

Developing a Shared Voice Through Co-Teaching

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14

NANCY'S VOICE ■

Several years of working as a middle-level science teacher in an inclusive school district gave me the opportunity to experience how co-teaching with teachers from other content areas and with special educators can help children of varying abilities participate meaningfully in regular classrooms. I must confess that I was initially uneasy about the inclusion in my classroom of students with physical, academic, and social challenges. My teacher-preparation program, although excellent at the time, did not include practical experiences in inclusive educational settings. Today, my understanding of how we can educate all students together has broadened. I realize that my initial concerns about inclusive education had to do with the unknown and with not being able to visualize how it might work.

LIA'S VOICE ■

Before I began co-teaching with regular educators, I had worked for years as a special educator in pullout resource rooms and separate special education classrooms. Although I was uncomfortable with sorting students by perceived ability, teaching them in isolation, and then hoping they would be able to apply this learning in a new context, this was not an uncommon practice at the time. My contact with general educators was limited to saying "Hello" to each other as I pulled my students from their classes.

Co-teaching addressed my dilemmas and ended my social and professional isolation. Co-teaching with Nancy convinced both of us that when teachers have adequate support and the opportunity to share their respective expertise, a rich educational experience can be created that benefits all students.

■ OUR VOICE

What you will hear in the following pages is our shared voice, our description of how our co-teaching partnership evolved over the 2 years we taught together. We hope that what we learned will be helpful to you in your co-teaching endeavors. The school district in which we co-taught together was one that underwent a dramatic, decade-long transformation from a district in which students with special needs were placed in special classes or bused outside of the district to a district in which all students were educated in general education classrooms, with co-teaching as a predominant student support mechanism.

The first step in the district's transformation was to close the on-site special classes and discontinue the practice of sending students out of the district. Although all students were now on campus and included in most general education classes, the benefits of inclusive education were not being fully realized. Specifically, the dropout rate of students with disabilities was still high (30%), and their absenteeism was a chronic problem. We were convinced that a primary reason these students were reluctant to continue their education was that they did not feel as if they really were a part of the school community. They were still frequently separated from their classmates when pulled from their general education classes to receive academic coursework in a resource room. We were faced with a serious challenge: In what ways could we structure a learning environment in which these students would want to participate? We had to look no further than our students and listen to what they were telling us: They wanted to learn alongside their friends, just as every other student wanted.

Now that we had embraced the concept of all students learning side by side, our administrator for special services decided that the general and special educators also needed to teach (and learn) side by side. He explained that with this co-teaching configuration, the differences in our general and special education teacher preparation would be an asset. For example, Nancy had been trained as a secondary science teacher, with little focus placed on making accommodations for students with learning differences. Lia, on the other hand, possessed these very skills—the ones Nancy lacked. By combining teaching skills, we complemented one another.

Tip 1 Know with whom you need to co-teach.

Unlike some teaching teams, we did not enter into our co-teaching relationship by choice. It was an administrative decision. In fact, we had not previously worked with each other. We are here to tell you that this does not have to spell doom for a team. Given time to meet, a framework such as the one we describe here, and attention to the collaborative teaming process, teachers can form an effective teaching partnership. This is what occurred for us.

■ OUR FIRST YEAR—DEVELOPING TRUST

There are several important aspects to the way we worked together. We have since learned to describe them as the essential ingredients of the cooperative process: face-to-face interaction through planning time,

positive interdependence, individual accountability, and monitoring and processing of our achievements.

Face-to-Face Planning Time

Before we could stand together in front of our students and represent ourselves as a viable teaching team, we had to establish a weekly planning time. Prior to the start of the school year, we agreed to set aside one prep period per week for this to occur. Given that we did not know each other very well, we knew that without this initial investment of time, our co-teaching would not be successful. Therefore, this became our sacred time, time that would not be interrupted by the typical demands that teachers face. Although it was just the two of us, we set an agenda, took minutes, and assigned tasks to be completed later (e.g., prepare worksheets, make copies, talk to a student, grade papers). Without investing adequate time to plan, we can almost guarantee, a co-teaching team will not reach its potential. Notes in the mailbox and planning on the run cannot build solid, trusting relationships.

Tip 2 Establish and clarify co-teaching goals to avoid hidden agendas.

Tip 4 Practice communication skills for successful co-teacher interactions.

Tip 5 Know how to facilitate a collaborative culture.

Positive Interdependence

Setting Mutual Goals

Much of our weekly planning time was driven by the mission that we and our school district had adopted, namely, that all students were to receive instruction in the general education classroom. To accomplish this mission, Nancy wanted to learn how to differentiate curriculum and instruction. Lia wanted to ensure that all the students for whom she coordinated services would be successful in general education classrooms. In retrospect, we now see that establishing a common purpose and setting clear goals provided a meaningful context in which to work. Once determined, a mission can guide a team in decision making, prompting team members to ask, “Is what we are doing congruent with our mission?” For example, given our mission of maintaining students in the regular classroom, the choice to remove a student from that environment became a choice of last resort because such an action was not in sync with our mission.

Tip 2 Establish and clarify co-teaching goals to avoid hidden agendas.

In addition, our individual professional goals became a yardstick by which to measure our growth as teachers. Did Nancy learn how to differentiate curriculum and instruction? How successful was Lia at structuring for student success?

Defining Roles

Something that wasn’t discussed during the year but that both of us assumed from the beginning was that Nancy would be responsible for delivering the content and Lia would play the supportive co-teacher role (see Chapter 4 for details about the supportive co-teaching approach). This assumption, although conventional (teacher and teacher assistant),

provided the basis for dividing our labor. This meant that Nancy took on the tasks related to what would be taught and how (i.e., identify the content to be covered; set objectives and do the majority of lesson planning, teaching, and evaluating). Lia supported this instruction through her skilled classroom and student management, verbally and physically prompting students to focus on the instruction, checking for student understanding, and intervening when off-task behavior occurred. When defining roles, it is critical to consider what the students need as well as what expertise each co-teacher brings to a situation. Redefining roles requires setting aside egos. For Lia, being an assistant to another teacher may not have been a glamorous job, but it was exactly what the students needed in order to engage and learn.

Individual Accountability

Once our roles were defined, trust was further built by following through on our commitments. Lia promised Nancy that she would co-teach for a minimum of one period per day, 4 days per week. Nancy depended on Lia to be there; had Lia not been dependable, Nancy would not have trusted that what had been planned would be realized. Conversely, if Nancy did not clearly plan the objectives for the science lessons, Lia would have felt let down. She would not have known how to support the students in Nancy's classes. The glue to this co-teaching relationship was individual accountability. We recommend that co-teachers apply this glue liberally!

Monitoring and Processing of Accomplishments

In our first year working together, we kept our reflections and processing within the noncontroversial realm of how the students were doing. We avoided conversations regarding our performance as teachers. Although Nancy's goal was to improve skills in differentiation and instruction, she did not seek feedback from Lia in this area, fearing that she would be criticized instead of supported in Lia's evaluations. It wasn't until Lia suggested that we take a district-sponsored course together to focus on our co-teaching that Nancy felt she could trust Lia to offer feedback. Receiving feedback and reflection on one's own work can be a scary proposition. It takes trust, and that is what we developed, first and foremost, in our first year.

■ OUR SECOND YEAR—SUSTAINING TRUST

We were fortunate to be able to work together for a second year. Our school district is often fluid when it comes to scheduling and partnering personnel from year to year. When we requested that we remain partners, our administrators listened and granted us a second year to develop continuity as a team. We were deliberate about attending to the same collaborative ingredients (i.e., face-to-face planning time, positive interdependence, individual accountability, monitoring and processing of accomplishments) that had allowed us to succeed as a co-teaching team in our first year.

Face-to-Face Planning Time

Co-teaching teams that have been together for a while can easily be lulled into complacency about planning. After all, team members are familiar with each other, and a routine has been established. Much can be lost, however, if planning (in terms of instructional integrity and quality) is incidental. As in our first year, planning time remained key to our success.

A big challenge in our second year was to move beyond our routine—that is, to use the lessons learned from the previous year as a starting point for refinement and improvement. Because we believed the adage that two heads are better than one, we knew that adequate planning time needed to remain part of the routine, even if it sometimes seemed as if the lessons could write themselves and the classroom could run itself. We found it helpful to use a structured planning meeting format (much like the one in Table 13.2 of Chapter 13) to guide us when we met face to face. We found we made much more efficient use of the little planning time available to us when we had an agenda and time frames to keep us focused.

Tip 3 Agree to use a common conceptual framework, language, and set of interpersonal skills.

Tip 5 Know how to facilitate a collaborative culture.

Tip 7 Expect to be responsible and to be held accountable.

Tip 8 Agree to reflective analysis of the co-teaching process, and celebrate often.

Positive Interdependence

In our second year, we established positive interdependence in new ways that resulted in an enhancement of our feeling that we were in this together. We revisited our goals, redefined our roles, and refined the monitoring of our progress so as to be more accountable for our individual and collective tasks.

Revisiting Goals

Although we were in our second year, we remained aware of our goal—ensuring that all students received instruction in general education—and continued to work toward it. In our first year, we had set broad goals, such as learning to differentiate instruction and adequately support students in general education classes. By our second year, we knew that there were several specific skills and strategies that we needed to master. We targeted the following as professional development areas: (1) positive discipline and behavior supports, (2) principles of effective instruction, and (3) the use of a universal design approach to planning that systematically considered our students' learning characteristics (This preceded the planning of content, instructional processes, and products of a lesson or unit (Thousand, Villa, and Nevin, 2007). Participation in a district-sponsored course, which we took together, facilitated our professional goal setting. For us, this course was one concrete way that our school district supported us as a teaching team. In many ways, our studying and learning together enhanced our “all for one and one for all” ethic and encouraged us to revisit and redefine not only our goals but our co-teaching roles as well.

Redefining Roles

Just as our goals became more interdependent, so did our roles. In our first year, we defined our roles along the boundaries of our relative expertise—Lia was the special educator, and Nancy was the science teacher. During our second year, we both saw ourselves as teachers of children, not as different types of teachers for different types of children. This change of perspective significantly changed the roles we played when co-teaching. Now both of us were responsible for developing lesson objectives, evaluating student progress, conferencing with parents, managing student behavior, and covering the logistics (e.g., making copies, preparing worksheets, setting up labs). We jointly shared all of the responsibilities a regular classroom teacher would normally have. We learned about the importance of redefining roles throughout a co-teaching partnership so that we could evolve into what, by our second year, could truly be called a teaching team (see Chapter 7 for more details about the team-teaching approach to co-teaching).

Individual Accountability

Even in the second year, accountability continued to be the glue that held our relationship together. For example, each of us had come to expect that the other would follow through on her responsibilities, as demonstrated during the first year. At this point, it may have been easy for either of us to have occasionally neglected our commitments, thinking that the other could handle it or would understand. Given the skills we had acquired, either one of us probably could have handled it and likely would have understood, but the other person's accountability to our teaching team would have begun to erode. The challenge for established teaching teams is to not take each other for granted, but to maintain a high level of mutual support.

Tip 8 Agree to reflective analysis of the co-teaching process, and celebrate often.

Monitoring and Processing of Accomplishments

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Tip 8 Agree to reflective analysis of the co-teaching process, and celebrate often.

In our second year of working together, we continued to reflect on student performance, considering this a critical and safe topic. Because we had developed a high level of trust and because we now shared a common language of instruction gained from the course we took together, we were now able to discuss our own and each other's teaching methods as well. We became comfortable talking about our interpersonal actions and our progress as co-teachers. Although at times these discussions were difficult, they yielded tremendous results for us. We are both better teachers as a result of these open and honest discussions.

■ FINAL REFLECTIONS

When school districts give general and special educators the opportunity to share their respective expertise by working as co-teachers, a rich and often remarkable educational experience for all students can emerge. In

our 2 years as an evolving teaching team, we experienced for ourselves how students of all perceived abilities can learn and reach their potential together, in the same class, avoiding the stigma associated with being pulled out of the classroom for specialized instruction. Co-teachers benefit as well. Their social networks within the school community grow. They no longer experience teaching as the isolated profession, as they jointly experience the joy and fun of a student's success or a great co-taught lesson. Finally, co-teachers' perspectives evolve, as ours did, from a *yours-versus-mine* view of students, curriculum, and instruction to a *we-and-ours* view of everything about good schooling.

Tip 6 Recognize and respect differences and multiple sources of motivation.