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Co-Teaching as a Response to Mainstreaming: The Perspectives of Teachers at a Magnet Middle School

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School can be frustrating and difficult for many students, but for those with learning disabilities and other special needs, there are more challenges in education. Special education students need a teacher that understands their problems and how to help them overcome their disabilities, and achieve academic success. Due to the additional services required for special education children, there have traditionally been two separate teaching environments for special education and non-special education children, in order to suit the children's needs. However, with the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) of 1997, the learning environment for all students changed.

In the summer of 2005, a decision about mainstreaming of special needs students in Hartford became the focus of the school system. Most of Connecticut has begun their plan to mainstream all special education students gradually over a number of years. However, Hartford decided to mainstream all special needs students at once, which brought chaos to many public schools. This decision to mainstream is due to the IDEA of 1997, which stated that all students with disabilities should be placed in the least restrictive learning environment. So all special needs students who were previously in separate classrooms have now been placed in classrooms with non-special education students. These changes have made it increasingly difficult to have educational programs designed solely for special need students (Zollers, Ramanathan & Moonset, 1999). Only the children with extreme disabilities or severe behavioral problems can be pulled out of class, although in many instances the students are accompanied by a professional aid and remain in the mainstreamed classroom.

At the Curtis-Bey Magnet Middle School (CMMS)* in Hartford, the decision had little impact on the school's operation since the special education students have been mainstreamed for the three years. In order to provide the most effective education for the students, every math and english classroom are co-taught by a special education teacher and a regular non-special education teacher. Co-teaching was brought to CMMS when Mrs. Smith, an 8th grade special education teacher came two years ago. She had previously used this method of teaching at her old school, after being introduced to it 7 years ago. Collaborative teaching involves different teaching strategies and is used to make mainstreaming effective for all students involved.

The purpose of my research is to look at the different methods of teaching used by special education teachers, focusing on co-teaching, and what changes to the program teachers find necessary in order to improve it. My main research question is: How has co-teaching become a solution to mainstreaming at CMMS and has it been an effective one? From that question, I formed two other research questions. What are the teacher's hopes for the future of the special education program? How does the unique environment at CMMS facilitate the perceived effectiveness of mainstreaming or co-teaching?

Considering the conditions in which the administrators and teachers of Hartford public schools have been forced into because of full inclusion classrooms, many teachers feel unprepared and haven't had enough training to work with special education students. With the merging of special education and general education, teachers now need to be qualified to teach a wide variety of students. Many teachers don't have the necessary training therefore teaching preparation needs to be revised so that the teachers could efficiently teach students with disabilities (Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey & Simon,

* Pseudonym for magnet school

2005). In addition, teachers with less special education training may have higher anxiety or feelings of hopelessness. Two other research studies found that teachers' comfort level with teaching special education students greatly affect their behaviors and their effectiveness as a teacher (Lago-Delello, 1998; Vaughn, Klinger & Hughes, 2000). If teachers feel inadequate in providing services for special needs students, then they may ignore the students, leaving the responsibility solely on the special education teacher. Friend and Bursuck (1999) argue that the best way to help those teachers, who were feeling incapable of working with special need students, is to work with teachers who have specific training in special education. Therefore, co-teaching seems like a perfect answer to the problem. This research could be very helpful to other Hartford public schools as an example of a solution to mainstreaming. Many schools are trying to figure out how to teach effectively with special education students integrated and although co-teaching has been identified as a possible teaching method, few schools know how to maximize the benefits of collaborative teaching. There is a need for more research to be done in order to discover new methods of teaching that would be conducive to full inclusion classrooms.

Another issue is that parents often worry about the quality of education that their children are receiving, especially when there are special needs students who require lots of help. Parents need to know how teachers are going to give the necessary attention to several students who are at different learning stages in the material, without being unfair to the other students in the classroom. The question is how can teachers give special needs students the help they need to stay on track with the rest of the classroom? This research not only provides lessons for teachers to come up with more effective teaching

strategies, but also can suggest changes in the education training of graduate programs to include co-teaching. It will bring ease to many parents who are worried that now that special needs students are mainstreamed, the quality of teaching has decreased.

The data that I collected has altered my original opinions about the benefits that mainstreaming can bring to a child's education. My first thoughts were that mainstreaming is very ineffective and creates more chaos for both the teachers and students in the classroom. After doing the observations and interviewing teachers and the administration, the research showed that mainstreaming can be effective given the appropriate training of the teachers along with effective teaching methods, like collaborative teaching. There are different approaches to co-teaching that many teachers aren't aware of, yet the different methods allow some flexibility with teaching, depending on the classroom setting. If the teachers in the classroom are incompatible partners and don't use the co-teaching to play to their strengths, then collaborative teaching will be ineffective. By having two teachers in one classroom, they are able to play their different roles in order to keep the students productive, and they can work to each other's strengths. A positive relationship between co-teachers is crucial to the success of collaborative teaching, along with flexibility, and extensive planning.

CMMS provides a unique environment that allows mainstreaming to be quite effective, which can be due to a variety of reasons. The teachers commented on the resources available to the students in the magnet school that are missing from many neighborhood public schools. Teachers also perceived the opportunities for extensive training that the magnet school provides the teachers to be a factor in the success of their special education program. The training helps put the special education teachers at ease

because they have more ways to approach the special needs children, and they can share their wisdom with other teachers.

Another aspect of the special education program at CMMS that the teachers attribute to the success of all students, both special and non-special education students, is that the names of the special needs students are ambiguous to everyone, other than the special education teacher. This sets a high standard of teaching for all students, so that inclusive classrooms are successful because every student is getting the attention they need. The special education teacher isn't given the responsibility of just the special education students, but every student. The general education teacher could identify which students seems to be having the most difficulty, but they don't know which students are in fact special education students, which therefore holds teachers to a high standard of teaching, not favoring any particular student. For the first three years of CMMS, there was a rigorous application process that involved several essays, which meant that only the students that were dedicated to working hard were admitted. Also, it made sure that parents were committed to their children's success. The high standards of CMMS certainly can be attributed to the success of mainstreaming.

This was a qualitative study that was based on observations at CMMS, and interviews with teachers and administrators. My methods changed from my original plans, due to the change in my focus. My original focus was the perceptions of the special needs students in the mainstreamed environment and how it affected their learning ability. One condition of my project that has remained constant is that I wanted to observe a middle school classroom because I thought it would be easier to identify the advancement of student learning in that setting. My decision to observe classes at a

magnet school was not a factor, but ended up working out to my advantage. After my initial meeting with the head special education teacher at CMMS, Mrs. Smith (a pseudonym), I realized that it would be more beneficial to change my research topic to teaching methods. Once Mrs. Smith explained that all the math and english classes were co-taught, I decided to observe both 8th grade classes. When I observed my first 8th grade math class, I realized how valuable co-teaching was to the success of mainstreaming because the students seemed to be responding well to it.

Mrs. Smith introduced me to the general math and english teachers that she worked with, which prompted me to interview both of them. I also met a 6th grade special education teacher, who taught both math and English. I observed both her classes once. I also interviewed her about mainstreaming and collaborative teaching. I also had the opportunity to meet and interview the principal. Due to a suggestion from one of my peers, I decided to interview the secretary at the school's main office to find out what parents have expressed about mainstreaming at CMMS. I interviewed 4 teachers in total, two special education teachers, and two general education teachers. Due to my focus changing to teachers' perspectives on mainstreaming, student interviews became unnecessary. In total I observed the 8th grade math class 3 times, the 8th grade english class twice, and the 6th grade math and English classes each once, for a total of 7 class observations. Each class was a 90 minute block period.

Naturally my interview questions changed with the altering of my focus. Originally my questions were geared to comparing the classroom setting and teaching methods before and after mainstreaming. But considering that mainstreaming wasn't new at CMMS, I had to change my questions to focus on various teaching methods.

Since co-teaching was the focal point in my initial conversation with Mrs. Smith, I added more questions to find out how teachers felt about co-teaching and the goals they had to improve the teaching methods for special needs students.

CMMS is an environment that breathes success for their students. Even the outside grounds of the school are well kept. It seems to be related to the “broken window” concept in which the appearance of the school is just as important in setting the standard for success of the students. Walking through the hallways, the floors are sparkling clean, and there are collages, pictures and various projects of the students hanging throughout the building. In the main hallway, there are dolls designed by the eight graders for their history class. On the 2nd floor, the 6th graders have their drawings and poems hanging on both sides of the hallway. The school seems to take pride in the work of their students and it shows the students that there is value in everything that they do.

There were a lot of windows in the building, bringing light into most classrooms, which one teacher described as an energizer for the students. The math class in which I observed was very unique because it was computerized. There were two very long tables in which there are computers. Each computer represents a station for each student. Each computer only is installed with a math program in which the students must log into when they’re taking tests or doing practice exercises. The program helps students understand their math errors by going through each step of the problem after they complete the exercises. During this time, both teachers walk around the classroom to make sure that students are on track and are not stuck on any problems. The class usually begins with the teacher doing activities on the board and discussing new math concepts that they need

to cover. The blackboard isn't a typical chalkboard. It looks like a dry erase board, but it is connected to a computer so that it will display what is on the computer. Mr. Reed (pseudonym), the 8th grade math teacher, uses the board to draw scales, graphs and write math problems. The board is so easy to work with and provides every function he needs to use. Due to the set up of the classroom, the teachers are easily able to walk around and check on the students. In fact, Mr. Reed also uses the space to run around to exhibit different math concepts, or to just get the students attention.

The English class that Mrs. Smith teaches with Ms. Peterson (pseudonym) has a drastically different classroom setting. The classroom looks very crowded because of the arrangement of the tables, with one row of desks in the back and then other tables lined up perpendicular to the back tables. It is very difficult for the students and teachers to walk around, so Ms. Peterson spends most of her at the front of the classroom. Mrs. Smith tries to walk around, but often is sitting at a desk on the side of the classroom. Since she isn't very strong with grammar, she helps the students with reading problems. Three of the students in the classroom have severe problems with their handwriting, so they are given text writers which are like minicomputers in which they type their work on. That way they can be up to speed with the class. I was told that the text writers are rare in most school and that CMMS buys them for the students to use while they attend CMMS.

Ms. Peterson is a sharp teacher and often snaps her fingers at the students who are being disruptive in class. She never misses anything that happens in her classroom and hardly cracks a smile. Mrs. Smith and Ms. Peterson have very different approaches to teaching and that often creates some hostility in the classroom. The classroom

environment wasn't as lighthearted as the 8th grade math class, therefore making it appear to be gloomy and depressing. I believe this strongly impacted the students' ability to learn.

The observations and interviews provided a lot of rich information that guided me to my thesis. After 3 observations, I went through my notes and categorized the information into 5 groups: student/teacher relationships, teacher/teacher relationship, student/student relationship, general classroom environment, and perceived student achievement. The results showed the power of the situation in the decision making of the appropriate method of teaching. Throughout my observations, I saw different types of collaborative teaching that were useful, depending on the lessons of the day. This flexibility was a key to the success of co-teaching at CMMS. The following are the six types of co-teachings designed for two teachers to use:

- One Teach, One Observe
- One Teach, One Drift
- Parallel Teaching
- Alternate Teaching
- Team Teaching
- Station Teaching

I observed One Teach, One Drift and One Teach, One Observe the most. In the math classes the teachers used One Teach, One Drift most frequently, and in the English classes, the teachers used One Teach, One Observe, although sometimes they also did One Teach, One Drift. In Mr. Reed's 8th grade math class, One Teach, One Drift is most effective because Mrs. Smith is always walking around the classroom making sure the

students' notebooks are in order and that they are following the lesson. The important aspect of her walking around is that she goes to every student, regardless of whether they are special education students or not. Not only does that ensure that other students are unable to figure out who the special needs students are , but she also makes it clear that her priority is the success of all the students in the classroom.

Observing the teacher/teacher relationship drew my attention to the significance of quality of the relationship between teachers in order to maintain a positive learning environment. Co-teaching creates requires a certain quality of a professional relationship in order for it to be a beneficial teaching method. Mrs. Smith commented her relationship with a fellow teacher, Mr. Reed.

“My relationships with the other teachers are definitely very important to how I perceive the success of co-teaching for the students. Two heads are better than one, and two staff members can teach to their strengths. Working with people year after year is like a marriage and like most relationships this takes work. The benefits are seen in our students as they tend to work better with high expectations. Mr. Reed and I have been working together for 10 years and we're like a married couple. We can finish each other's sentences easily. Knowing each other's moods and energy levels are helpful in gauging the level of success of the students. The way the students act and learn is based on our attitudes as teachers. If one day, Mr. Reed doesn't seem to have much energy, I have to boost my energy level to make sure that there is constant level of energy in the classroom to motivate the students to work

hard and show their capabilities. Without that energy, success teaching is unlikely. We are flexible in order to work to both of our strengths when teaching. We both have great sense of humors and the students seem to thrive off of our energy, which makes the class such a joy to teach.”

It makes sense that teachers who have worked together the longest amount of time find it very easy and conducive to learning to use collaborative teaching. When observing Mr. Reed and Mrs. Smith’s math class, it is evident that they have chemistry in the classroom and that they bounce off each other’s energy. Mr. Reed loves using real life examples because he thinks it would be easier for the students to relate to, and Mrs. Smith always makes fun of him when he uses football as an example. She likes pretend to get confused about the problem so that a student will take the initiative to explain the answer, sometimes even using football as an example. It is role playing, but it is very useful, even though I’m sure some students realize her true intentions.

Collaborative teaching requires extensive planning of each class lesson. Teachers must plan out not only the lesson for each class period, but they must think of ways to present the information to the students and what examples they think will be most useful. The co-teachers must plan which teacher is going to say what, and also what practice exercises the students will do after the lesson has been taught. Mr. Reed discussed with me the extent of their planning for the 8th grade math class.

“When Mrs. Smith and I plan a lesson, we must always consider the students characteristics and needs in order to approach the class the most

effective way. We spend much time before school planning our classes, and then revising them once we have thought of a better approach to teaching the lesson. There is never enough planning that goes into the class. Planning is most essential, because teaching to your strengths is important. I realize that Mrs. Smith enjoys teaching multiplication of positive and negative integers, therefore we plan that lesson so that she can teach the students about the tips to multiplying negative numbers. Since she is a special education teacher, Mrs. Smith has some creative ideas to get the information through to the students, which makes my job easier.”

Mrs. Smith also explained that she spend most of her time planning class lessons with all the teachers she works with, and each class requires a different amount of planning because of the different class environments and the need to teach to the student’s strengths. Flexibility and patience are also crucial in the planning process because the teachers need to be willing to change their lesson on the spot when they realize that their original method isn’t working. Ms. Peterson said that she often has multiple ways of teaching the rules of grammar in case one way doesn’t make sense to some students. Teachers also need to be patient so that they don’t get frustrated when a lesson isn’t going exactly as planned, because that is a rare occurrence, and teachers have to be willing to accept that part of their plan didn’t work and just revise it for the next class.

Most of the fears that teachers have about mainstreaming are due to the lack of training they have received to work with special needs students. Teachers must understand that special education students often just learn differently than their peers,

therefore they need help using their own methods and skills to learn. Mrs. Smith often tries to give the special needs students different ways that they can solve the math problems, or think of various ways that they can remember a particular rule of grammar. General teachers sometimes feel that they would be useless to special needs students, because they don't know how to approach the child's disability.

At CMMS, the teachers have lots of training to prepare them for working with children at different cognitive levels. Special education teachers participate in the training sessions with other Hartford public schools. In addition, the special education teachers provide a workshop for special education teachers and general education teachers on successful ways to co-teaching. Since CMMS has been mainstreamed for three years, the staff has been able to find more resources in order to get additional training. CMMS recently had a powerpoint presentation led by Mrs. Smith about co-teaching. Since she had used this teaching technique at her previous school, she is known as the expert of co-teaching. It was a workshop to give more teachers options in order to be more valuable to their students. Mrs. Smith discussed the professional development options offered to the teachers at CMMS.

“We all get the same training but everyone has options to the PD (professional development) they attend or if they want in-services from outside of the school you just take the initiative and sign up for workshops. I have been to many in-services outside of school and have taught many training sessions to teachers at CMMS. We go to monthly Hartford Special Education meetings, and also attend meetings with CREC, which

CMMS is currently run by. CREC has been supportive in terms of us being able to use their sped coordinator who is a great asset to us. Even our principal attends the PD meetings. She has been so supportive of inclusion and collaborative teaching, and admires the special education teachers for have such an amazing and successful program. In fact, because she took the initiative to attend so many PD meetings, she just received an award for the most inclusive principal of the year. It a great honor to have the principal and to our special education program.”

Mrs. Smith believes that there is never enough training that a teacher can receive because the more training one has, the more successful they will be in working with special needs students. She also talks about how it is important right now for there to be well trained teachers due to the changes in the student applications to go to CMMS. Until this year, the application had been very lengthy and included several essays. It was to ensure that the students at CMMS were seriously committed to hard work as well as the parents’ dedication to excellence. Now the application doesn’t have that much depth which means the incoming 6th graders require more services and more attention. Therefore it’s important that the teachers have sufficient training to make sure the students thrive in the classroom.

Although the special education program is a huge success at CMMS, partially due to co-teaching as a solution to inclusive classrooms, most teachers still have hopes for the future of the special education program. The special education teachers express that even though the special needs students are their main focus, they need to make sure they are a

resource to every student in the classroom. The reason is that sometimes students that aren't necessarily classified as special needs students are on the fence, and have some difficulty that is hold them back academically. Therefore a suggestion that two teachers mentioned were having all classes co-taught. That could be difficult not only financially but because there is a shortage of special education teachers. However the benefits of having history and science co-taught are extremely high and would help set the high standards of teaching at CMMS. Ms. Peterson talked about her hope to have all classes co-taught in my interview with her.

“The students will have more support form their teachers and can have more one on one attention if there were always two teachers in the classroom.

I'm fortunate be co-teaching my English class. Although sometimes it can be frustrating, co-teaching makes a huge difference in the success of the students academically. If I wanted, Mrs. Smith and I could split the class up into smaller groups and do reading exercises. For history teachers, maybe they would be able to cover more information in depth if there were tow teachers. There are so many different ways of teaching and it becomes limited if there is only one teacher. I strongly believe that the quality of teaching would increase if all classes were co-taught.”

Many teachers feel the same way as Ms. Peterson because they realize that many students, not only special education students, are at need, and require a large amount of help to keep them on the right track. Also that would create more support for the special

needs students in all their classes, which can only help them realize that they have the same capabilities as their peers.

Although mainstreaming seemed as though it would cause a lot of chaos among the school system, CMMS uses co-teaching as a highly effective method of teaching. The resources that the school provides for the special education students that are unavailable at other neighborhood schools proves the extra steps that CMMS has made to ensure that all their students have academic success. As Mrs. Smith explained, “We live in a mainstreamed society so the sooner students know how to function within it, and know how to actively use their compensatory skills to function, the better off they will be.” The purpose mainstreaming is to prepare students for life after school when they will be in the real world working with people with difficult cognitive learning levels.

Additional training for both general education and special education teachers will always be beneficial because there is always something new that teachers can learn to help assist their students. There are a lot of aspects that affect the quality of co-teaching, especially the relationship between two teachers. When teachers find a balance in their teaching methods, and are comfortable with one another’s roles in the classroom, co-teaching is the most effective teaching method in response to mainstreaming.

Appendix One

Interview Questions for Special Education Teachers

1. Can you describe how your position as a teacher in a co-taught classroom?
2. What do you think are the biggest challenges of co-teaching?
3. What are the pros and cons of co-teaching?
4. Do you feel like the training you received prepared you adequately for needs of special education students?
5. What do you think is the best part of mainstreaming?
6. What aspect of mainstreaming do you think is most beneficial for all students?
7. How has your school administration helped in the mainstreaming process?
8. What do you think are the characteristics necessary to have a successful co-teaching environment?
9. If you could change one thing about mainstreaming what would it be?
10. How do you think co-teaching can be improved?
11. What goals do you have in order to make mainstreaming more effective in your classroom?
12. How does the CREC program affect mainstreaming at HMMS?
13. How did co-teaching become the method of teaching for special education students at HMMS? What was in place before co-teaching?
14. What other programs are designed especially for special needs students?

Appendix Two

Interview Questions for General Education Teachers:

1. Can you describe how your position as a teacher in a co-taught classroom?
2. What do you think are the biggest challenges of co-teaching?
3. What are the pros and cons of co-teaching?
4. Do you feel like the training you received prepared you adequately for needs of special education students?
5. What do you think is the best part of mainstreaming?
6. What aspect of mainstreaming do you think is most beneficial for all students?
7. How has your school administration helped in the mainstreaming process?
8. What do you think are the characteristics necessary to have a successful co-teaching environment?
9. If you could change one thing about mainstreaming what would it be?
10. How do you think co-teaching can be improved?
11. What goals do you have in order to make mainstreaming more effective in your classroom?

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