Co-Teaching: Getting to Know Your Partner

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Mr. Salvatore and Ms. Happa were getting to know one another. They were in a new co-teaching partnership, designed by the school administrator, since just before the school year began. Mr. Salvatore had been a solo fourth-grade teacher for 15 years. He enjoyed teaching and maintaining complete instructional responsibility for students in his classes.

Ms. Happa was new to the school. She had been a teacher for 7 years and enjoyed collegial interactions on behalf of students for whom she and other teachers shared responsibility.

In the beginning of their teaching arrangement, Ms. Happa was comfortable in a supportive role because she wanted to learn about the students and Mr. Salvatore’s teaching style. As time passed, however, she wanted a more active instructional role and increased opportunities to interact with students, especially in the upcoming implementation of response to intervention (RTI).

Co-teaching is analogous to a professional marriage (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007) in which teaching partners collaborate to provide instructional services to students with disabilities and others at risk of school failure as a result of the negative consequences of environmental events. Regrettably, in many instances co-teachers are carelessly placed together and therefore, completely miss out on the development stages critical in a relationship. As in conventional marriage, skipping the time to develop a strong relationship may lead to communication problems and misunderstandings, as well as ending the relationship. These difficulties between adults can negatively affect students in co-teaching settings. For example, students may receive conflicting messages when there is friction in a co-teaching relationship and the teachers are not synchronizing classroom logistics or lesson design and delivery. The situation may be especially complex for students with information-processing difficulties. As a result, they may not know which direction to follow or which teacher to ask for assistance. Another consequence, often called “staff splitting,” may occur when teachers do not get along: the old game of “he said, she said.” Always savvy students can read an uncomfortable and tense relationship and may use a rift between teachers to manipulate a situation to their advantage. Here, of course, as in many families, one teacher says no to a request but the other teacher may say yes. The process of staff splitting may increase friction between the co-teachers. Thus, like parents, teachers must communicate with each other and ensure they are on the same page regarding interactions with children.

Effective communication is key to navigating professional relationships, whether teachers are thrown together or have time to get to know each other. The important consideration, as with family life and parents who have
children's best interests at heart, is that most teachers enter the profession because they want to help children. To ultimately benefit students, then, this article presents problem-solving strategies to facilitate communication between co-teachers.

**Getting Started: The Relationship-Building Stage**

Before beginning a co-teaching relationship, teachers first must know the meaning of co-teaching, as well as logistics involved with the process.

Co-teaching is an instructional delivery model used to teach students with disabilities and those at risk of educational failure in the least restrictive, most productive, integrated classroom settings where both general and special educators share responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction for all students (Arguelles, Hughes, & Schumm, 2000; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). The practice provides teachers with an opportunity to share professional expertise. In most instances, general educators are

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of instructional processes for students who are identified as having disabilities or being at risk.

Unfortunately, attempts to merge the knowledge bases in co-teaching settings often causes confusion between teachers. Therefore, teaching partners need to communicate openly about issues that arise. The situation corresponds to newly married couples: Each person enters the relationship with diverse individual and cultural mores, which must be meshed to form a harmonious home. Co-teachers come together with dissimilar personal and professional values that they must identify, state, and combine in an effort to create positive academic and social climates for all students in their classroom settings.

In a recent study, Scruggs and colleagues (2007) found that co-teachers believe personal compatibility is the most important factor for co-teaching success. Thus, once teachers understand the definition of co-teaching they can begin to talk about the practicalities of their relationship. Teachers should first discuss their philosophy of education, specifically how they feel about teaching together in an inclusive classroom. Did they choose co-teaching, or was it chosen for them? If co-teaching was chosen for them, is it a process to which they can commit for a full school year?

Most teachers are willing to work together to benefit students for whom they share responsibility. In that regard, parity is the next issue they should address in their relationship. Parity implies equal status, or equality in substance. In a co-teaching relationship, parity suggests that all classroom responsibilities are shared equally, including instructional planning and delivery, discipline, grading, and collaborating with parents, among other tasks. Co-teachers' inability to discuss nitty-gritty details regarding shared classroom space, instructional noise levels, discipline, and daily chores often leads to unresolved issues that interfere with efforts to collaborate on behalf of students. Co-teachers need to discuss the basics of their partnership.

Ms. Happa's and Mr. Salvatore's hastily arranged relationship did not allow them an opportunity to talk about issues of parity and other fundamentals important to their professional association. Fortunately, they recognized the weakness in their relationship and rather than allow it to deteriorate, they decided to use a portion of their common planning time to address their roles and responsibilities. Some issues were easy to discuss, whereas others took a bit longer.

For example, they had common ideas about shared classroom space, discipline, daily chores, and communicating with parents. Mr. Salvatore was more than willing to share his classroom with Ms. Happa. He understood the need for both teachers to have separate desks or at least discrete places for their instructional materials and belongings. He also acknowledged that materials for a particular lesson should be stored in the classroom so that they were readily available for instruction. As a result, he arranged for a kidney-shaped table in the classroom for Ms. Happa to use during their lessons. The students were accustomed to Mr. Salvatore's disciplinary plan, so, it was easy for Ms. Happa to follow his approach.

The teachers also decided to share daily chores, such as attendance taking and lunch count. Since Ms. Happa was not always in the room for attendance and lunch count activities, she performed other routine tasks during the day. For example, she often accompanied students to the cafeteria, thereby allowing Mr. Salvatore time to catch up with his e-mail messages.

Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore recognized the importance of parity in parent-teacher interactions and decided that they would communicate, jointly when possible, with all parents. As a matter of fact, on back-to-school night, they co-presented an overview of the school year and anticipated classroom events. This approach allowed parents to view both teachers as equal partners in the classroom.

Effective strategies for communicating with parents include (a) using various modes of communication, (b) inviting parents to visit or attend school events, (c) engaging families in curriculum planning, and (d) providing parents with resources to help their children succeed in school (Salend, 2010). Communication with parents is essential in building strong collaborative and co-teaching relationships, which ultimately benefit students. The advantage of a co-teaching partnership is that both teachers can communicate with parents to keep them informed of their children's academic and social growth and development. When this communication occurs, the teachers also learn about parental concerns and aspirations for their children.

Instructional noise is another issue to which co-teachers must attend. Classroom noise can become a problem if one teacher prefers teaching in a quiet setting and the other is comfortable with a noisy instructional environment. Figure 1 shows various types...
of classroom structures that many co-teachers use or consider as they plan (Friend & Bursuck, 2009).

Mr. Salvatore believed that noisy classrooms were signs of collaborative learning; on the other hand, Ms. Happa believed that students should collaborate, but in a quiet manner. The easiest solution was to discuss acceptable noise levels within the classroom and to acknowledge that the intensity may increase or decrease, depending on the co-teaching structure (e.g., one teach, one observe; team-teaching; station teaching; one teach, one drift around the classroom).

Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore were able to accommodate this variability by planning instructional activities for both quiet and noisy classrooms. For example, a noisy lesson might be one in which the students work together using rulers to measure various items in the classroom. A quiet lesson might be one where students work in pairs to determine the meaning of a poem.

Planning: The Marriage/Co-Teaching Stage

After talking about minor details in their relationship, co-teaching partners must address the area of instruction. Most co-teachers, initially, were solo teachers and, like Mr. Salvatore, may not be comfortable sharing responsibility for instructional decisions. Therefore, it is essential for them to address issues related to curriculum planning and instruction. Critical topics to discuss include concerns such as who

- Plans and teaches the lessons.
- Prepares and organizes instructional materials.
- Chooses co-teaching structures that complement the lessons and students' abilities.
- Identifies assessment processes that determine students' acquisition of knowledge and ability to demonstrate skills and competencies.
- Grades assignments.

Figure 1. Description of Co-Teaching Structures

1. **One Teach, One Observe**—when one teacher is responsible for whole group instruction while the other teacher observes the students and gathers information on their academic, social, and behavioral skills. This co-teaching structure allows co-teachers an opportunity to gather information about their students, and each other as well.

2. **Parallel Teaching**—when the co-teachers place the students into two equal groups and each teacher simultaneously teaches the same material to his or her small group. The benefit of this co-teaching structure is that it allows for increased teacher interaction and student participation as well as differentiation of instruction.

3. **Station Teaching**—when the co-teachers arrange the students into two or three equal groups, and the students rotate through each of the instructional stations. In this structure, the stations should not build on one another, but rather be nonsequential. The advantage of this co-teaching structure is that it also allows for increased teacher and student interactions.

4. **Alternative Teaching**—when one teacher teaches the whole group and the other teacher teaches a small group of students. The grouping for this structure should change according to students' needs. This co-teaching structure allows either teacher the opportunity to teach (e.g., remediation, preteaching, vocabulary development, and enrichment activities) for a short period of time.

5. **One Teach, One Assist**—when one teacher instructs the whole group and the other teacher assists individual students. The co-teaching structure allows the drifting teacher the opportunity to provide brief periods of individualized instruction to students who may be struggling with the academic content.

6. **Team Teaching**—when both teachers deliver instruction simultaneously to a large group of students. This structure affords the team teachers the chance to interact with the students. It also provides them with an opportunity to ask clarification questions of one another, thereby eliminating the potential confusion in instruction.

Such planning is crucial, especially for teachers who may experience arranged partnerships as a result of school district decisions and policies to implement RTI, which seeks to prevent academic failure in children who incur difficulty learning. RTI uses early instructional assistance, frequent measures of academic progress, and increasingly intense research-based instruction. As such, it requires general and special educators to collaborate actively to ensure implementation of lessons that address a wide array of instructional needs in general education classrooms and provide access to the general education curriculum for diverse learners (Murawski & Hughes, 2009).

As stated previously, special educators may be considered as the masters of access who, at first have limited familiarity with curriculum and instructional materials. Consequently, they may assume several supportive roles in co-teaching settings, such as (a) providing back-up support to students, (b) teaching a component of the curriculum, and (c) team-teaching (Weiss & Lloyd, 2003). Special educators often assume more participatory instructional roles when they feel confident with curricular content.

Trent and colleagues (2003) found that a mutually satisfying co-teaching relationship emerges when teachers focus on technical aspects of planning, which ultimately benefit them, as well as the students. These teachers recognize the significance of "identifying their roles, responsibilities, sequences,
and most importantly, who was going to do what” (p. 209). In addition, the teachers feel it is imperative to have structured planning time, rather than impromptu planning 5 minutes before class sessions. These delineations help define co-teaching relationships. When teachers are equal partners in instructional processes, they outwardly show few distinctions between them (Trent et al., 2003; Weiss & Lloyd, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that co-teachers discuss planning and instructional techniques.

Problem Solving: The Ongoing Relationship Stage

What should teachers do when problems arise? As in other relationships, when things go wrong the partners need an opportunity to sit down and address issues in a structured manner. Similarly, co-teachers must discuss issues that confront them in a well-thought-out and orderly process. Luckily, co-teachers can find various problem-solving models (Berkeley & Ludlow, 2008; Sinclair, 1998) that can be modified to meet specific needs. Sinclair’s (1998) classic model is a seven-step process that includes (a) identifying issues; (b) developing alternative courses of action; (c) analyzing risks and benefits of each course of action; (d) choosing a course of action; (e) taking action; (f) evaluating results of the action; and (g) assuming responsibility for the consequences, correcting potentially negative consequences, or re-engaging in the decision-making process. Although some issues can be resolved rather quickly, others are more intricate and demand considerable time to disentangle them. A structured problem-solving model allows co-teaching partners to elucidate larger problems and hopefully avoid a breakup. The following scenario demonstrates how teachers may use Sinclair’s problem-solving model in their co-teaching relationship.

After approximately a month of getting to know each other and the students, Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore hit a road bump in their teaching relationship. They had a solid foundation, yet Ms. Happa believed she could offer more to their professional association. As a result, she explained to Mr. Salvatore that she would like to contribute to instructional design and delivery. Although they had discussed various co-teaching models, Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore struggled with classroom implementation. They had a tendency to follow the “one teach, one assist” model, with Mr. Salvatore leading the lessons.

Mr. Salvatore enjoyed collaborating with Ms. Happa; however, he was uncertain about sharing instructional responsibility for the students. Ms. Happa explained to Mr. Salvatore that she earned a Master’s Degree in Special Education and was knowledgeable about the curriculum, as well as appropriate instructional strategies.

The co-teachers were truly in a bind. They knew it was their responsibility to ensure a quality education for students. Yet, differences in how to provide instruction had the potential to interfere with the process. So, they decided to resolve their issues using Sinclair’s (1998) model of problem solving.

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Ms. Happa felt undervalued because she was a competent teacher and wanted the opportunity to demonstrate her skills and knowledge. Although she tried many times, she could not get Mr. Salvatore to understand the “co” in co-teaching. She did not want to be in charge of his class; rather, she wanted to share instructional responsibilities.

Step 1: Identify the issues.

Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore were having difficulty communicating. On the one hand, Mr. Salvatore wanted Ms. Happa in the classroom, but on the other, he did not want to share instructional design and delivery. Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore knew they shared the same goal: to afford success for all students. They just had difficulty figuring out how to achieve their goal. On the one hand, they could maintain the status quo and plod along in their disjointed efforts. On the other, they knew this approach was not appropriate and they needed alternative practices to work together. Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore decided to generate various solutions to their dilemma. After a lengthy discussion, they narrowed down their choices to three options. The first choice was to give up and end their relationship. The second alternative was to speak with the principal to see if she could ease the situation. The third option was for Mr. Salvatore to observe Ms. Happa co-teaching in another classroom.

Step 2: Develop alternative courses of action.

Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore discussed each alternative. They decided that Option 1, giving up and ending the relationship, was not an option, especially because of the potential deleterious effects on the students. They were frustrated. They knew they had a solid foundation; they just hit a speed bump. They also knew they did not want to stay the course and end up hating co-teaching and each other. The risks of Option 1 were just too high; they had to identify another alternative.

After approximately a month of getting to know each other and the students, Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore hit a road bump in their teaching relation-
problem with the principal. First, both teachers had a good relationship with the principal and did not want to seem as though they could not solve the problem on their own.

Second, there was additional risk for Mr. Salvatore because he knew the principal was in favor of co-teaching to benefit students’ education as well as teachers’ professional development. He did not want to be viewed as an individual player rather than as a team member.

Finally, they discussed Option 3. Ms. Happa also co-taught with a fifth-grade teacher, and asked Mr. Salvatore if he would like to observe her co-teaching in the other setting. The benefit of this option is that Mr. Salvatore would have a concrete and positive example of a different co-teaching relationship.

Step 4: Choose a course of action.

After considerable discussion, Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore chose the third alternative. Mr. Salvatore would observe Ms. Happa co-teaching in another setting.

Step 5: Take action.

The following week during a preparatory period, Mr. Salvatore observed Ms. Happa co-teaching a fifth-grade mathematics lesson in which Ms. Happa and her co-teaching partner demonstrated two co-teaching structures. They began the lesson with parallel teaching, in which each teacher reviewed the morning work assignment. Next, she and the co-teacher taught alternatively. In this situation, Ms. Happa taught a small group of students while the co-teacher taught the larger group. The observation allowed Mr. Salvatore an opportunity to scrutinize Ms. Happa’s teaching and learn that she could indeed teach.

Step 6: Evaluate results of the action.

The next day, Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore discussed the observation. Ms. Happa explained the lesson components to Mr. Salvatore and asked if he had any questions. Mr. Salvatore told Ms. Happa that he was impressed, but he wanted to review the various co-teaching structures. He just was not sure how they would work in their shared setting. Ms. Happa explained the co-teaching structures (i.e., one teach, one observe; team-teaching; station teaching; and one teach, one drift) and offered examples of how each structure could work in their classroom, depending on the lesson content and students’ instructional needs. (See Figure 2 for examples of how co-teaching structures may be used.)

Figure 2. Examples of How to Use Co-Teaching Structures

1. One Teach, One Observe is an excellent strategy to implement during the first few weeks of school. It may be used during any lesson to determine which students are contributing to the lesson, as well as to identify students who need extra encouragement and support to contribute to class discussions. One teach, one observe also may be used to collect student data, monitor and support student behavior, and write and evaluate students’ individualized education program objectives in preparation for meetings with parents and colleagues.

2. Parallel Teaching may be used in many different ways. The strength of the format is that it enables teachers to work with smaller numbers of students and to provide all students an opportunity for individualized and hands-on learning. Parallel teaching is an excellent format to use in science lessons, particularly those with experiments, especially because the teachers are working with a smaller number of students and have a better chance of controlling the variables.

3. Station Teaching is a good format to use in any curricular area. For example, in an English language arts lesson, the students, who are working in small groups, rotate through one of three stations. The teachers teach two stations (e.g., grammar and spelling) while other students work independently on narrative writing activities.

4. Alternative Teaching is an exceptional format to provide students with more intense and individualized instruction in a specific academic area. For example, many students have difficulty solving word problems. Therefore, one teacher can provide them with explicit instruction on solving word problems twice weekly for 15–20 minutes per session, while the other teacher works on other word problem-solving activities with the remaining students in the class.

5. One Teach, One Assist is an excellent strategy to check for student understanding. For example, during a math lesson, while one teacher is teaching, the other teacher can provide additional one-to-one assistance, such as reminding students about the first step to solve a problem, prompting students’ use of a diagram to help understand the problem, or providing the definition of a concept to address students’ difficulties and to ensure their understanding of the new material.

6. Team Teaching can be used in any academic subject, especially when presenting new material. In this instance, the co-teachers set up the lesson to question one another when a difficult concept is presented, thereby taking the pressure off of the students who may have difficulty understanding the new material. This structure also helps the teachers support each other as they present the material to ensure they addressed all steps and accurately reinforced the concepts.

Note. Adapted from "Creating optimal opportunities to learn mathematics: Blending co-teaching structures with research-based practices," by J. M. Sileo & D. van Garderen (2010), TEACHING Exceptional Children, 42(3), 14–21. Copyright 2010 by the Council for Exceptional Children.
Step 7: Assume responsibility for the consequences, correct potentially negative consequences, or re-engage in the decision-making process.

After the observation, Mr. Salvatore decided to share responsibility for instructional design and delivery with Ms. Happa. Because he had observed a mathematics lesson, Mr. Salvatore decided to start co-teaching in mathematics. Ms. Happa was comfortable with his decision. They co-planned the lesson to ensure they were both engaged in the instructional processes. The lesson was a huge success without any hitches.

As an aside, Ms. Happa and Mr. Salvatore have been co-teaching successfully for 8 years and advocate for the process among their colleagues.

Final Thoughts

The beginning stage of any co-teaching relationship is similar to the initial aspects of any dating relationship. At first, the relationship is great, and the partners are blissful and happy. As time evolves, however, newly formed relationships need to be nurtured to create a stronger relationship, because performing as a team is hard work, if it is to be successful and long lasting. New couples in any relationship often argue about simple things, such as leaving the cap off the toothpaste tube or which of the partners is responsible for doing laundry, vacuuming, or cooking. The same can be said for new co-teaching partners. The teachers may disagree about leaving the lid off the whiteboard marker or putting away instructional materials at the end of the day.

In either marriage or co-teaching, the key to success is compromise and collaboration. All co-teachers must be flexible for their relationship to flourish. Therefore, co-teaching partners must communicate throughout the relationship to ensure the relationship focuses on what is most important in co-teaching—children’s academic and social growth and development.

References


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Note: The names of the co-teachers in this article are pseudonyms.

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