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A Co-Teaching Model:

COMMITTED PROFESSIONALS, HIGH EXPECTATIONS, AND THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

By Karen Wise Lindeman and Kathleen Magiera

“He was the only deaf student in the entire school. He had no one who could communicate with him—not teachers, not students, not anybody. This tugged at my heart, and I wanted to help.”

~ Said by a first grade general education teacher when a child who was deaf entered her classroom

When Jeffery* entered Woodlawn Elementary, a small, rural school in the northeast United States, a committed team of professionals began to work collaboratively to provide services. Jeffery was born deaf and received a cochlear implant at the age of 4. He spent his first years of school in a self-contained classroom with students who had a variety of disabilities. After two years of using his cochlear implant and a sign language interpreter, Jeffery still had limited language skills though a few dedicated professionals saw his potential.

When he started first grade, Jeffery, at the direction of his Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, was placed in an inclusive general education classroom in which he was provided services, allowing him to have greater access to the curriculum and to improve his socialization (Kluwin, 1999). For our school's professionals, Jeffery's entry into an inclusive classroom was a new experience. We were a teacher of the deaf, a first grade general education teacher, a speech-language pathologist, an occupational therapist, and an interpreter. None of us had ever worked with a deaf student with cochlear implants or co-taught. We had a limited understanding of how this would work. However, our high expectations and our strong desire to see Jeffery remain in the general education classroom for as much of the day as possible drove us to work hard to succeed. Each of us wrote separate goals reflecting our individual areas of expertise into Jeffery's IEP. Now we each had to find ways to meet those goals in the context of a first grade curriculum, a general education classroom, and Jeffery's same-age peers.

Photos by John T. Consoli

Charts courtesy of Karen Wise Lindeman and Kathleen Magiera



Researchers (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie, 2007) have indicated that the key to successful co-teaching is the planning of the general education curriculum by a team of professionals to best meet the needs of students with and without disabilities. The general educator is “the content specialist,” while the special education team members are “the learning specialists.” By interfacing these skills, instruction in the general education classroom can be enhanced to meet the needs of a student with special needs, in this case, a student who was deaf (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005).

That year, as we shared the responsibility for providing Jeffery’s education and services, we became a team. The results were amazing. Jeffery excelled both academically and socially. He earned high grades and made friends with many of his hearing classmates. At the end of the year, the family, the administration, and the other teachers were amazed.

As professionals we looked back on the experience as one of our most rewarding—and we decided to take a closer look and reflect on our year to improve our own practices and hopefully help others. We wanted to explore why this collaborative model worked and how a group of professionals from different

disciplines, each with different goals for the student and with no experience working with a deaf child with a cochlear implant, came together to make Jeffery’s year a success.

Further, we wanted to see if we could use our experience and develop a co-teaching model to support other students with cochlear implants in a general education classroom. In other words, what did we do right? Just as importantly, what could we have done better?

How It Worked Co-Teaching: A Framework

We began, of course, with high expectations. We shared a faith in our student. We knew that Jeffery could do the work. We knew that if we teamed up effectively, he would be able to succeed in his inclusive classroom.

The Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching (Magiera, Simmons, & Hance, 2008) delineates a “quality process” to ensure that co-teachers collaborate successfully and achieve the best results for their students. We received Institutional Review Board approval, and each team member agreed to be interviewed and videotaped about her experience. By viewing the videos and analyzing them using the co-teaching framework created by Magiera et al. (2008), we



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Terminology

What is the difference between mainstreaming and inclusion?

Mainstreaming refers to educating a child with special needs in a general education classroom when he or she is able to fit into the classroom. If special help, differentiation, or remediation is needed, the child is removed or ‘pulled out’ for these services.

In **inclusive** classrooms, all children are educated together—they are all included regardless of the differentiation or remediation needed. Typically modifications are made in the general education classroom with no or limited pullout services. Extensive collaboration between professionals is needed.

What is Collaboration?

Collaboration is the process whereby special and general education teachers implement the services (Magiera, Simmons, Marotta, & Battaglia, 2005).

What is Co-Teaching?

Co-teaching, a specific form of collaboration, is a special education service delivered to students with disabilities. It has shown promise for blending professional expertise to better serve students with disabilities within general education classrooms (Muller, Friend, & Hurley-Chamberlain, 2009). Murawski (2012) has described co-teaching as “substantively different” than a solo-taught class with isolated services.

were able to see what went well and how we could improve our instruction.

Stage 1: Planning

DECIDING ON DISTRICT-WIDE COLLABORATION

At this stage, all the professionals who will be involved with the student agree to collaborate, and this may involve identifying and sharing an understanding of what co-teaching means. For us, the decision to collaborate came out of the desire to see Jeffery in the general education classroom. The decision was a grassroots effort from the teachers—an “out-of-necessity collaboration” in the words of our speech-language pathologist. Support from the administration was vital. Noted the general education teacher, “Our administration gave us the leeway to arrange things the way [they] needed to be.” Added another professional, “The administration trusted us to do what was best ... they trusted each of us as professionals, each an expert in our area.”

Stage 2: Professional Development

RECEIVING TRAINING IN CO-TEACHING DELIVERY

The general education teacher and the related service providers need to establish a common vocabulary and consistent ideas for what co-teaching means (Magiera et al., 2008). In our situation, however, our team had no training. There was a lot of trial and error. Observed the occupational therapist, “Collaboration was all of us coming together as a team and just being there for support, encouragement, and problem solving.” Professional development was an area in which our team was lacking and from which we could have benefited.

Stage 3: Setting Standards

DECIDING WHAT IS IMPORTANT

Successful collaboration requires explicit expectations for all students in the inclusive classroom, including the student with a disability. For us, standards evolved as the year progressed; however, we prioritized Jeffery’s inclusion in the general education curriculum and his acceptance by his peers. The speech-language pathologist summarized, “We were always looking at the curriculum, at the context. What did the student need to know? What were his peers learning? What will he be accountable for? The [general education teacher’s] lesson plans were the driving force [that determined our services].” The general education teacher photocopied her weekly lesson plans and shared them with the team, but we needed time to “check in” or, as the general education teacher said, “We needed [time for] a sit-down discussion.” The speech-language pathologist remembered, “We had to get creative ... to stay in touch.” A weekly team meeting was instituted. We met during one of the general education teacher’s preparation periods and eventually included a requirement for weekly meetings in Jeffery’s IEP. “Getting four different service providers in a room at the same time each week was difficult,” noted the occupational therapist. “However, it was so important ... really worth it.”

Stage 4: Reflection

CLARIFYING ROLES, REINFORCING LEARNING

Co-teaching professionals need time to ask questions and compare strategies while they plan together. The weekly team meetings were critical for this. For example, during the meeting, the speech-language pathologist would share something that was successful in therapy with the team, and the general education teacher would implement this strategy in the classroom. These meetings allowed the collaborative instructional process to evolve in a positive direction. “Here is where he is struggling,” the occupational therapist might note, or “This was too difficult; let’s break it down,” the speech-language pathologist might observe. We took the time to see where Jeffery needed extra assistance or guidance and used this information to help other team members design instruction for the coming week.



Stage 5: External Observation

PROCURING AN OUTSIDE PARTNER

Cramer and Nevin (2006) found that co-teachers, feeling underprepared to collaborate, can find an outside partner useful. This partner can be an outside individual, agency, or instructional tool that helps in balancing self-study and reflection to identify strengths and concerns about how the team is functioning. For us, the “outside partner” that allowed reflection was the Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching (Magiera et al., 2008). Using this model allowed us to take a step back and analyze our work.

Stage 6: Student Achievement

ASSESSING THE STUDENT'S PERFORMANCE

In this last stage, the impact of the co-teaching on student achievement is considered (Magiera et al., 2008). Jeffery improved his scores on AIMSweb (a measure of words read correctly per minute) each quarter, moved to the next reading level at a rapid pace, began writing simple sentences on his own, and eventually did not need occupational therapy. The general education teacher was especially excited to see that Jeffery had met so many social goals. “[Jeffery had] conversations at lunch,” she noted. “He was invited to a friend’s house. [He

was] invited to his first birthday party.”

While these strides might seem normal for some students, for this deaf child who was placed in an inclusive classroom in a single jump and with some English language delays to boot, they were extraordinary. Seeing Jeffery’s progress and hearing the stories of his success, the team was encouraged to keep working and adjusted instruction to best meet his needs.

What We Learned

From reviewing the teachers’ reflections and aligning these to a high quality co-teaching model provided by Magiera and her colleagues, we found the following critical to Jeffery’s success:

• COMMUNICATION

For us, the team meetings were essential. “[We used the team meeting to] *reflect on what was going on, for seeing progress and seeing our struggles,*” noted the occupational therapist. “[These meetings allowed us to] *get on the same page and reflect.*”

Most of the published co-teaching literature focuses on logistics, ongoing co-planning, and compatibility in teaching philosophy of special and general education

Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching



COOK, B. G., & TANKERSLEY, M. G. (2013). *RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION* (1st ED., PP. 120). UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ: PEARSON EDUCATION, INC. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

teachers (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989; Friend & Cook, 2010; Murawski, 2012). Special education teachers respond positively to learning more about the general education curriculum. At the same time, general education teachers enjoy the assistance of a team of specialized professionals. “I needed the support,” said the general education teacher. “I would not have been able to make as many gains with [Jeffery] ... without having the additional support.”

The speech-language pathologist spoke about the importance of the easy and informal communication afforded by proximity. “We could talk before school, after school, in the middle of the day in the hall. We were lucky.” By “lucky,” she meant that the teacher of the deaf was not an itinerant teacher coming for 45 minutes a day but rather a member of the school faculty, enabling our team to have the teacher as a partner. The general education teacher commented, “Working with a deaf student was very different for me. I didn’t completely understand how to approach things. Working with a teacher of the deaf helped me a lot.”

The speech-language pathologist noted that communication allowed her to use the student’s classwork as part of her therapy. “Honestly, if we didn’t have the team meetings, I wouldn’t have known [these assignments were] happening. We would have been writing sentences [in isolation—in pullout therapy] about something else ... that would have been good as well but not as functional.”

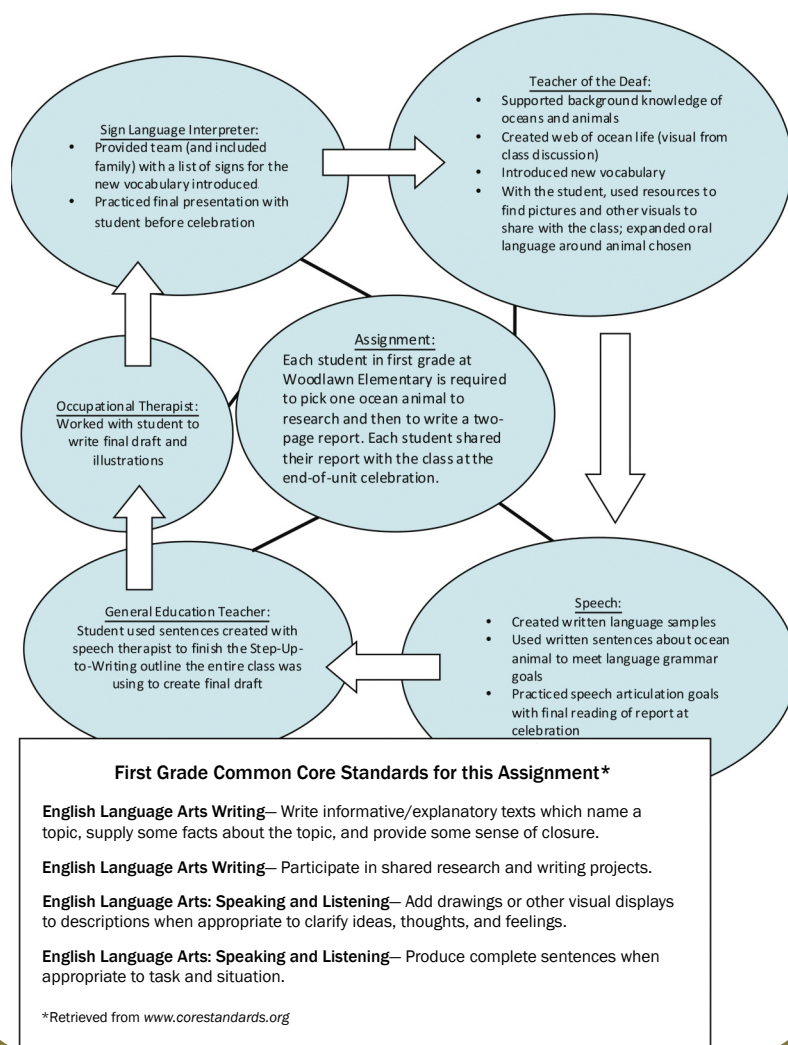
The team meeting was an important part of Jeffery’s success because it meant scheduled and regular communication; the informal meetings were also critical.

• PROFESSIONAL RESPECT

“I am so fortunate to work with colleagues that are so enthusiastic, and everyone cares,” said the speech-language pathologist. *“It is really the bottom line.”*

Scruggs et al. (2007), in their meta-analysis of 32 qualitative studies on co-teaching, found that compatibility among professionals was the most important element in successful co-teaching relationships. The respect, compassion, and sense of shared responsibility were evident on our team. The general education teacher referred to the teacher of the deaf as an expert in deaf education. “The only thing I could have asked for was more of it,” she noted. “More time to have the [teacher of the deaf] in the classroom.” Additionally, she noted, “We shared

Planning Example Science Unit: Oceans



everything. We shared the room, we shared the other children in the room, and we shared our student. We trusted each other to be honest when things were working or weren’t working.” “I can’t take credit,” continued the speech-language pathologist. “It was everyone working together ... none of us would have had the success we had in isolation.”

• HIGH EXPECTATIONS

“We all were looking out for the student’s best interest,” said the speech-language pathologist.

Not only did we respect each other professionally and personally, but each team member cared about Jeffery. Each knew he could be successful. “We all were so invested in [Jeffery],” affirmed the occupational therapist. “There was something really special about that.” His behavior improved greatly as he began to see the teachers’ level of concern. “He could catch the vibe,” the occupational therapist said. “I remember he was surprised that we all

talked [about him]. He picked up on that.” “We all had compassion,” added the general education teacher. “If you don’t have that, there is no reason to be [teaching].”

Compassion combined with our belief in Jeffery’s potential success and our planning to allow him to succeed and enabled Jeffery to feel the teacher’s concerns, as did his classmates. As he became a full member of the first grade classroom, his self-esteem increased, his social goals were met, and he had academic success.

Common Core and Our Work

As the general education teacher prepared her class to meet Common Core State Standards, we joined her in designing instruction, interventions, and accommodations for Jeffery. The general education teacher reported, “I would go over the main points [of the lesson plan that] everyone in the classroom was expected to know. Then [the team would discuss] what

specifically we needed to do to enable [Jeffery to glean the same knowledge and skills as his peers] and we worked from there.”

She continued, “We started with the goals for the class for the week. We picked them to little pieces; we took them apart.” With the Common Core State Standards implemented in a majority of states, it is essential for teachers of the deaf to use a collaborative approach while working with students in the general education classroom.

By having a team that communicated well, respected each other’s area of expertise, and set high expectations, a young deaf child was able to thrive in an inclusive classroom, both academically and

socially. Co-teaching and collaboration were the precursors to this success—and we believe that most other students who are deaf can succeed if the professionals involved in their programs are supported by this approach. Our collaboration enabled the high expectations that we had for our student to also be fair ones. We are relieved and proud that we—Jeffery and the team of professionals who supported him—succeeded.

**The student’s name in this article is a pseudonym.*

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