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What Is Co-Teaching?

We just found out that we are expected to co-teach. What *is* co-teaching? What is it not? What elements or variables need to be in place so that we know we are really co-teaching? Is there a process that will help us to successfully co-teach? The answers to these questions are discussed in this chapter.

■ WHAT CO-TEACHING IS NOT

Although the concept of co-teaching is not new in education, there are many teaching arrangements that have been promoted in the history of American education that may look like co-teaching. If you are a person who learns from nonexamples, then the following discussion may be helpful.

Using your own experience as a guide, can you think of "nonexamples" for what co-teaching is not? We can think of several from our experience.

Co-teaching is not one person teaching one subject followed by another who teaches a different subject. Many teachers are familiar with this structure if their students travel in groups within a departmentalized administrative framework. In this case, however, the teachers often do not have time to plan or evaluate instruction. Instead, they are responsible for covering the subject matter individually within their curriculum areas (for example, science) and then the math teachers who are then replaced by the language arts teachers, replace them, and so on.

Co-teaching is not one person teaching one subject while another person prepares instructional materials at the Xerox machine in the teachers' workroom or corrects papers in the teachers' lounge. This is a familiar arrangement for those teachers who have the luxury of working with a paraprofessional, a parent, or a community volunteer in the classroom.

Co-teaching is also not occurring when one teacher conducts a lesson and others stand or sit by and watch. This often happens when there are observers or volunteers who come into the classroom with no specific function or assignment.

Co-teaching is not happening when the ideas of one person prevail for what is to be taught or how it will be taught. This type of structure often occurs when a group of would-be co-teachers defer to the eldest, to the person with the most presumed authority, or to the person with the most convincing voice.

Finally, co-teaching is not simply the assignment of someone to act as a tutor. For example, the early schoolmistresses and schoolmasters in one-room schoolhouses were known to use older students to help teach younger students. It is not known to what extent the older student had input in the selection of the lesson, design, and delivery of the lesson, and so on. Many of those student helpers went on to Normal Schools to become teachers themselves. In this case, the student was an assistant teacher often assigned to teach individuals or groups of pupils while the schoolmistress taught another individual or group.

Instead, the 21st-century notion of co-teaching places it within the context of some of the most innovative practices in education. The reassignment of existing personnel to co-teaching teams results in a knowledge and skill exchange among team members and higher teacher-to-student ratios, outcomes

that benefit more students than the individual student in need of intensive instructional support. Skrtic (1991) considered this a dynamic structure in which complex work is more likely to be accomplished and novel services are more likely to be crafted to meet individual student needs.

WHAT IS CO-TEACHING? ■

Co-teaching is two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching some or all of the students assigned to a classroom. It involves the distribution of responsibility among people for planning, instruction, and evaluation for a classroom of students. Another way of saying this is that co-teaching is a fun way for students to learn from two or more people who may have different ways of thinking or teaching. Some people say that co-teaching is a creative way to connect with and support others to help all children learn. Others say that co-teaching is a way to make schools more effective. Co-teaching can be likened to a marriage. Partners must establish trust, develop and work on communication, share the chores, celebrate, work together creatively to overcome the inevitable challenges and problems, and anticipate conflict and handle it in a constructive way.

THE ELEMENTS OF CO-TEACHING ■

Our definition represents an integration of our firsthand experiences with other school-based teams that actively support students in heterogeneous learning environments (Villa & Thousand, 2004) and our reading of the literature on cooperative group learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), collaboration and consultation (Fishbaugh, 1997; Friend & Cook, 2002; Hourcade & Bauwens, 2002; Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1999), and cooperation (Brandt, 1987). Enhancing the initial definition presented in the previous paragraph, a co-teaching team may be defined as two or more people who agree to

1. Coordinate their work to achieve at least one *common, publicly agreed-on goal*

2. Share a *belief system* that each of the co-teaching team members has unique and needed expertise

3. Demonstrate *parity* by alternatively engaging in the dual roles of teacher and learner, expert and novice, giver and recipient of knowledge or skills

4. Use a *distributed functions theory* of leadership in which the task and relationship functions of the traditional lone teacher are distributed among all co-teaching group members

5. Use a *cooperative process* that includes face-to-face interaction, positive interdependence, performance, as well as monitoring and processing of interpersonal skills, and individual accountability

Each of these factors is explained in more detail in the following sections.

Common, Publicly Agreed-on Goal

Many co-teachers begin with an agreement to achieve one instructional event, such as a school play, as a team. Their successes then lead them to agree to co-teach instructional thematic units for a six-week period of time, perhaps culminating in a schoolwide celebration. Over time, they see that their unique expertise, skills, and resources are needed for more extensive periods of time, thus leading to more formal co-teaching assignments.

Shared Belief System

Co-teachers agree that not only do they teach more effectively, but their students also learn more effectively. The presence of two or more people with different knowledge, skills, and resources allows the co-teachers to learn from each other. Often individuals decide to become co-teachers as a result of taking inservice courses in specific instructional methods such as cooperative group learning or differentiated instruction. Having a shared language to discuss teaching and learning is both an outcome and a necessary component of co-teaching.

Parity

Parity occurs when co-teachers perceive that their unique contributions and their presence on the team are valued. Treating each member of the co-teaching team with respect is a key to achieving parity. Co-teaching members develop the ability to exchange their ideas and concerns freely, regardless of differences in knowledge, skills, attitudes, or position. Soliciting opinions and being sensitive to the suggestions offered by each co-teacher is especially important when there is a perception of unequal status because of position, training, or experience. Parity between a teacher and a paraprofessional, for example, could be demonstrated when the paraprofessional uses his or her unique knowledge to enhance a lesson developed with the teacher. Reciprocally, the teacher is in an expert role when the paraprofessional imitates a teaching-learning procedure that the teacher has demonstrated. The outcome is that each member of the co-teaching team gives and takes direction for the co-teaching lesson so that the students can achieve the desired benefits.

Distributed Functions Theory of Leadership

Nancy Keller, an experienced co-teacher from Winooski, Vermont, stated that as a member of a co-teaching team, "I do everything a normal teacher would do except that now there are two or more people doing it." What is important about this statement is the implicit recognition that co-teachers must agree to redistribute their classroom leadership responsibilities and decision making among themselves. This phenomenon of role redistribution in which

the functions of the traditional lone leader or lone teacher are divided among members of a team is known as the *distributed functions theory of leadership* (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). There are functions or jobs that occur before, during, and after each lesson; co-teachers must decide how they will divide up these jobs from one lesson to the next. Some responsibilities must occur daily; others weekly or periodically; and still others once or twice a year. Teachers decide how the content will be presented—for example, one person may teach and the other(s) facilitate follow-up activities. Another example is that all members will share in the teaching of the lesson, with clear directions for when and how the teaching will occur. Another decision involves identifying the teacher who communicates with parents and administrators. Some co-teachers decide that co-teaching team members will rotate that responsibility.

Still another decision involves describing how co-teaching team members will arrange to share their expertise. Some decide to observe one another and practice peer coaching. Remember, when co-teachers make these decisions, they will experience more success if they use a cooperative process described in the next section.

Cooperative Process

There are five elements that facilitate cooperative processes: face-to-face interactions, positive interdependence, interpersonal skills, monitoring progress, and individual accountability. Each of the five elements is now defined in more detail.

Face-to-Face Interactions

Face-to-face interaction is an important element for co-teachers as they make several important decisions. Co-teachers need to decide when and how often they will meet as well as how much time meetings will take during school hours. They need to decide when others (e.g., parents, specialists, paraprofessionals, psychologists) should be involved. They also need to develop a system for communicating information when formal meetings are not scheduled (such as a communication log book at the teachers' desk or Post-it notes on the bulletin board of the classroom). Face-to-face interactions are necessary for co-teachers to make these and other critical decisions.

Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence is the heart of co-teaching. It involves the recognition that no one person can effectively respond to the diverse psychological and educational needs of the heterogeneous groups of students found in typical 21st-century classrooms. Co-teachers create the feeling that they are equally responsible for the learning of *all* students to whom they are now assigned and that they can best carry out their responsibilities by pooling their diverse knowledge, skills, and material resources. To establish positive interdependence, co-teachers can establish a common goal, create rewards for their success, and divide the labor of the delivery of instruction.

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills include the verbal and nonverbal components of trust and trust-building as well as conflict management and creative problem solving. Such social interaction skills are needed for achieving the distribution of leadership functions and for ensuring that no child is ignored. Individual co-teachers will find that they are functioning at different interpersonal skill levels, depending on their previous training, personality styles, and communication preferences. Effective co-teacher partnerships encourage each member to improve his or her social skills by giving feedback and encouragement to each other.

Monitoring Co-Teacher Progress

Monitoring refers to the process of frequently debriefing the successes and challenges of co-teaching lessons. Co-teachers check in with each other to determine whether (1) the students are achieving the lesson's learning goals, (2) the co-teachers are using good communication skills with each other, and (3) the learning activities need to be adjusted. Methods of monitoring can vary from very simple to more complex. For example, some co-teachers use a checklist on which they each literally check off their agreed-on responsibilities. Some co-teachers set up a brief, 15-minute meeting each day while their students are at recess to discuss the three aspects of monitoring (goals, communication skills, adjusting the activities). Co-teaching team members also can take turns sharing accomplishments, reporting on what each one contributed to the success of the lesson, and making suggestions about what might need to be changed to improve the lesson.

Individual Accountability

Individual accountability is the *engine* of co-teaching. It is clear that co-teaching is effective based on the actual delivery of skills and knowledge by each co-teacher. Individual accountability is a form of acknowledging the importance of the actions from each co-teacher. Individual accountability in co-teaching involves taking time to assess the individual performance of each partner for one or more of four purposes. One purpose is to increase partners' perceptions of their contributions to the co-teaching endeavor. A second purpose is to provide partners with recognition for their contributions. Yet another is to determine whether any adjustments need to be made in any of the partners' co-teaching roles and actions. A final purpose is to identify when one or more of the partners may need assistance (e.g., some modeling or coaching, access to additional resources or supports) to increase effectiveness in the performance of assigned roles and responsibilities.

You will see how the five elements of the cooperative process operate in varying degrees for each of four approaches to co-teaching—supportive, parallel, complementary, team teaching—that are defined in Chapter 2 and illustrated in Chapters 3 through 6.