

FACTORS AFFECTING THE ADOPTION OF CO-TEACHING MODELS IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: ONE SCHOOL'S JOURNEY FROM MAINSTREAMING TO INCLUSION

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We conducted qualitative research in a suburban middle school in Western Pennsylvania and examined the factors affecting the implementation and adoption of co-teaching models between regular and special education faculty. Purposeful sampling was used to identify 15 regular education teachers and 5 special education teachers as participants in the present study because the implementation of co-teaching had a significant impact on their daily practice as classroom teachers and resulted in substantial changes within their work environments. Teachers were interviewed and observed during a one-year period. Results suggest interpersonal relationship among co-teachers, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and administrative support and validation are factors that may affect the successful development of co-teaching relationships.

The proliferation of inclusion in public schools has prompted the development of several models of collaborative instruction (Austin, 2001). Given the national trend to place students with disabilities in general education classrooms full time, it is not surprising that many school systems are changing their special education delivery models to make them more inclusive (Walter-Thomas, 1997). These changes are often the result of court cases in which students with disabilities have been forced to file law suits in order

to receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment as guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. These laws have focused attention on students with increasingly diverse learning characteristics achieving high academic performance in general education (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004).

This review of literature will examine one particular court case that has had far reaching implications on the direction of special education instruction in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As a result of *Gaskin vs. Pennsylvania Department of Education* (2004), schools have adopted co-teaching models as a means of increasing inclusive practices and reducing special education segregation. For the purpose of this study, co-teaching was defined as well as the complexities associated with its implementation and adoption.

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School districts across Pennsylvania have recently been forced to rethink the method in which they educate special education students with their non-disabled peers. In 2004, a landmark court case was decided after 10 years of litigation involving a group of parents from eastern Pennsylvania whose children were educated in segregated classrooms as a result of their disabilities. The court case *Gaskin vs. Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2004*, was filed on behalf of Pennsylvania public school students with disabilities alleging that they had been denied their federal statutory right to a free appropriate public education in regular classrooms with necessary supplemental aids and services. In particular, the plaintiffs alleged that the Pennsylvania Department of Education had systematically failed to enforce the provisions in federal law requiring local schools and school districts to offer a full continuum of support services allowing children with disabilities to be educated in regular classrooms.

On December 21, 2004, counsel for parties in the *Gaskin* case signed a provisional settlement agreement. Per this agreement, the Department of Education was required to undertake a series of reforms in special education processes and procedures, including data collection, compliance monitoring, plan approval, Individualized Education Program report format, and complaint resolution. As a result of this court case, school districts across Pennsylvania are now attempting to educate more children with disabilities in regular education classrooms. One initiative school districts have considered is the use of co-teaching partnerships between regular education and special education teachers. Co-teaching relationships have been shown to provide teachers and specialists assistance in the development, delivery, and evaluation of effective instructional programs most likely to benefit students with disabilities (Walter-Thomas, 1997).

Gately and Gately (2001) defined co-teaching as:

The collaboration between regular and special education teachers for all of the teaching responsibilities of all students assigned to a classroom. Both teachers work together by sharing planning, presentation, evaluation, and classroom management in order to develop differentiated curriculum that meets the needs of a diverse student population. (p. 41)

Bauwens and Hourcade (1995) described the co-teaching process as: "A restructuring of the teaching procedures in which two or more educators

possessing distinct sets of skills work in a co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly teach academically and behaviorally heterogeneous groups of students in integrated educational settings" (p. 46). Zigmond and Magiera (2001) defined co-teaching as a special education service delivery model in which two certified teachers—one general educator and one special educator—share responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction for a diverse group of students, including students with disabilities. Reinhiller (1996) contended that co-teaching between general and special educators had become a common method of service delivery prior to the year 2000. Murwaski and Dieker (2004) implied that this method of instruction is a potential way to increase the learning outcomes for all students in the general education setting while ensuring students with disabilities receive necessary modifications and are provided instruction from a content expert. Rice and Zigmond (2000) concluded that well implemented co-teaching could be beneficial for students with and without disabilities.

In addition to discussions in the literature, the National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (1995) identified four specific models of co-teaching: 1) supportive teaching, 2) parallel teaching, 3) complementary teaching, and 4) team teaching. Supportive teaching is when one teacher takes the lead instructional role and another teacher provides support to students. Parallel teaching is when two or more teachers work with different groups of students in separate sections of the classroom. Complementary teaching is when teachers separate to enhance the instruction provided by the other co-teacher. Finally, team teaching is when two or more teachers plan, teach, assess, and assume responsibility for all of the students in the classroom.

Zigmond and Magiera (2001) identified five models of co-teaching: 1) one teaching/one assisting, 2) station teaching, 3) parallel teaching, 4) alternative teaching, and 5) team teaching. These models are similar in definition to the ones the National Center for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (1995) provided with station teaching as the only difference. Zigmond and Magiera (2001) defined this method as teachers dividing the physical arrangement of a classroom into three sections, two that support teacher directed instruction and one for independent seatwork.

Because teaching has traditionally occurred in isolation, the implementation of a co-teaching arrangement could be a difficult and complex

process. Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2004) likened co-teaching to a marriage in that partners must establish trust, develop and improve communication, share chores, celebrate, work together creatively to overcome inevitable challenges and problems, and anticipate conflict and handle it in a constructive way. Zigmond and Magiera (2001) concluded that successful co-teaching results from careful planning, ongoing co-planning, enthusiastic pairs of teachers compatible in philosophy (as well as temperament and personality), and strong administrative support.

Murwaski and Dieker (2004) identified two obstacles that educators must overcome when establishing a co-teaching partnership:

First, teachers are sometimes faced with schedules crafted before co-teaching teams are assigned. As a result, students with disabilities are often placed in classes that are already full. Second, special educators are often assigned to work with multiple teachers during the same class period, and thus, the teachers are not able to effectively collaborate with anyone. (p. 53)

Such issues can create a climate of resistance on behalf of the teaching staff when implementing co-teaching models.

Cook and Friend (1996) identified other problems that may arise, including classroom teachers fearing that special education teachers will judge their work. Special educators, on the other hand, may worry that others will question the value of their work or even if their jobs will be eliminated. Walter-Thomas (1997) identified problems in co-taught classrooms, including poorly defined role descriptions, lack of clear expectations from administrators, and frustration with implementation issues. Weiss and Lloyd (2002) concluded that a lack of training and support can result in the special education teacher assuming a monitoring role in the classroom during co-teaching periods. Friend, Hurley-Chamberlain, and Cook (2006) found variability in the implementation of co-teaching at the secondary level due to the lack of training and ongoing support. They illustrated several constraints at the secondary level that affect the implementation of co-teaching, including the intensity of the content, scheduling issues, and pressure to prepare students for exit and standardized exams.

As this service delivery model continues to gain in popularity, it is critical that research be conducted to determine how effective

implementation can occur. Co-teaching potentially has an impact on an entire school program as it requires changes in the task, structure, human, and technical subsystems within a school. It is essential that an adequate research base exist for teachers, administrators, and school policy makers to draw upon as they implement co-teaching relationships between regular education and special education teachers. This outcome is critical if schools are to meet the mandates of court cases and state and federal laws addressing inclusion and special education.

To date, most of the research that exists regarding the nature of co-teaching relationships has been conducted at the elementary level. Additional research is needed to determine what aspects of the secondary school could affect the successful implementation and adoption of co-teaching relationships between regular and special educators (Walter-Thomas, 1997). The essential elements needed to ensure co-teaching relationships that are both effective for students and professionally satisfying for teachers may be determined by accessing teachers' opinions, as they are the primary stakeholders involved in a co-teaching relationship. This study, an examination of factors affecting the implementation and adoption of co-teaching models in a middle school, provided valuable information in this process.

Method

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the implementation and adoption of co-teaching models in a middle school in Western Pennsylvania. In particular, we investigated factors that affected the implementation and adoption of co-teaching models and examined the human, task, structural, and technical subsystems of the school. Our grand tour question was: What factors in a suburban middle school in Western Pennsylvania affect the successful adoption of co-teaching relationships between regular education and special education teachers?

We employed a case study design and a naturalistic inquiry method to best answer our research question. Merriam (1998) suggested that case studies are different from other types of qualitative research in that they are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system such as an individual, program, innovation, event, group, intervention, or community. Using the naturalistic approach allowed us to study the implementation and adoption of co-teaching models and relationships as it/they occurred naturally,

without constraining, manipulating, or controlling it/them. Our intent was not to establish a cause-effect relationship, but to offer understanding and generate patterns inductively from our collected data. We confirmed these patterns through the triangulation of data sources, which lent credibility to our interpretations.

Participants

Criterion sampling (a form of purposeful sampling) was our method of choice used for identifying and securing participants for the study. We wanted to discover, understand, and gain the most insight possible about this particular phenomenon. The criteria established for participant selection required status as a special education teacher or regular education teacher assigned at least one co-teaching period during a school day. The participants included 15 regular education teachers, 3 special education teachers, an instructional support teacher, and 1 speech and language pathologist. All teachers co-taught at least one class per day with a colleague, and several of them co-taught as many as three classes per day. Teachers ranged in career experience from 4 to 32 years. No teacher in the study had previous co-teaching experience.

The case or bounded system we studied in this investigation was the Klondike Township Middle School (pseudonym). Klondike Township is a small township approximately six square miles in size with an above average family household income. The school district enjoys a positive regional reputation with higher than average student achievement on state assessment tests. The middle school consists of grades six, seven, and eight with approximately 650 students and 60 faculty and staff members. The school was in the first year of implementing co-teaching relationships in grades six and seven during our investigation. Prior to the co-teaching initiative, most students with disabilities were pulled out of the regular education classroom for primary academic subjects such as reading, English, and math. Students with disabilities were mainstreamed for certain classes such as physical education, art, music, library science, and computer instruction. No co-teaching relationships existed prior to the start of the 2006-2007 academic year.

Procedure

Our data collection included: (a) interviewing subjects, (b) observing of co-teaching in

classrooms, and (c) examining documents related to co-teaching. We conducted two interviews with each participant throughout the spring and summer of 2007, each approximately one hour in length. We maintained an interview log and summarized participants' responses to questions from a semi-structured interview guide.

Participant observation was our second method of data collection. We visited six co-teaching classrooms every month throughout the school year and observed the classrooms to determine the developmental stage of the co-teaching relationship. We subscribed to Gately and Gately's (2001) list of essential components within a co-teaching relationship: 1) interpersonal communication, 2) physical arrangement, 3) familiarity with curriculum, 4) curriculum goals and modifications, 5) instructional planning, 6) instructional presentation, 7) classroom management, and 8) assessment. We used an observation guide when visiting classrooms and jotted down anecdotal notes about progress in each of the eight areas. In all, we completed 96 classroom observations.

Content analysis was our primary method for analyzing the data. We collected raw data from interviews, field notes, and documents, and then coded them with note cards to identify recurring themes. As coding occurred, we drafted memos, identifying consistent, interesting, and poignant findings. Specifically, we employed a form of pattern matching in which we reviewed all of the anecdotal notes made during observations, field journal notes, interview responses, and interim memos that contained our initial perceptions about co-teaching. A thorough search of the data was then conducted in which we challenged our initial reactions and looked for negative evidence and alternative explanations. We then moved to a more deductive mode of thinking and analyzed the data for feasibility, usefulness, and centrality. Our intent was to determine how well the data related to the research problem and was central to the story of the school's attempt to implement co-teaching models.

In an effort to ensure the reliability and validity of the data analysis, we employed three methods. First, we conducted member checks and showed our participants excerpts of our interpretations for their review and response. Second, we selected peer reviewers familiar with co-teaching who could determine our accuracy. Third, we triangulated our sources and included interviews, observations, and documents to identify consistency in results.

Results

In general, three consistent themes emerged from the analysis of the data. First, co-teaching was an arranged partnership the school administrator (principal) established based on logistics (school schedule) and available resources (personnel). Teacher personalities and styles are not often considered during the matching and implementation process. As a result, the partnering of two teachers who were an incompatible match had occurred. This incompatibility often encompassed multiple areas, such as classroom management, academic expectations, and level of interest and ability in specific academic content areas.

When asked how his job changed as a result of the co-teaching initiative, a seventh grade algebra teacher working in a co-teaching relationship responded:

I have to tutor and train the co-teacher in Algebra I on my own time. She doesn't do her homework. She does it during class. I cannot plan with the co-teacher because the concepts are above her abilities. In the beginning of the year, it was all fine because she understood the work. Once we hit a level that was beyond her ability, she just quit. She is an excellent special education teacher in the resource room, but she cannot provide any instruction, planning, or assessment in Algebra I. Now she feels that she does not have to do anything. I provide the daily handouts to her and give her the weekly plans. However, they are never completed before class. She works on them during class rather than making herself available to help the students.

This sentiment demonstrates the incompatibility of these two teachers and the dysfunction in the co-teaching relationship. First, the Algebra I teacher assumes that the work has become too difficult for the special education teacher and that she is incapable of comprehending it, leaving one to question whether any substantial level of co-teaching will ever occur in this classroom beyond the one-teach one-assist model. Second, the regular education teacher assigns the special education teacher work as if she were a student in the class. Again, successful co-teaching relationships are based on mutual respect and effective communication on the part of both professionals, lacking components among these two teachers. Finally, the two professionals appear to have different perspectives regarding roles and responsibilities

in the co-teaching relationship. The regular education teacher assumes the role as lead instructor and views the special education teacher's role as that of a helper.

Another component not considered was the teachers' frustration with their lack of content knowledge. The resulting anxiety caused tension and contributed to dysfunctional co-teaching relationships. When asked how she liked teaching in the regular education environment, a special education teacher responded:

De-professionalization can absolutely occur in this arrangement . . . especially if I keep working in an assistant role. I need to be taught the material just like the kids. Once I am taught the material, I will be able to teach the students. I never realized how difficult these classes were. The kids are definitely being challenged and so am I. I think next year will be a better year.

Frustration with curriculum familiarity was also heard in a seventh grade English teacher's response:

Special education teachers do not have the background to teach seventh grade English. My co-teaching partner never went beyond single sentence structure in the resource classroom. We do compound sentences, complex sentences, five paragraph essays, and the like. Familiarity with the curriculum is a huge issue right now because they never taught it. They need time to figure it out and learn it. Until that happens, she [special education teacher] is just going to be an aide in my room.

Although the teachers publicly indicated they were capable of overcoming mismatches in style and professional values, observations and personal interview responses suggested otherwise. The teachers involved in a dysfunctional partnership were unable to adjust their situations, which resulted in a sense of de-professionalization among special education teachers and frustration among the regular education teachers.

A second theme that consistently emerged was the difficulty associated with co-teachers assuming roles and taking responsibility for tasks in the classroom. Faculty members indicated they would prefer the principal or director of special education to assign specific job functions for the regular education teacher and the special education teacher. Regular education teachers consistently

indicated they did not feel comfortable delegating roles to the special education teacher and considered doing so as professionally disrespectful. Special educators struggled with assuming instructional roles in the classroom because they did not want to infringe on the content teacher's expertise. These issues were heard in the comments of a sixth grade social studies teacher:

The division of responsibilities is still a big problem in many of the co-teaching teams. The special education teachers see themselves as being only responsible for the special education kids and us being responsible for the rest of the students. The classroom teacher seems to be doing all the work including establishing the curriculum from scratch. This includes modifying tests, adapting curriculum, and lesson plans. All I want is for my co-teaching partner to take an interest in teaching some of the content. I want her to pick out some of the units she is interested in and begin planning and presenting. We have to determine who is doing what for next year. We have to get on the same page.

Such statements were commonplace and speak to the importance of interpersonal communication as a factor affecting the implementation of co-teaching.

The third and final theme that emerged was the need for administrative support and validation, as well as teacher input into the co-teaching initiative. Teachers who reported poor results with the co-teaching initiative had fewer visits in the classroom from the principal and claimed not receiving any positive feedback from the principal or the director of special education. Teachers stated that once implementation was initiated they never heard from or visited with an administrator, other than the co-teaching consultant team working with the school district.

Teachers desired more confirmation from the principal regarding the future plan for the initiative and whether they would be partnered with the same co-teacher during the next school year. They wanted a voice in the planning and preparation for the next school year. The inability of the principal to address these concerns resulted in teachers' resistance. Such dismay was heard in the voice of a sixth grade English teacher:

There was no teacher input in the co-teaching initiative. We showed up to school one day and found out we would

be doing co-teaching beginning next school year. They never asked us what we thought about it or who we wanted to work with or anything. But, that is so typical of the district . . . no vision, no clear direction . . . just reaction and response . . . whatever the flavor of the day is, or whatever the parents want. Once we started, we never saw them. I would like to know if what we are doing is what they want. I would also like to know who I will be working with next year. Am I working with the same person? Will we be getting more staff?

Such a response speaks to the complexity of implementing co-teaching relationships because of logistical issues associated with planning a master schedule and meeting the needs of all special education students while creating optimal co-teaching partnerships. The literature about co-teaching supports consistent partnerships from one academic year to the next, allowing for an evolution of curriculum familiarity (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). However, the arrangement is not always feasible when the needs of students, budget issues, and personnel requirements across a school district are considered.

Discussion

Implementing co-teaching in the Klondike Middle School proved to be a complex process during the first year of the initiative. There were various developmental stages observed in the co-teaching relationships, and both dysfunctional and thriving relationships were documented. Some of the identifiable factors associated with successful co-teaching implementation and adoption included interpersonal communication skills, administrative support, familiarity with curriculum, involvement in the planning of the initiative on behalf of the teachers, a common philosophy on classroom instruction and management, and identification of roles and responsibilities in the co-teaching relationship.

Perhaps the first step in successfully implementing co-teaching models in a school is to allow teachers to be a part of the planning and preparation process. Giving teachers a voice about the co-teacher with whom they will instruct all students and related curriculum areas is a good first step. As with any educational initiative, giving the grassroots level people in the organization a voice in the implementation process empowers

them and aids in creating a sense of importance regarding the new paradigm.

Another critical step in creating co-teaching relationships is to help teachers accept the redefining of traditional roles to which they are accustomed, namely the awareness that co-teaching may triumph over isolated teaching arrangements. The paradigm change begins with school leaders articulating a vision of co-teaching as an organizational and instructional strategy beneficial for all students. School administrators must also validate the importance of co-teaching with frequent visits to co-taught classrooms and support the successful co-teaching performance with praise and encouragement.

Once secondary teachers refocus their traditional conceptions of teaching, they must forge a co-teaching philosophy that manifests in effective instruction. The process often begins by (a) establishing and clarifying co-teaching goals, (b) identifying a set of beliefs about teaching and student learning, and (c) defining roles and responsibilities within the classroom. When redefining their roles and responsibilities for co-teaching, teachers may find developing a checklist or obtaining a commercially prepared co-teaching responsibilities matrix is a useful way to begin a necessary reflective-critical dialogue. As observed at Klondike Middle School, teachers were often uncomfortable delegating roles and assigning tasks to each other. The utilization of a checklist or matrix might have validated the importance of that process and made a potentially uncomfortable situation more natural and productive.

Limitations

This study explored the factors that affected the implementation and adoption of co-teaching relationships in a suburban middle school. Limitations in the study included a participant sample that was relatively small and primarily composed of regular education teachers. Because the majority of participants were regular education teachers, few of them had any formal special education training. This dynamic may have created a predisposition of opposition to working with special education students due to lack of experience or training.

Another limitation that may have influenced the results of the study was that participation in the co-teaching arrangement was not voluntary. The middle school principal and assistant principal assigned teachers to their co-teaching partners based on the needs of the student body (especially

the special education population) and available personnel. Teaching styles and personalities were never considered. This oversight may have influenced the way teachers responded to certain questions during the semi-structured interviews.

A final limitation that may have influenced the results involves the socioeconomic status and geographic location of the population sample. The fact that all co-teacher participants taught in an upper middle class school district in a suburban setting limits the generalizability of the findings. Several of the teachers in the study also lived within the community, which may have influenced the way they responded about the district's new teaching approach.

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