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Revisiting Classroom Routines

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To unleash co-teaching's potential, make the most of limited co-planning time.

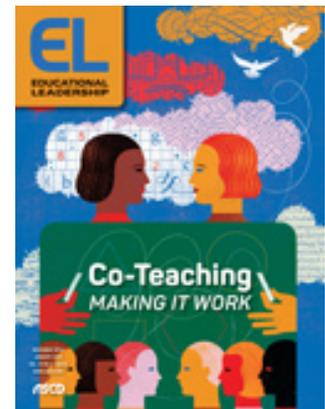
Ask anyone involved in co-teaching if there can be effective co-teaching without co-planning, and the answer will be a resounding *no!* Since the inception of co-teaching, proponents have touted co-planning as the key to its success (Friend, Reising, & Cook, 1993; Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land, 1996). But any co-teaching team will surely tell you how difficult it is to find time to plan together. This lack of planning time is an obstacle to effective co-teaching (Davis, Dieker, Pearl, & Kirkpatrick, 2012).

Reasons abound for this continuing challenge. Special education teachers may co-teach with multiple general education teachers or in multiple subjects. General education teachers may rely on plans developed for classes that aren't co-taught. Often, there is a lack of continuity in co-teaching assignments, making it difficult to "grow" a co-teaching curriculum. Further, joint planning time is rarely incorporated into co-teachers' schedules. Even when co-planning time *is* allotted, the time can be taken up with meetings with school staff and parents, administrative duties, or general discussion regarding students.

Using Your Limited Time

To understand the complexity of co-teaching, imagine the questions co-teachers embarking on a new academic year need to address: What are the course curriculum and state standards? How do we keep up with the district pacing schedules? How will we assess student learning? How do we give all students opportunities to succeed without lowering the bar? Do we need to design lessons from scratch? What are the common co-teaching models? When can we plan together? When do you get to school? What's

your cell number? Will we ever have time to sleep?

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The reality is there just *isn't* enough time for co-teachers to appropriately and effectively preplan every aspect of every activity in every lesson. Often, frustrated co-teachers rely on the default model of co-teaching—that of One Teach/One Support, which I somewhat disparagingly call the *Big T, little t* model. This model, in which one teacher takes the lead and the other assists, takes little to no planning time and gives the illusion of two teachers working together, but students are only superficially supported and don't enjoy the maximum benefit of a two-teacher classroom. Moreover, the lack of parity can create dissatisfaction between the co-teachers, leaving one feeling underused and the other overworked (Murawski, 2012).

In other instances, co-teachers attempt to individualize instruction and offer intense instruction to students achieving below their peers by using the Alternative, or *Back Table*, model of co-teaching, in which co-teachers adapt or modify the planned class lesson for a small, seemingly homogeneous group of students needing extra support, creating a class within a class. The resulting segregation can lead to stigmatization, even greater achievement disparities, and once again, lack of parity between the co-teachers.

Although there are legitimate uses for both the One Teach/One Support and the Alternative models of co-teaching, their overuse diminishes the power of co-teaching and jeopardizes student success.

I propose that if co-teachers use their limited planning time to look at activities they routinely employ and to develop specific procedures for these routines that would make better use of both teachers, they might dramatically increase the effectiveness of their instruction with little expenditure of time. By making this the first step in their co-teaching, co-teachers could cultivate the skills and the thinking needed to develop and execute learning activities that include all students. They would then be able to use these modified routines repeatedly throughout the year and better realize the potential of co-teaching.

Taking It One Routine at a Time

To begin their co-planning, co-teachers might make a simple list of routine classroom activities. The list might include such activities as test reviews, homework reviews, morning work, cooperative learning, independent practice, close reading, and long-term projects.

Next, the co-teachers might pick one of these routines, discuss why it is important, analyze their roles, assess students' typical performance during this routine, and strategize ways to enhance the routine. The following examples show how the process might work for some common routines.

Beginning of Class

Let's look at a typical routine that combines a "Do Now" activity and homework check in a co-taught high school American history class. As students enter the classroom, one of the co-teachers hands out a Do Now activity and gives the students five minutes to complete it. This activity usually requires students to read a short passage and write responses to a series of questions.

During this time, one co-teacher circulates the room making sure students understand and work on the assignment, while the other goes to each student to check the completion of the previous night's homework. After five minutes, one co-teacher takes the lead and goes over the Do Now questions with

the entire class. The other co-teacher contributes by offering clarifications. This routine uses well over 10 minutes of class time.

As the teachers reflect on this routine, they note that a few students have difficulty with the Do Now reading, while others struggle with the written responses. A few don't get started right away and never finish, and engagement during the whole-class discussion is minimal. The co-teachers also see that some students never do the homework, and some consistently submit incomplete work.

They decide to revamp their routine. At the beginning of every lesson, they will heterogeneously divide their class of 30 in half. One co-teacher will read the Do Now material to the group, instruct the students to discuss the answers with a partner, and then lead a discussion with the whole group. Simultaneously, the other co-teacher will lead a discussion on the homework topic with the other half of the class, targeting important ideas, clarifying points, and generating connections. At the end of the five minutes, the co-teachers will switch groups.

Both the original and revised routines use the same amount of time and materials. However, because of the smaller ratio of teachers to students in the revised routine, more students can be involved in discussions, the co-teachers can more readily assess the understanding of the students, and the co-teachers can customize and revise instruction as needed.

Test Review

A pair of middle school co-teachers typically take turns moderating a *Jeopardy*-like game in which teams of students take turns providing "questions" that fit the "answers" displayed on a chart or interactive whiteboard. An entire class period is devoted to this activity the day before each test. Although the students seem engaged and enthusiastic, the co-teachers agree that not all students are participating, and test grades show little improvement. The co-teachers decide to divide the class of 30 into three equal groups and use stations—one independent and two teacher-led—for test reviews.

At the independent station, students are paired up and take turns asking and answering prepared questions. In one teacher-led station, a co-teacher reviews practice multiple-choice questions, reinforcing unit content and incorporating test-taking strategies by highlighting important vocabulary and showing students how to eliminate choices. In the second teacher-led station, the co-teacher discusses the big ideas of the unit, reinforces connections, and clears up student misunderstandings. Heterogeneous groups of students spend 15 minutes at each station, giving them the opportunity to work with both co-teachers and receive individualized and intensive instruction.

Morning Routine

In an elementary class, the typical morning routine includes 20 minutes for students to work on a packet of independent activities that review math, spelling, and vocabulary. The students receive the packet each Monday and are expected to complete it by Friday. As the 30 students work, one co-teacher supervises while the other takes attendance, checks that homework is completed, and responds to notes from home. The co-teachers agree that this routine is an important way to start class but observe that for some the work is too easy, and for others it's too hard.

The co-teachers decide to set up independent learning centers for math, spelling, and vocabulary, as well as two teacher-led centers. The three independent centers include a range of activities from basic to challenging and involve a variety of presentation and response modes that include combinations of reading, writing, listening, recording, viewing, and drawing. The students check their answers with answer keys and chart their progress on learning graphs. Students also reflect on each activity by checking the difficulty level (1 = easy; 3 = hard) and interest level (1 = low; 3 = high).

At the teacher-directed homework center, one co-teacher checks and discusses homework, while at the teacher-directed classwork center, the other co-teacher looks over and discusses classwork, morning

work, student interests, and any difficulties. Every morning, each of the 30 students is assigned to one of the five centers, and the heterogeneous groups of six students rotate through the five centers throughout the week.

This revised routine enables the co-teachers to track and guide student learning more closely and offer more individualized independent work that students complete more thoughtfully. Although the materials used in the learning centers are more varied than the original weekly activity packets and require more time to create, the teachers design them for a 10-week quarter and no longer have to create new packets every week.

Group Work

The 30 students in a secondary content class are often divided heterogeneously into five groups and rotate through a series of five activities. The students work together, and each group submits one completed assignment for each of the five activities. The co-teachers circulate around the groups to answer questions, clarify points, and make sure groups are working harmoniously. At the end of the class period, the co-teachers share in the discussion and review the assignments with the entire class.

The co-teachers notice that not all students are participating equally, with some relying on others to do the work. The co-teachers also realize that the activities range in difficulty and that most students need assistance with the most difficult activity.

The co-teachers decide to make one simple change. One co-teacher circulates among four of the activities while the other co-teacher works with the groups as they come to the hardest activity. The students have the opportunity to work independently in groups yet receive targeted teaching in the one teacher-led activity.

Making Co-Teaching Routine

By looking carefully at classroom routines, co-teachers can move toward more efficient and effective co-teaching. The process of reflecting on particular routines enables co-teachers to identify problems with routine tasks and adjust accordingly.

In each of these revised routines, both co-teachers are actively engaged in teaching, and learning is enhanced for all students. When co-teachers commit to reflecting on and revamping one routine at a time, they create significant teaching and learning opportunities without significant time expenditure. This change makes an exponential difference, and it's about time!

IN MY EXPERIENCE ...

Co-Teaching in Finland Is Different—and Similar

In July 2013, my family and I moved from Boston to Helsinki. In early August, I rode the subway downtown and visited the school where I would be teaching 5th grade—a refurbished hospital that holds 400 students in grades 1–9. The principal led me to her

office, where we sat down to chat for three hours. Halfway through our meeting, she printed out my teaching schedule, and I was shocked.

Not only would I be teaching significantly fewer hours in Finland (just 24 hours each week, with a 15-minute recess built into each hour), but in many of the blocks on my schedule, I saw not just my own name, but someone else's. The principal explained that I would be co-teaching about 50 percent of my lessons.

In Helsinki, classroom teachers like myself are joined several times during the week by other trained teachers. For a couple of lessons each week, I would work with the special education teacher whose primary role was to support the learning of students who had learning plans. At other times, I would work with resource teachers—trained educators who had full-time hours, but no classroom to call their own; administrators would assign them to classrooms that needed extra support. And sometimes, I would team with other classroom teachers, either for lessons with my 5th graders or lessons with their students in their classrooms.

During that first year, I savored my teaching schedule—filled with shorter school days, 15-minute breaks, and more co-teaching opportunities. But I found myself wondering whether collaborating in the classroom was truly worth the investment. Once I had a year of experience teaching in Finland under my belt, I resolved to spend more time with my colleagues planning lessons and negotiating co-teaching roles and responsibilities in advance.

That fall, a young resource teacher, Juho, joined me and my students for a couple of lessons each week. Every Thursday afternoon throughout the fall term, for a couple of hours, we would revisit the unit plans we had made in September and plan the next two science lessons, making sure to split the tasks between us. (We designed every assessment together, too.) Even though I was the classroom teacher, Juho was fully invested. For example, as we planned one lesson in our space unit, he insisted on using a solar system app on his tablet that had fascinated him. Juho's app made my students buzz for days.

Best of all, I could tell that our collaboration was benefiting the students. When Juho joined our classroom, we would regularly have lively class discussions about science, and students who wouldn't normally participate would speak up. They were probably noticing that both Juho and I were equally engaged and curious about the subject.

By the end of my second year in Finland, I was no longer having doubts about the value of co-teaching. Yes, doing it well costs some time and effort, but students can greatly benefit from it. And that's a good enough reason for me.

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