

# Addressing Diverse Needs through CO-TEACHING:

Take  
Baby  
Steps!

by Wendy W. Murawski

*By incorporating these suggestions, teachers can begin to establish a differentiated and inclusive co-teaching environment.*

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To assist students with diverse needs within the general education classroom, one possible service delivery model is co-teaching (also known as collaborative teaching, team teaching, or cooperative teaching). The idea of a general education and special education teacher working collaboratively on a coequal status to meet the unique needs of all students in a general education classroom is often quite appealing to teachers. The process of moving from a program that primarily uses a pullout model to one of co-teaching, however, can be a daunting process; and educators admit confusion and frustration at figuring out how to begin.

Though co-teaching was cited as the most frequently used service delivery option for students in general education classrooms (Na-

tional Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion 1995), teachers who reported to be co-teaching may be providing in-class support, but not actually co-teaching. Cook and Friend (1995, 2) defined co-teaching as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space." Thus, a paraprofessional or special education teacher who spends the majority of class time circulating, providing one-on-one assistance, modifying, and helping with behavior management, is not truly co-teaching in that classroom.

Merely being in the same physical space is not sufficient; co-equal professionals both should be responsible for delivering substantive instruction to students. To

meet individual needs, however, this type of substantive instruction often needs to be differentiated. Establishing a situation or relationship in which co-teaching is possible takes work; and it is critical that educators who are interested in co-teaching, and in meeting those individual needs, lay the groundwork for this to occur. Following the Baby Steps provided in Table 1 should help in these efforts.

### Baby Steps

**Break out of your room and routine.** Special educators often are segregated from their general education colleagues, both physically and philosophically. This sometimes self-imposed isolation may be the result of a school climate that supports teachers who don't make waves or admit difficulties. Within this type of environment, special educators often do not find the time, interest, or energy to leave their rooms to inter-

act with other teachers. By staying in their own classrooms, however, special educators are less likely to be exposed to the grade-level curriculum and expectations held by their general education colleagues. As a first step toward co-teaching, getting to know other teachers is a must. Special educators are encouraged to join other teachers at lunchtime, attend faculty gatherings, and volunteer for committees.

At the same time, general education teachers frequently resist change, especially if they have had success within their classrooms previously. However, given the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), children with disabilities likely will be included in more general education classes. Many content teachers are concerned that they do not know how to meet those specific academic, behavioral, and emotional needs. At the same time,

they consider special education teachers experts in modifications, accommodations, and differentiated instruction.

General educators must recognize that change is inevitable. They must be proactive and break out of their own classrooms and routines. Often, the initial rapport established with special educators will lead to consultative discussions regarding strategies for meeting diverse needs. These strategies sometimes can be used immediately. Moreover, this type of relationship can lead to future collaborative teaching.

**Assess the current situation and environment.** Every school has its politics, its stronger and weaker teachers or departments, and its areas of particular need. By breaking out of their own classrooms, teachers have opportunities to assess these issues. Is the current school situation one in which co-teaching would be embraced quickly, or do some wheels need to be greased? Are administrators willing to support teachers who volunteer for this collaborative and inclusive endeavor?

Special educators should begin to consider the teachers, grade levels, and departments at the school. General educators should begin to consider the special educators with whom they have rapport, and the individuals with disabilities they would be most willing to include within their own classrooms. For example, are students with mild to moderate disabilities more easily integrated into a particular classroom, or would students with more significant disabilities be equally welcome? Are particular individuals or departments more amenable to this arrangement than others? If so, these

**Table 1. Baby Steps Toward Co-Teaching**

**B**reak out of your room and routine.

**A**ssess the current situation and environment.

**B**egin to establish rapport with others.

**Y**elling is out! Use good communication skills.

**S**tart to provide in-class supports.

**T**ake the initiative.

**E**xemplify best practices.

**P**rovide specific how-to information about co-teaching approaches.

**S**hare the co-teaching worksheet.

are the people to get to know better and with whom to begin dialogue about establishing a collaborative classroom.

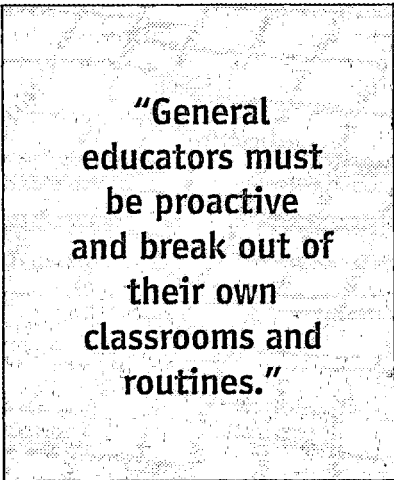
**Begin to establish rapport with others.** Co-teaching frequently is compared to a marriage because the relationship between teachers is a daily one that requires much interaction, communication, and trust. As such, co-teachers should pair with others whose personalities match or at least complement one another. Friend and Cook (2003) recommended that collaborative relationships be voluntary to increase the chances of their effectiveness.

Gately and Gately (2001) reported that co-teachers go through stages (beginning, compromising, and collaborating) during their time together. Norris (1997) reflected on these stages as "forming, storming, and norming." The forming stage requires potential co-teachers to get to know one another, personally and professionally, before they ever can move to the storming (working through issues) and norming (establishing a working environment) stages. By establishing rapport with others, the chances that newfound friends will be interested in co-teaching in the near future increases.

**Yelling is out! Use good communication skills.** Many school districts have begun to look to co-teaching as a method of serving students with diverse needs in the least restrictive environment in an effort to meet legal requirements. Yet, asserting to other educators that they need to engage in co-teaching because "it's the law" or "it's in the child's IEP (Individualized Education Program)" is *not* the way to go! Teachers are less likely to be open to co-teaching if they feel it is a mandated situation that

requires them to give up their teaching autonomy.

In situations where teachers are told that they will be expected to co-teach, it behooves both educators to use excellent problem-solving, consultative, and communication skills in their early communications with one another (Friend and Cook 2003; Murawski 2003). In addition, each educator needs to recognize the other's frame of reference and use good lis-



**"General educators must be proactive and break out of their own classrooms and routines."**

tening skills to ensure that miscommunication does not occur. Too often, co-teaching will fall apart if educators sense a lack of parity or do not know their role in the co-taught classroom (Walther-Thomas 1997).

**Start to provide in-class supports.** Though in-class support differs from co-teaching, it can be a good starting point. In the general education classroom, the special educator circulates, assists with those having difficulty academically or behaviorally, and suggests needed adaptations for students with special needs. The general education teacher, however, is the primary teacher for the classroom and does the bulk of the planning, instructing, and evaluating of stu-

dents. While in-class support can be a valuable method of helping differentiate instruction for students in general education classes, it often relegates the special education teacher to that of paraprofessional (Walther-Thomas 1997). When this arrangement continues over a long period of time and in a majority of classes, the special education teacher may feel burned out, bored, or devalued as a teacher.

As a baby step toward co-teaching, however, providing in-class support to a few general education colleagues is an excellent way to demonstrate the value of another teacher's assistance. Clearly, many students with diverse needs will benefit from more individualized attention, not just those individuals with identified disabilities (Levine 2002). This preliminary step also helps establish schedules that enable two teachers to be in the same classroom during the school day. In addition, the responsibilities and job duties performed by the special educator when acting in the role of "in-class support personnel" can increase over time until more parity is reached in the responsibilities and accountability of the educators. Sometimes this introductory step is needed just to get teachers more comfortable with working with one another in the same room.

**Take the initiative.** Teachers are encouraged to look for ways to let others know that they are interested in engaging in co-teaching or other inclusive, collaborative interactions. Administrators should be alerted, and literature on co-teaching practices and the potential benefits to students and faculty who engage in co-teaching should be shared. Interested teachers

should talk to colleagues about the possibility of co-teaching. Schedules should be considered. Also beneficial is to identify potential barriers and brainstorm ways to remove or minimize those barriers.

Educators can co-teach a unit or single lesson with a colleague to determine whether teaching styles are complementary. Special educators can offer to provide in-class assistance to general education teachers who bring student concerns to the school's Student Study Team (also known as a prereferral or assistance team). General educators can offer to provide strategies for special educators to address instructional standards or content-specific conundrums. Those who know about co-teaching and want to increase the likelihood of its use at a school should offer to do a mini in-service on co-teaching at a faculty meeting or staff development day, or arrange to bring in an expert on the topic.

**Exemplify best practices.** Public relations are key when it comes to new school initiatives. General educators often are wary of co-teaching with special education colleagues because of concerns about consistency and teaching ability, as well as the impact on instruction and assessment. In fact, most general education teachers do not know what the job of a special educator entails and are unclear about whether special education teachers really can "teach." As special educators are completing mounds of paperwork, talking on the phone with parents and other service providers, mediating behavioral concerns, and setting up meetings, general educators see only a teacher who is on the phone,

at his or her desk, or working with a small group of students. It is up to the special educators to share with colleagues the abilities that they will bring to the co-teaching relationship. Another suggestion is to arrange an opportunity for general education teachers to observe special education teachers in practice.

Similarly, general education teachers need to clarify what their expectations are and what they will bring to the collaborative table. Co-teaching requires parity and the knowledge that both partners' expertise will be valued. However, the potential for a quality co-teaching situation can be lost if one of the teachers does not follow through or fails to meet expectations. Both educators need to model the techniques they expect of their colleagues; these include consistency, structure, good teaching practices, punctuality, behavior management techniques, creativity, and high standards that also address different learning styles and needs. Once a solid co-teaching team has been established and rapport built, other educators interested in co-teaching will have that positive role model from which to learn.

**Provide specific how-to information about co-teaching approaches.** After one or more teachers have been identified as interested in engaging in a co-teaching relationship, a team should be formed and some preplanning completed prior to the actual instruction. Together, general and special educators should review the co-teaching approaches available and get familiar with the variety of ways to maximize the use of two teachers in the classroom. This ability to use various two-teacher strategies is one of the primary

benefits of co-teaching. Teachers need to familiarize themselves with these approaches so that they can determine which to use in various circumstances and lessons.

Cook and Friend (1995) identified five major approaches to co-teaching instruction, which are summarized in Table 2. Together, co-teaching teams should familiarize themselves with these approaches and emphasize to one another the two key tenets for effective use of the co-teaching approach: (1) teachers must demonstrate parity by *switching roles* often so that no one teacher is always with a small group or providing support by circulating while the other does all the large group instruction; and (2) heterogeneous groups must be maintained by *switching students* often within large and small groups, so that no one student is stigmatized as being in the "dummy" group.

**Share the co-teaching worksheet.** Murawski's (2003) SHARE worksheet for new co-teaching partners facilitates discussion prior to entering the co-taught classroom. Discussing the items on the worksheet (Table 3) allows partners to establish mutual goals for classroom procedures, rules, standards for behavior, and methods of differentiating instruction. The worksheet also encourages partners to share their philosophies, pet peeves, and expectations, and to establish how they would like to give and receive feedback throughout the school year. Reviewing these items in a proactive manner increases the likelihood that the new co-teaching partners will enjoy the arrangement. In the beginning, partners may find that they will have to agree to disagree

on particular topics and look for ways to work out areas of difficulty as the year progresses.

### Closing Thoughts

Inclusive classrooms are becoming the norm for many

schools as they work to address IDEA and NCLB. However, even teachers who philosophically be-

**Table 2. Co-Teaching Approaches**

| Approach                        | Description  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>One Teacher, One Support</b> | One teacher is responsible for planning and content instruction; the other teacher is responsible for adaptations, classroom management, communications, charting, paperwork management, and other support as needed. These roles change often so that one teacher is not always relegated to the position of assistant.   |
| <b>Parallel Teaching</b>        | Teachers share responsibility for planning and content instruction. The class is split into heterogeneous groups, and each teacher instructs half of the class on the same material. The content covered is the same, while the instructional delivery or learning styles addressed may vary.  |
| <b>Station Teaching</b>         | Teachers divide the responsibility for planning and content instruction. Students are rotated between two or more stations that may be directed by a teacher or assistant, or independent stations. Teachers repeat instruction to each group that comes through the station, though content or delivery may vary based on differentiated needs.                 |
| <b>Alternative Teaching</b>     | Teachers divide the responsibility for planning and content instruction. The majority of students remain in a large group setting, while some students work in a small group for preteaching, reteaching, enrichment, or other individualized instruction.   |
| <b>Team Teaching</b>            | Teachers share the responsibility for planning and content instruction. Students remain in a large group setting, while teachers work as a team to introduce new content instruction, work on building skills, clarify information, and facilitate learning and classroom management. This approach requires the most mutual trust and respect between teachers. |

Adapted from Cook, L., and M. Friend. 1995. Co-teaching: Guidelines for creating effective practices. *Focus on Exceptional Children* 28(3): 1-12.

**Table 3. SHARE Worksheet**

**Sharing Hopes, Attitudes, Responsibilities, and Expectations**

*Directions:* Take a few minutes individually to complete this worksheet. Be honest in your responses. Then, with your co-teaching partner, take turns reading the responses—without commenting. Next, take a moment to jot down your thoughts regarding what your partner has shared. Finally, come back together and begin to share reactions to the responses. Your goal is to (a) Agree, (b) Compromise, or (c) Agree to Disagree.

1. Right now, the main hope I have regarding this co-teaching arrangement is:
2. My attitude/philosophy regarding teaching students with disabilities in a general education classroom is:
3. I would like to have the following responsibilities in a co-taught classroom:
4. I would like my co-teacher to have the following responsibilities:
5. The biggest obstacle I expect to have in co-teaching is:
6. I think we can overcome this obstacle by:
7. I have the following expectations in a classroom regarding:
  - a. discipline:
  - b. classwork:
  - c. materials:
  - d. homework:
  - e. planning:
  - f. modifications for individual students:
  - g. grading:
  - h. noise level:
  - i. cooperative learning:
  - j. giving and receiving feedback:
  - k. parental contact:
  - l. other important expectations I have:

(Murawski 2003)

lieve in meeting students' individual and diverse learning needs in the least restrictive environment are concerned about how to accomplish that task. The differentiation of instruction often is more feasible when done in a class taught by both a general and special education teacher. These co-taught classes can be a rewarding experience for those who go about it in a systematic manner.

Establishing the right environment and working to create rapport with a prospective co-teacher will go a long way toward ensuring that a future co-teaching relationship is effective. If educators interested in creating the opportunity to co-teach at their schools follow the Baby Steps espoused here, they may be able to move quickly through the beginning and compromising stages, and then begin to enjoy the collaborative aspects of co-teaching (Gately and Gately 2001). Through co-teaching, the possibility of truly meeting all students' diverse learning needs in a differentiated and inclusive classroom can become a reality.

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