

# CO-TEACHING: AN EDUCATIONAL PROMISE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES OR A QUICK FIX TO MEET THE MANDATES OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND?

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As educational leaders continue to struggle with the "Highly Qualified Teacher" mandate of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, many are turning to co-teaching models that are designed to incorporate regular education and special education teachers into the same classroom to deliver instruction. This model appears to address the issue of inclusion of students with disabilities into the regular classroom while simultaneously eliminating the NCLB mandate that all teachers must be highly qualified in the subjects in which they instruct. Two issues that could significantly impact students with disabilities in relation Co-teaching's implementation are concerns regarding proper staff development and concerns of it becoming a "quick-fix" for educational leaders struggling to meet NCLB's mandates.

## **Co-teaching: Cure or Quick-Fix?**

Is co-teaching a fad or the future for teaching students with disabilities in the regular education setting? The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997 (IDEA) required that disabled students, to the extent possible, be taught with nondisabled students in the regular classroom. The least restrictive environment standard (LRE) has led to new ideas and models in special education. The co-teaching model is designed to include disabled students in the regular classroom, but in a manner which provides the necessary accommodations to be successful.

The standard special education model utilizes the "pull-out" approach to educating disabled students (Ross-Kidder, 2003). In the elementary school setting

the special education teacher pulls the student out of the regular education class for a period of time each day. At the secondary level disabled students would either be self contained or be serviced by a special education teacher for at least one period per day.

Districts are now looking at models for "pulling-in" disabled students (Ross-Kidder, 2003). As more students with learning disabilities (LD) are being included in regular education classrooms, the challenge for school districts is to continue to provide for both the regular education student and the LD students in the same setting.

Co-teaching is a collaboration effort between a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Both teachers are responsible for teaching all of the

students in the class (Keefe & Moore, 2004). The goals of co-teaching should be to increase instructional options for students, enhance participation of disabled students within the classroom, and to enhance the performance of students with disabilities (Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005).

There are several approaches to co-teaching, five of which were identified by Friend and Cooke (1995). In the first approach one teacher would be responsible for the teaching while the other circulated throughout the room providing support. The second approach, station teaching, allows the teachers to divide the content and students into groups, splitting time with each group.

Parallel teaching, the third approach, allows the class to be divided and each teacher teaches their own group the same content. In the fourth approach, alternative teaching, students are organized into groups, one large and one small, and each teacher instructs one of the groups. The smaller group is recognized as the one requiring the most attention.

Co-teaching is a partnership between two teachers, one special education and one regular education. Elementary teachers, in a study conducted by the Keefe and Moore (2004), had a more positive attitude toward co-teaching than did secondary teachers. Elementary teachers were more likely to share a class for at least half a day if not all day, with one or two teachers, while secondary teachers may only be together for one or two periods. The way teachers were paired also made a difference. Teachers generally reported a more

positive working arrangement if they chose their co-teaching partner. This also included better communication which in turn led to an enhanced relationship. Teachers who had no choice in selecting their partners, in general, had more negative views of co-teaching.

Teachers utilizing the Co-teaching models in the Mastropieri, et al. (2005) study, the Keefe and Moore (2004) study, and the Lawton (1999) study reported problems with having sufficient planning time, primarily in the secondary levels. When special education teachers partnered with more than one teacher, scheduling planning periods to coincide often proved to be difficult, if not impossible. Teachers either had to meet before or after school to plan the curriculum and determine the roles of each teacher. Teachers reported needing a minimum of 45 minutes per day to plan for co-teaching.

#### *Roles in the Co-teaching Model*

In a collaborative model, co-teachers are supposed to be equals, but in reality this seldom happens. This is even more pronounced on the secondary level. In the Mastropieri et. al (2005) study of high school world history classes, the general education teacher assumed the lead role and became the dominant teacher. General education teachers became the curriculum experts and the special education teachers the manager of activities. According to Murawski and Dieker (2004), most collaborative relationships were jeopardized when one teacher dominated or lead in sequences that the other did not expect. Secondary education is content heavy and

often resulted in the dominate role of the regular education teacher. Mastropieri et al. (2005) reported that most special education teachers were comfortable with their role due to a lack of core content knowledge and students did tend to view the special education teacher as an assistant, rather than as a teacher.

Many issues must be resolved when teachers choose to co-teach. Issues include:

1. Who is responsible for the students in the classroom?
2. Who gives the grades and how do we grade?
3. Whose classroom rules will be enforced?
4. Where is each teacher's space within the classroom?

The responsibility for students depends, in large part, on the role of each of the teachers. Ultimately, both teachers must be responsible for student learning. Grading can be resolved rather easily in a number of ways. Both teachers can check, discuss, and assign grades, or they can divide the work-load evenly. It is imperative that each teacher understand the standards by which grades will be assigned.

Classroom management is an important issue. Good classroom management allows for more learning opportunities for all students. The teachers need to have planned their management techniques in advance. Within the realm of classroom management, personal space of teachers is an issue with each teacher needing his or her own desk and territory.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Co-teaching**

Students in co-teaching model classrooms get the attention of two teachers. This could not only be helpful to students who have special needs, but also to those who have not been identified. The special education and regular education students offer a more enriched curriculum than would be offered in the absence of the co-teaching model (Lawton 1999).

Keefe and Moore (2004) reported positive outcomes for students involved in co-teaching arrangements from special education teachers and the regular education teachers. Special education students lost the label and stigma of being learning disabled. Both teachers reported students with learning disabilities operating at higher levels of achievement. According to Sack (2005), more positive results occurred with co-teaching that enhanced instructional performance of teachers new to the profession. Pairing two teachers in the same classroom, one an experienced teacher and the other a novice, demonstrated promise for the potential to produce better teachers.

The emphasis on high stakes testing had a negative impact on the co-teaching experience (Mastropieri, et al., 2005). The push to cover the content that appeared on state mandated assessments, pressured teachers to move through material even if they were unsure as to whether there was student understanding. Those most likely to be left behind were students with learning disabilities. The pressure to cover content decreased the amount of differential instruction occurring within the

classroom. When testing was an issue, the major adaptation for many students with disabilities was one-on-one assistance from the special education teacher.

According to Keefe and Moore (2004), general education teachers reported far fewer negative outcomes than did the special education teachers in co-teaching arrangements. At least a few of the regular education teachers reported very little change in their routine and really wondered why the special education teacher was present.

Special education teachers reported concerns about class sizes. Large classes did not allow teachers to sufficient time to address students with learning disabilities as individuals with individual needs. Some students needed more individual attention than could be supplied in an individual classroom (Keefe and Moore, 2004).

#### **A Survey of Schools Implementing Co-Teaching Models**

Twenty-four school districts were surveyed to determine their utilization of a co-teaching model and the amount of preparation that district instructional and leadership personnel had prior to its initiation. The survey was completed by eight districts with total student enrollment greater than 2,000; by eight school districts with student enrollment greater than 1,000 and less than 2,000; by eight school districts with student enrollment of 1,000 or less students. The purpose for surveying school district by size of student enrollment was to determine whether rural school districts had significant results from districts that were in or near areas of more population density.

The questions asked on the survey of each district were as follows:

1. Has your school district initiated a co-teaching model to address the instruction of children with disabilities' inclusion in the regular education program?
2. Did your district provide staff development activities for the co-teaching model prior to its implementation?
3. If so, did the staff development include regular education teachers, special education teachers, and administration?
4. Would you rate the staff development received prior to implementing a co-teaching model as 1. Superior; 2. Marginal; 3. Nonexistent?

Each of the twenty-four schools indicated that the co-teaching model had been initiated in their districts. The size of the school district did not reveal any pattern of staff development that did or did not take place prior to initiating co-teaching. Of the twenty-four school districts surveyed, three indicated that they had provided staff development prior to program initiation and respondents from each of the three indicated that it was of superior quality that included regular education and special education teachers. Only one of the three indicated that school administrators were present in the staff development activities.

In this study the eight school districts with enrollments in excess of 2,000 students each indicated that co-teaching had been initiated. One district indicated that it provided staff development to regular education teachers, special education teachers, and school administration. The respondents indicated that the staff devel-

opment was of superior quality.

Of the eight school districts with enrollments of greater than 1,000 but less than 2000 students each indicated that co-teaching had been initiated. Two districts indicated that staff development involved regular education and special education teachers, but no school administrators. The respondents indicated that staff development activities were of superior quality.

Of the eight school districts with enrollments of 1,000 or fewer students each indicated that at least some form of co-teaching had been initiated. None of these districts had provided staff development to their personnel prior to initiating the model

Though this study is of a very limited population of schools it was apparent that the size of the school district had little impact on whether or not staff development was provided prior to the initiation of co-teaching. The respondents from school districts that had provided staff development indicated that it was of superior quality, but only one of the twenty-four districts surveyed indicated that educational leaders (administration) participated.

### Conclusions

From this study of twenty-four school districts there is evidence to suggest that co-teaching models are being initiated to meet the mandates of NCLB. With a special education teacher and regular education teacher working in the same classroom, the notion that both must be highly qualified (as required by NCLB regulations) is not an issue. The regular education teacher is considered the teacher of record and meets the standard for being highly qualified. This does not imply that

special education teachers included in this model are not qualified teachers.

This study would indicate that the co-teaching models in the schools surveyed are, for the most part, initiated without proper staff development for regular education teachers, special education teachers, and educational leaders (school administrators). This would support the notion that co-teaching is being initiated primarily for compliance with NCLB and less for quality instruction for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

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