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Benefits of Co-Teaching for ESL Classrooms

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Co-teaching has recently become more popular in schools throughout the nation. It has been recognized to have several positive implications for teachers, including increased collegiality, cooperation and information exchange. Co-teaching lowers the student-teacher ratio and exposes the students to differentiated teaching methods. This supports evidence that indicates that students who learn in smaller groups both retain and achieve more in the classroom (Davis, 1993). While co-teaching is widely accepted in special education classrooms, it can also be very beneficial when teaching English to speakers of other languages. At the same time, it exposes English language learners to authentic language; it also exposes native speakers to students from other cultures.

Co-teaching is traditionally defined as the collaborative teaching between a classroom teacher and a special education teacher. Co-teachers must agree on methods of instruction, discipline, supervision of classroom aides, and in some cases even the curriculum. They must also plan together, teach together and assess the students together. Co-teaching has several positive implications for teachers. It encourages collegiality and cooperation among them. It also promotes an open exchange of ideas, experience and encourages risk-taking (Haynes n.d.). Planning together also cuts down on individual planning time. Snead & Wycoff described this exchange of information by saying,

Creative collaboration flourishes when everyone understands that great ideas generally emerge from a democratic process of throwing all ideas (good and goofy) into a pot where they tumble and merge, collapsing and reforming into something often completely unexpected and new (n.d.)

Co-teaching provides an opportunity for teachers to be exposed to different teaching philosophies, techniques and methods. It helps them develop into more effective teachers as they are able to nurture and develop their own teaching practices. It also promotes a sense of 'team' and 'team work'. When teachers work as a team, they share responsibility, have autonomy and authority over their classes, and are better able to solve any problems which arise.

Although it is important to understand that co-teaching is, it is equally important to understand what co-teaching is not. It is not a pull-out in the classroom for special education students (Ogburn & Hill, n.d.). It is also not an in-class translation service for non-English speakers. Co-teaching is an opportunity for two teachers to be of equal importance in teaching a lesson. It is not a situation where there is one main teacher, with the second teacher functioning as an assistant. When two teachers work together to co-teach, they do all the work equally. It should not be the case that one teacher works more than the other, while one teacher rests and relaxes more often.

In order for collaboration to be successful, teachers must communicate openly with each other, and must work together to set both short-term and long-term goals for the class. Both teachers must understand their roles in the classroom, as well as in the lessons they present to the students. Teachers

must learn to make use of the flexibility co-teaching introduces, and together choose the best teaching methods and co-teaching model for each lesson. These choices should be based upon the students' needs, teachers' personalities, schedule and lesson content. Price, Mayfield, McFadden and Marsh (2001) identified traits of successful co-teaching within separate areas. These areas are attitudes and beliefs, school support, collaboration and instructional methods (Price et al., 2001).

Attitudes and Beliefs:

- Both teachers must believe students can succeed
- Both teachers must accept responsibility for outcomes
- Parents are aware of co-teaching goals and support co-teaching in the classroom

School Support:

- School administrators understand and support co-teaching
- School administrators understand and support needs of teachers and students
- Professional development and staff development are provided for teachers
- Appropriate assessment policies are in effect to monitor student achievement
- Teachers are provided with appropriate planning time

Collaboration:

- Special educators are part of the instructional or planning team. As needed, these may include, special education teachers, English as a second language teachers (ESL), reading specialists, remedial math teachers, and a teacher of gifted students
- A team approach is used for planning, teaching, assessment and parent communication

Instructional Methods:

- Teachers use their experience, knowledge, and skills to adapt the curriculum to instructional methods and models of co-teaching
- A variety of instructional methods and models of co-teaching are used
- Teachers create a cooperative learning environment which fosters socialization, and in which students feel valued as people
- Teachers must constantly assess how well their co-teaching methods are working to meet student needs
- Teachers must be willing to change ineffective elements of instruction

When co-teaching is implemented correctly, it can also be effectively used in ESL classrooms. For the

benefit of English language learners, co-teaching may be defined as the collaboration of a classroom teacher and a teacher of English as a second language (ESL). One main objective to co-teaching in ESL classrooms would be to integrate traditional ESL methods of instruction with regular classroom teaching and activities. This causes ESL students to be more exposed to, and submerged in the English language. It gives them more chances to hear, and understand how the English language as it is used by native speakers (Hoffman & Dahlman, 2007). They will also be more exposed to, and gain understanding of higher vocabulary, two- and three-part verbs, idioms, expressions, formal and informal language and slang. Co-teaching also encourages ESL students to practice speaking English more often than if they were in a regular ESL classroom. English language learners would start to look at native speakers as role models of good English language usage. Co-teaching is the basis for native English speaking students to be exposed to students from other cultures and to speakers of other languages. In turn, this promotes student understanding and appreciation for each other as members of a global community (Stoessel & Miles, n.d.).

Co-teaching can be implemented in an ESL classroom using any of the following five models for co-teaching as described by Bos and Vaughn (2006).

1. Model A: One Group – One Lead Teacher, One Teacher “Teaching on Purpose”

One teacher acts as a lead teacher in the traditional sense, and the second teacher “grazes”, or walks around the room to individual students making sure they understand the lesson. The second teacher also answers any questions and clears up any confusion the students may have about the lesson. This teacher might also pull aside a few students at a time, or even pairs of students for more direct help and re-teaching of the lesson’s concepts.

2. Model B: Two Mixed Ability Groups – Two Teachers Teach the Same Content

In this model, the class is divided into two smaller, mixed ability groups. Each teacher teaches the same lesson and content to a different group.

3. Model C: Two Same-Ability Groups – Two Teachers Teach Different Content

In this model, each teacher teaches a different group. The students are same-ability, but divided up based on the level of their skills within a certain lesson. One teacher may re-teach or review harder concepts. The second teacher may be offer extension activities to those students who would benefit from additional practice.

4. Model D: Multiple Groups – Teachers Monitor / Teach

In this model, the class is divided into multiple groups. These groups may be either mixed-ability or same-ability. Both teachers may work with the groups together or individually throughout the lesson. This model is usually used for cooperative learning / group activities, such as reading groups.

5. Model E: Two Teachers Teach Together

In this model, both teachers work together to teach one lesson together, at the same time. The special education teacher may assist English language learners with strategies to support their learning of the lesson.

Teachers may also combine any of the models to make their own “hybrid” model in response to both student and curricular needs (Flanagan, 2001).

Co-teaching has been shown to have numerous positive implications for both students and teachers. It promotes collegiality, risk-taking and autonomy for teachers, while increasing student achievement and retention. Co-teaching can be used to benefit special education as well as English language learners. In light of all the conclusive evidence of the benefits of co-teaching, schools across the nation must explore how co-teaching can be more fully used.

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