

Co-teaching and Parity

One of the biggest challenges schools face when instituting a co-teaching model is the challenge of establishing parity for both teachers in the classroom. Parity is a critical ingredient of co-teaching. It is important that both teachers feel respected and valued for their contributions and that students perceive each teacher as an equal and valued participant in their education.

Moving from In-equality to Parity in the Co-taught Classroom

Ms. Radford and Ms. Ball had been working together as co-teachers for approximately five years. The first year that they worked together was the year the middle school had instituted co-teaching and inclusion. The school had used a model for implementing co-teaching that I call the "dumped in method of co-teaching." Teachers were simply dumped into it without supports or training. Consequently, they struggled significantly during that first year to sort out their co-teaching relationship. Needless to say, it did not go well. Here is what they had to say:

When asked how their relationship evolved, Ms. Radford replied, "When we started out, I was viewed as a teacher's assistant in the classroom. It brought my morale down as a teacher, even though I had been teaching for five years." Ms. Ball added, "And that was my first year teaching." Ms. Radford continued to explain, "It brought my morale down because the students looked at her as the teacher and at me as the assistant." Ms. Ball, elaborated, "We didn't know the different co-teaching models. We didn't know that both our names should be on the door and that we both should have a desk in the room. We didn't realize that we should be doing everything together because both of us were certified teachers. As hard as we tried to explain to the students, every day, that Ms. Radford was also a teacher and that they needed to respect her as much as they would respect any other teacher, It was difficult for the students to understand because we didn't know what we were supposed to do. Neither we nor the students understood the concept." Ms. Radford added, "Now, the students understand it, and they view both of us as teachers. We had some training from Susan Fitzell on co-teaching and learned how it should be implemented. We used the training that we attended to plan over the summer for this year. So now our names are on the door, we both have a desk in the classroom, we plan together and we started out teaching together on the same day."

What made co-teaching work?

Ms. Radford and Ms. Ball's co-teaching relationship improved because they made the effort to get training together on what co-teaching looks like. They discussed what they learned together and used their time in the summer to plan ahead for the following school year so that they would begin the year on the same page. The key here is that they made a commitment to each other to make it work. Then they followed through on that commitment. They also made a decision to treat each other as equals in the classroom. This was a conscious commitment and decision to be successful as co-teachers. That in itself is a significant factor in their success.

People often ask, "Do they need to have two desks in the room?" The answer to that question is no. Anyone who has been able to establish two desks in the room, whether one desk is a teachers cart, or a table, or a full-fledged desk, have noted a significant difference in student's perception regarding the teacher's roles. However, many co-teaching pairs have been very successful with establishing parity in the classroom without having two desks in the room.

At the elementary school, co-teachers are usually only in the classroom for a portion of the day. Having a desk in the room, or their name on the door may not be feasible. However, the collaborating co-teacher is introduced as a teacher, might have a spot in the room they can call their own, or might have their name on the board or flipchart. At the high school and middle school level, one option is to have a hook on the wall next to the classroom door with a clear sleeve, hung at eye level. Teachers type up a table that has a row for every class period in that room. The table is divided into three columns; the time of each class period, the class label (period A, period 1, etc.), and the third column both co-teachers names listed during the period they are in the room together. For classes that are not co-taught, only one teacher name would be on the line. Now, when anyone approaches that classroom, they know exactly who is in the room and both teachers are given equal status. If there is a schedule change, the chart can be quickly changed and replaced.

Other ways to set up the classroom and procedures to clearly establish parity

1. Both teacher's names are listed on the student schedule.
2. Both names are listed on everything that goes home for that subject area that is co-taught.
3. Both names are on the grade report.
4. Both names are on any paperwork related to that subject or class.
5. Both teachers call home - based on their availability or knowledge of a situation - regardless of whether the student is on an individualized education plan or not.
6. Both teachers have a key to the classroom.
7. Materials are shared between both teachers, including answer keys.
8. Both teachers have access to the grade book.

Use language that clearly establishes parity to students and others

1. Use phrases such as 'our' students, rather than 'your' students.
2. When speaking to the class, say, 'we' rather than 'I.'
3. Never identify students openly in front of the class as special ed students.
4. Encourage groups to work together in mixed-ability groups so that expectations conveyed are spoken using the same language for all students.
5. When working with same-ability groups, teachers do not differentiate their language to signal out the students with special needs. For example, "Take your sped group over there."

Co-teaching Time is Sacred

Administrators respect that co-teachers are in a classroom together because they are working together to meet the needs of all students. Consequently, special education teachers are not pulled out of class:

1. for emergency meetings
2. to help with behavior problems
3. to talk to a parent
4. to cover another teacher
5. to participate on committees
6. to test students
7. for any reason barring a rare absolute emergency, where there are absolutely no other options.

Consider this; if the special education teacher called in sick for the day and was home with the flu, and any of the above situations occurred, would do that sick teacher be called at home and ordered into the building to deal with the problem? The answer is obviously no. Somehow, when a teacher is not in the building, these situations are handled without them. Why is it any different when the teacher is in the building, teaching, in a co-taught classroom?

Maintaining Trust in the Co-taught Classroom

Imagine that you are a general education teacher and you've honored your commitment to co-plan with your special education co-teacher. Your plan involved different activities that included alternative teaching strategies. Consequently, both teachers would have groups at the same time and be teaching those groups different material. Then the general education teacher has her co-teacher pulled from her and she is left to figure out an emergency lesson plan on the spot.

How many times do you think the general education teacher in that situation will be willing to plan a lesson with a co-teacher, and continue to treat that co-teacher like an equal, when she cannot trust that the special-education teacher will be there to follow through. What administrators and special educators need to understand is that pulling a special education teacher from a general education co-taught classroom is a violation of trust. Once trust is broken, it is very difficult to get it back. Without trust there is little parity.

And just as important as being in the classroom is showing up to the classroom on time. Teachers who teach alone cannot be late to class because, if they are, craziness can erupt when students are left unattended. Co-teachers cannot be late either, because being present together at the beginning of class sets the tone of parity as both start the class period together and on time.

Copyright © 2013, Susan Fitzell & Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. First published May 15, 2013.

#####

Susan Fitzell, M. Ed, CSP, is a nationally recognized presenter, author of nine books for teachers, trainers, and parents, an educational consultant, and CEO of Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. As an independent consultant and coach, Susan offers the personalization, continuity, and consistency necessary for true change in any organization. She works side by side with teachers, school administrators, and business leaders as a coach and trainer, employing Brain Power strategies that take learning to the next level.

For more information, visit Susan's website at www.susanfitzell.com.