

Teacher Quality: The Collaborative Dimension
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Marilyn Friend
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
marilynfriend@marilynfriend.com

Moderator: Bonnie Jones (OSEP, USDE)

Panelists: Margo Mastropieri (George Mason University), Christine Walther-Thomas (University of Kansas)

Understanding Collaboration

Although the term *collaboration* has been defined in many ways, generally it is a *style* of working with others in a professional setting (Friend & Cook, 2007). It is voluntary (that is, selected by each participating individual) and characterized by parity, mutual goals, shared responsibility for decisions, shared accountability for outcomes, and shared resources. Because collaboration concerns professional working relationships, it is not surprising that it is developmental and based on trust, respect, and a sense of interdependence. The essential components for developing collaboration include a sense of commitment to the shared work, effective communication skills, understanding of interaction processes, programs and services designed to foster collaboration, and a supportive context that includes informed leadership. Many examples of collaboration can be found in schools, including mentoring; grade level, middle school, and department teaming; teaming related to response-to-intervention, other intervention assistance, and special education eligibility/program planning processes; and parent-professional partnerships.

A Rationale for Collaboration as a Priority in the Preparation, Licensure, Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement of Teachers for High-Need Schools

The rationale for including collaboration as a priority in addressing the critical need for high quality teachers for schools with the greatest needs can be established by examining trends and concerns in special and remedial education, education in general, other professions, and 21st-century society, including these points:

- Increasingly, meeting the requirements of NCLB and IDEA requires partnerships among educators from many areas of specialization
- Novice educators rely on the support of others as they make their way through their early career phase.
- Emerging solutions for addressing the needs of schools with the greatest needs invariably include collaborative activities
- When resources are scarce, banding together enables them to be used efficiently; compartmentalizing results in duplication of effort and less effective use of those resources
- Many professions (e.g., business, health occupations) gradually have built collaboration as a foundation for effective practice; as schools reflect society the importance of and pressure for likewise incorporating collaboration in schools is growing.
- In an information age, there is simply too much for any single professional educator to know to effectively carry out all the complex responsibilities of his or her job.

The Dilemmas of Collaboration

Although few professionals would express a negative opinion about the value of collaboration, its use in schools is sporadic rather than systemic. Several of the dilemmas that prevent collaboration as a standard of practice in today's schools include these:

- Lack of clear, shared understanding of what collaboration is and how it can be taught to teacher candidates and novice educators
- Lack of widely accepted set of knowledge and skills that reliably capture the essence of collaboration and commitment from teacher educators to incorporate collaboration into professional preparation programs
- Limited data to unequivocally support collaboration as an indicator of effective schooling, compounded by the fact that collaboration, as a mechanism for successfully achieving goals, is always embedded in professional activities and so its use and impact are difficult to study
- School structures that directly or indirectly foster isolation
- Competing priorities for limited time and resources available for education initiatives

Co-Teaching as an Example of the Promise and Complexity of Collaboration

Of the various types of collaboration occurring in schools (including), co-teaching illustrates clearly its promise and complexity. As attention on co-teaching increases, it is critical that leaders in the field understand its potential and the complexities of effective implementation.

Co-Teaching Defined

Co-teaching is a service delivery option in which two equivalently licensed professionals (usually a general education teacher and either a special education teacher or another specialist such as a reading teacher or bilingual teacher) share instruction for a diverse group of learners with joint responsibility for key decisions and joint accountability for outcomes. Research on the elements of successful co-teaching indicates that co-teaching includes a shared system of beliefs; interpersonal and professional skills for working with others and carrying out instructional responsibilities; understanding of collaboration; informed, deliberate classroom practices; and external supports that include professional development and administrative assistance.

Outcomes of Co-Teaching

The research base on co-teaching is emerging. Many early studies focused on perceptions of teachers, administrators, students, and parents. More recent studies, often focusing on co-teaching in middle and high schools, are examining the ways in which co-teaching is implemented and outcomes for students. Generally, co-teaching can have a positive impact on student achievement, behavior, and perceptions of school. However, data suggest that much co-teaching practice is relatively low quality, with special educators functioning primarily as assistants to the general education teachers. Teachers express a need for understanding of each others' roles, specific information about quality co-teaching practices, core academic content information (for special educators), and administrative support for common planning time and reasonable schedules and class composition.

Challenges of Co-Teaching

At its best, co-teaching is collaborative and positively affects student outcomes and teacher and others' perceptions. Some of the greatest challenges that must be addressed to achieve these benefits mirror those related to collaboration and include these: lack of clear understanding of co-teaching (and confusion with terms such as *inclusion* and *collaboration*), lack of preparation for co-teaching (teachers and administrators), lack of clarity about appropriate applications of co-teaching (for which students in which content areas), inattention to school culture and structures (scheduling, planning time, selection of participants), absence of accountability systems (teachers and administrators), limited data to demonstrate effectiveness.

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