students. We always need to keep in mind that what we do as teachers is for the support of our students. Having a positive attitude and working together offers more opportunities for students to be successful.

Co-teaching is an opportunity for two or more credentialed professionals to provide instruction to a blended group of students in the same setting. Appropriate use of co-teaching captures the expertise of both professionals and results in unique instructional opportunities for all students. There are several models available for co-teaching. Each has its benefits for both the students and the professionals.
Structure for Co-teaching

1. **One teaches, one assist** – Both teachers are present and one teaches while the other provides assistance to students.

2. **Station teaching** – Teachers divide content and each takes an active role in delivering instruction. Some students may work independently.

3. **Parallel teaching** – Teachers jointly plan and deliver instruction to separate groups.

4. **Team teaching** – Both teachers share instruction, lead discussions, demonstrate lessons, and answer questions.

Developing a School Philosophy

- Creating a sense of community – engaging students in a variety of communication activities that builds a sense of belonging.

- Appreciating student diversity - providing opportunities to read stories, view films and participate in activities that encourages acceptance of others.

- Attending to curricular needs- assessing students understanding of concepts and providing curriculum to meet a variety of needs and interests.

- Offering access to appropriate personnel supports- providing students with personnel with the expertise to support all student’s needs and abilities, i.e. mentors, aides, other professionals.

- Open-minded professionals- teachers need to have a strong sense of self and be willing to collaborate with others.

- Providing opportunities to involve the para-professional in planning and evaluating the program.

Critical Factors to Successful Co-teaching

- Selecting a compatible co-teacher- working with a colleague who has a similar philosophy and educational goals.

- Obtaining and maintaining administrative support- creating a collegial and supportive relationship with the site administrator.

- Developing relevant conflict resolution skills- having the opportunity to build and practice communication skills and rapport with colleagues.

- Organizing schedules to allow for planning time- developing a flexible weekly schedule that allows for planning time with co-teacher.
An advantage of co-teaching is that there are more opportunities for students to learn through a greater range of appropriate instructional approaches. As with all successful experiences, co-teaching requires a great deal of planning. Collaboration needs to begin before the new school year begins and continue throughout the year. In the best of worlds teachers would be paid for their planning time. However, more than likely this is not possible, therefore the co-teachers will need to schedule time during the summer months to plan together. Planning for effective co-teaching includes the following:

Before the school year -

* selection of co-teacher teams
* visitation of successful inclusive settings
* planning curriculum
* collecting resources
* structuring the classroom setting

After school begins -

* adjust schedules for continued planning
* continue to develop curriculum
* continue to bring in resources
* provide faculty training
* develop instructional strategies
* provide accommodations for those in need

Co-teaching is a partnership. And like all successful partnerships teachers need to continue to be collaborative in all aspects of the teaching experience. Finding time to share information on a daily basis is important to maintaining and enhancing the learning experience for all the students. Learning to share the responsibility for maintaining a daily routine and teaching duties are important aspects of a successful team. It was my experience that each teacher needs to learn to share their strength and provide positive feedback to each other to ensure the quality of the program and maintain student progress. Being supportive of each other is key to maintaining a rewarding work experience.
Co-teaching requires that each professional is flexible in developing strategies that demonstrate comprehensive instruction to a diverse population. By working together, teachers can reduce and possibly eliminate the stigma for students with disabilities. Teachers can prepare lessons requiring students to work together in cooperative groups, as well as, providing specific instruction to support those in need. By working together teachers can provide a more coherent and continuous instruction than offered by other special education services. In this type of learning environment students learn to be more accepting of differences in others and in the process can also learn to be supportive and nurturing of their peers.

When a school takes on the responsibility of committing to a co-teaching model in an inclusive setting it is important that the entire school community be involved in carefully planning and instituting the program. Ideally, the administrator, teachers, and parents need to meet to develop a philosophy of placement. Hopefully, the school already provides a continuum of placement opportunities, services and supports that are driven by well developed IEPs and based on individual child's needs. The teachers, parents and support staff personnel must also be the primary decision makers in planning and building an effective school-wide program. Extensive staff development needs to take place before implementing the program. Researchers suggest the emphasis of staff development needs to be in the areas of multicultural curricula, interdisciplinary teaching, and integrated curricula with an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills and life-centered curricula. In order to provide the services necessary for an inclusive setting, the administrator can increase the staff-student ratio and lower class size in the co-teaching environment. Beginning with a shared vision the school staff can build a successful learning environment for all the students. If your school staff is not open to the idea of an inclusive setting or utilizing a co-teaching model then it is your responsibility to begin slowly by using your strengths and expertise to influence the administration and eventually the faculty that the inclusive philosophy and the co-teaching model is useful, meaningful and supports the growth and development of all students.

Before you begin to think about working in a collaborative team teachers need to do some serious reflective thinking. Below is a list of reflective questions to help the beginning teacher think about the issues relative to co-teaching.

1. Am I an accepting and open individual?
2. Do I have good interpersonal skills?
3. What is my vision of educating young people?
4. How do I deal with behavioral issues?
5. What is my grading policy?
6. What are my strengths?
7. What is my greatest fear about working in a collaborative setting?

8. What challenges do I face at my school in developing a co-teaching model?

9. How will I utilize the paraprofessional in a co-teaching model?

10. How will I gain support for co-teaching at my school?

Numerous studies related to co-teaching has indicated that special education teachers gain insight into the realities of the general education classroom while the general educators learn valuable lessons in planning, accommodating, and instructing students with special needs. Co-teaching is a very rewarding experience for those involved and beneficial to the students as well. By planning together, by being supportive and open to learning from each other, co-teachers can make a profound and positive effect on the students they serve.

Achieving Administrative Support

1. Develop a personal and friendly rapport with your site administrator(s).

2. Demonstrate your expertise by sharing your knowledge and enthusiasm for teaching at faculty meetings.

3. Be supportive of all school functions.

4. Encourage the administrator to attend significant and relevant conference with you.

5. Invite the administrator into your classroom as an observer and participant in a variety of activities.

6. Act professionally in all endeavors with colleagues.

7. Visit other school sites together that have implemented successful inclusive setting using the co-teaching model.

Selecting A Compatible Co-teacher

You want to collaborate with a colleague who has.. . . .

- a similar vision regarding educating students
- a shared work ethic
- demonstrated respect for their colleagues
- supportive skills and expertise
• effective communication skills
• good interpersonal skills
• shown an appreciation for parents’ involvement in the educational process
• will be supportive of your efforts to meet the unique needs of all the students.

Essential Teacher Characteristics for Co-teaching

• Flexible in thought and action
• Compatible and co-operative
• Trusting and nurturing
• Willing to share with others
• Accepting of professional criticism
• Shared vision
• Good interpersonal skills
• A good sense of humor
• Responsible and reliable
• High self-esteem
• Maturity

Co-teaching takes many hours of collaboration, however the rewards outweigh the challenges of working with other professionals in the same setting. Developing a plan to educate the total school population about the rewards of co-teaching is a very important issue to consider in order to provide a successful school experience for all those involved. Providing resources to colleagues and support to parents can only enhance your program. Providing a training seminar to the total school faculty will help overcome some of the fears and misconceptions held by many teachers. By presenting the positive results of co-teaching in an inclusive setting to administrators will also enhance the rapport you will have with the greater school community. It is not an easy task to change people’s attitudes toward a new idea. You will need to be persistent in your enthusiasm for providing an exemplary education for all students utilizing the co-teaching model and confident that your efforts will have the desired successful results. Your efforts will result in a more
collaborative and effective school environment and a more meaningful educational opportunity for your students.

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