

The December 2015/January 2016 Educational Leadership journal focuses on co-teaching: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Is it the panacea for what ails education? Absolutely not, but can a co-teaching environment build teacher capacity, increase student engagement, and improve student achievement? A more revealing question for me is whether a collaborative community yields noticeable changes in classrooms, instruction, and student outcomes.

One of the greatest benefits from working with colleagues is the ability to practice in a non-evaluative environment with other like-minded, skilled practitioners. The key, however, is not the time spent together; the key is what actually happens during that time to impact teaching and learning. So, how does teacher collaboration promote teacher growth?

Instructional coaches work one-on-one and in small groups with teachers following the BDA cycle of consultation. During these planning, visiting, and debriefing sessions, teachers and coaches work together to identify areas of strength and areas needing support. These are active collaborative sessions where teachers and coaches talk about their goals, determine effective instructional practices necessary to achieve these goals, and generate ideas about addressing student needs if the goals are not met. Sometimes, these sessions lead to coach modeling of content or process and many times they lead to co-teaching with very well-planned structured lessons with data collection tools and material clearly recognized. Whether modeling or co-teaching, the operative process here is the collaboration between and among the teachers to plan, practice, perform, and then problem-solve to make adjustments in teaching where necessary. And, teachers are not the only beneficiaries of this process; in 2009, CK Jackson and E Bruegmann reported that students benefit when teachers learn from their peers; that is, when the quality of a teacher's colleagues improves, the students of that teacher benefit as well. That collaboration is much more than "just" co-teaching.

In 2009, Murray & Mazur conducted a mathematics intervention study and found that peer coaching conversations were positive and supportive yet they lacked depth. The feedback was positive but not suggestive or analytical. They found that the peer partner groups did not *"challenge or question one another's classroom practices."*

The peer coaching was not a critical friends group designed to give specific, timely, descriptive and non-judgmental feedback. This sounded like a group of teachers who visited each other's classrooms but did not know how to provide useful feedback. On the other hand, perhaps they didn't know that providing descriptive feedback was part of the process. Without that expectation or preparation, they would not know how to offer feedback, reflect individually and collectively, or communicate non-evaluative comments to the teachers whom they visited.

In our PIIC Teachers' Survey conducted by fhi360 during the winter of 2014-2015, 84% of teachers reported that they have changed their instructional practice as a result of one-on-one or small group coaching. When asked how their instructional practice changed, teachers reported that they were more willing to try new instructional techniques, reflect on their practices more and more effectively, and assign more reading and writing in content areas. This is a direct result of working with a trusted colleague, their coach, and modeling the collaborative process. In addition, 98% of those surveyed reported that changes in their classroom practice had a positive impact on student engagement and student learning.

While co-teaching is a promising and welcoming idea, there are some parameters and helpful hints to ensure a productive outcome. Being mindful of them will help you avoid the pitfalls. First and foremost, coaches need to provide multiple, ongoing opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning and work together on relevant topics that are tied to teacher practice, data, research, standards, and student needs. Now for some tips: 1) Collaboration is a reciprocal and recursive process, not a one-time event; 2) Cooperation and collaboration are different; understand those differences; 3) Co-teaching must be seamless, not *"you do your part and I do mine"* ; structured and deliberate planning are essential; 4) Co-teaching is not automatic; build the relationships with each other and the students in the classroom where you are working together; and 5) Co-teaching alone does not make a difference in building teacher capacity; it's the discussing, planning, practicing, and debriefing that make a difference in promoting teacher growth. As a coach, you are in the driver's seat... create those teaching and learning moments – consistently, regularly, and purposefully.

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