Positive Aspects of Collaborative Team Teaching Classrooms

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Abstract

In the present day educational world, schools are increasingly adopting the “Collaborative Team Teaching” approach. According to *The Elementary School Journal*, “Collaborative Team Teaching”, partner’s general education and special education teachers in a classroom composed of general education and special education students, both of which are permanent members of the class. Studies have been conducted which show that this type of arrangement is beneficial and preferred by both students and teacher. The social atmosphere for both disabled and nondisabled peers, having two teachers working together and the instructional capabilities of this setting all contribute to the positive aspects of the classroom. This paper sheds light and further examines the benefits to each of these facets of the collaborative team teaching classroom.

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 Upon entering an elementary school in the United States in the year 2009, you would find several different learning settings. Among these learning environments are general education classrooms, inclusion classrooms, 12-1-1 classrooms, resource rooms and collaborative team teaching classrooms. After spending time in each of these settings, I was especially interested in the set up found in collaborative team teaching settings. The benefits of this arrangement seemed plentiful.

To the untrained individual, these different settings may not be familiar. Therefore, before further evaluating collaborative team teaching classrooms, it is necessary to further explain the features of each type of classroom arrangement. First, an inclusion classroom has a mix of general education and special education students with two teachers typically. Such a classroom is not fixed with as many regulations. All lessons and activities are specially designed to allow all students to participate, whatever their disability might be. Next, a 12-1-1 classroom is an isolated special education program. It includes twelve students (Approximately), one teacher and one para (although there could be additional para’s for individual students needs). A collaborative team teaching classroom contains 40% special education students and 60% general education students. In such a setting there are two teachers and there could be one or more para’s. Finally, resource room is a pull out, special education service. Students are removed from the classroom during particular subjects to receive either small group or one-on-one instruction. This allows the students to receive differentiated teaching in a way that accommodates their special needs.

After having observed or taught in each of these types of settings, I was able to make an educated and informed decision on which setting I found to be extremely successful. My opinion
was that the “Collaborative Team Teaching” classroom was the one I found to have the most positive aspects. Before delving into the positive attributes of collaborative team teaching classrooms, it is important to provide a formal definition of the term. According to Marleen C. Pugach and Caren L. Wesson (1995), Collaborative Team Teaching, “partner’s general education and special education teachers in a classroom composed of general education and special education students, both of which are permanent members of the class” (p.280). The arrangement joins the two teachers in an equal partnership. In this type of classroom the students are meant to be unaware which of the teachers is on the general education side and which is on the special education side. Therefore, teaching time is split between the two teachers.

The first positive aspect of a collaborative team teaching classroom is the social atmosphere it provides for all students. The setting is valuable for the students with disabilities as well as the students without disabilities. The students without disabilities can serve as mentors that students with disabilities can turn to for help during group work. Also, these students can serve as role models if other students are having trouble with behavior or focusing. They can look to their classmates as examples. In addition, students without disabilities can begin to understand that not everyone is exactly the same. This is an important life lesson for all children. Individuals have different strengths and weakness, abilities and needs. It is imperative that they learn to appreciate peers no matter the differences they may have. Homogeneous settings in classrooms often times takes away students ability to learn this valuable notion. When disabled and non disabled peers are joined in the classroom it sets the stage for students to gain this understanding. Overall, not only are disabled students aided by their nondisabled peers, but all are given the opportunity to grow as an individual and learn about others. They gain an appreciation for others while understanding that helping each other makes themselves feel good.
A study published in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* depicted general benefits that collaborative team teaching had on students in the class. For students with disabilities it was mentioned that students felt an increased sense of self esteem. When mainstreamed into this type of classroom, students are no longer stuck behind their label. They don’t feel the overall sense of being in “special education” and feel more “normal”. The stigma of being separated because of a disability is removed from the equation. Stemming from this notion, disabled students seem to flourish in such a setting. When held to higher standards, they gain an increased realization that they can achieve and their academic skills seem to improve. Finally, there overall relationship with peers bloomed. They seem to fit in well and it is often reported that students even hang out with peers outside of the classroom more (Walther-Thomas, 1997, p. 399- 400).

The study also identified areas in which students without disabilities were positively influenced by being in such a classroom. Firstly, a collaborative team teaching classroom allows for students who are not identified as being disabled, yet are still low achieving to grow academically. General education classrooms often have students who are below grade level but do not have a learning disability. These students need extra attention or remediation in order to catch them up to grade level. If placed in a collaborative team teaching classroom, the ratio of two teachers allows these students needs to be met more effectively. Additionally, they benefit from having a special education teacher in the room to teach students their vast knowledge of cognitive skills and study skills. In a solely regular education setting such emphasis may not be placed on simplifying and explaining subject matter in ways that students with learning disabilities may profit to the students. Consequently, having students without disabilities hearing such instruction they too with reap the benefits. Finally, observations show that these students show greater acts of kindness by helping peers. The results of which include less cliques and
flights in the classroom. It is often observed that collaborative team teaching classrooms seem to run more as a cohesive team and the community feeling is high (Walther-Thomas, 1997, p. 400-402).

The second positive aspect of this arrangement is the fact that there are two teachers in the classroom. This is a huge advantage for the students in the class. When whole class lessons are being taught, it is only necessary for one teacher to be leading the lesson. Therefore, this allows for the other teacher to be moving around the room. There are several benefits to this factor. This teacher could utilize proximity to resolve any behavioral situations, remove distractions and ensure students are focusing on what is going on. In addition, if there are any students that seem to be confused or struggling with the topic, the teacher can work with these students to clear up any misunderstanding or embellish on what is being taught in a way that will allow the struggling student to comprehend the idea. When students are lost or confused entire lessons go without any benefit. It is vital that ambiguous points be clarified in a timely fashion in order for a student to meet the goal of the lesson being taught. Two teachers allows this to happen more often. Having two teachers also works well during small group instruction or group work. Two teachers mean that two groups can be attended to simultaneously, receiving teacher aid at the same time. With two teachers in the classroom, they are better able to meet the needs of a variety of student levels. During small group instruction, students can be placed into groups based on their academic levels. For example, there could be a group for learning disabled students and students that are below grade level, a group for students on grade level and a group for students that are above grade level. With two teachers it is possible to give more individualized attention to students and meet their needs. Group work can be adjusted to accommodate the students. Having two teachers also allows for the needed attention to be
devoted to learning disabled students, while nondisabled peers are still be attended to sufficiently.

Besides the profits students gain from having two teachers, it is the teachers themselves that prosper in a classroom with an additional teacher. As discussed in the book by Francis J. Buckley (2000), there are many gains teachers acquire due to teaching alongside a fellow educator. The quality and effectiveness teaching can be improved through collaborations. “Teachers strengths are combined. Their weaknesses are remediated. Teachers complement one another’s expertise” (p. 11). Creativity of lessons and originality of assignments increases when two minds come together. Ideas can be bounced off of each other and jointly interesting and new projects can be developed. In addition to learning from one another, having a fellow teacher increases time for planning and preparing. This can improve the overall contentment of a teacher, which will in term improve the classroom flow.

The third positive aspect of collaborative team teaching is the positive instructional environment it provides. The main advantage of this type of classroom is the fact that it provides the least restrictive environment for students with special needs. According to the IDEA, one of the six principles is “least restrictive environment”. This means that ever student should be in a class that is as close to a general education setting as is possible to meet their needs. Collaborative Team Teaching is a means of mainstreaming students that may otherwise be placed in a strictly special education classroom. According to an article published by James Walsh and Barbara Jones in the Journal *Teaching Exceptional Children*, there are two aspects of co-teaching classrooms in the area of instruction that are valuable. First, this type of class set-up makes it more likely that instruction will be closer matched to the curriculum used in general
education classrooms. Since disabled students are in a classroom alongside nondisabled peers, lesson goals and objectives are more focused on grade level standards. While assignments are still adjusted in necessary fashions to accommodate all students, the overall standards are more closely matched. Secondly, students are more likely to be held to higher expectations (Walsh and Jones, 2004, p. 15). Sometimes in a special education classroom, teachers may overly dumb-down assignments in order to make them easier for students to complete them. While intentions may be right, if you do not hold students to high standards and push them to strive for the highest level they can reach you are ultimately stunting a student’s academic capabilities. When special education students are place alongside their nondisabled peers teachers can attempt to bring students with disabilities as close to their non-disabled peers academically as feasibly possible.

I believe that I have provided a wide range of reasons that collaborative team teaching is such a positive classroom setting. My examination and research included all parties that participate in the classroom. It was proven that general education students, special education students and both teacher profit from the arrangement. In addition, I focused on many details of how each partaker is advantaged from the setting. For students there are a vast many social and academic reasons that the setting allows them to thrive. Finally, the situation allows teachers to have a partner which is a personal advantage and allows them to better serve the students. Without a doubt I believe that if done right, the collaborative team teaching classroom can be the answer many teachers, parents and students are looking for.
References


