“For us it works”

Co-teaching in a High School Global History Class

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Images of a teacher in a classroom surrounded by schoolchildren are deeply embedded in my consciousness and memory -- images from my own school experiences, from literature and media, and my life as a teacher. Conversations about teachers and teaching often reference the same image: Each teacher in (typically) her own classroom with her own group of children, grouped by age, or in high school, by subject. When autonomy is desired, “Just close your classroom door,” is the advice that teachers give and get. But today, it is not always clear whose room, whose door, or even whose students that statement might address.

Effective collaborative teaching is an expectation of teachers today, especially when addressing the needs of special education students, and co-teaching involving paired general education teachers and special education teachers is an increasingly popular model. Currently 93% of all special education students spend time in general education classrooms, on average, 4.8 hours a day (Wagner & Blackorby, 2002). Most of these students receive services from a special education teacher and from general education grade level or subject teachers. Increasingly, this support is provided through team teaching in the general education classroom rather than through pullout programs. The co-teaching model, defined by Friend and Cook (2007) as a partnership between two or more professionals who share instructional responsibility

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for a diverse group of students in a shared classroom space, may be employed to deliver those services.

As a special education teacher, I implemented a similar model in different classrooms and with different teachers with varying degrees of success. I observed a lack of understanding and information on the implementation of this model, an issue born out frequently in conversations with colleagues, as well as pre- and in-service teachers in classes that I taught, despite the plethora of information in the form of checklists, guidelines, and “how-tos” directed at co-teachers. I wondered how other teachers who have grown up with the image of a lone teacher in her own classroom among schoolchildren dealt with sharing that role and space.

What Do We Know About Co-teaching?

The co teaching model is designed to promote inclusion and potentially benefit all students in the co-taught classroom by providing additional opportunities for one on one interaction between students and teachers, access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities, as required by law, without losing the opportunity for specialized instruction when needed, and more accessible lessons due to teachers sharing the planning process (Ferguson, Desjarlais, & Meyer, 2000). This promising model (Friend, 2008) has been found to be challenging to implement (Sharpe & Hawes, 2003). While much co-teaching literature focuses on outlining and describing types of co-teaching – one teach – one observe, parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, and teaming (Friend, 2014), other researchers have looked at roles, teacher attitudes, and challenges (Mastropieri et al., 2005; Potts & Howard, 2011; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015).

The current study sought to further explore co-teaching roles and to answer these research questions: (1) How do special education and general education teachers understand co-

teaching? (2) How do paired co-teachers understand and negotiate their roles, and what sort of role sharing is taking place?

Methods

Finding Co-teachers

In order to investigate how co-teachers deal with sharing roles and space, how special education and general education teachers feel about co-teaching, how paired co-teachers understand and negotiate their roles, and what sort of role sharing actually takes place, this study used observation and individual interviews with a pair of general education and special education teachers. I believed that co-teaching practices were very different at the elementary and secondary levels, and with a small number of participants, I chose to focus on secondary teachers because that was my area of interest and expertise. I followed recommendations from colleagues that I look at one area school district, the Newton Hollow School District², as their teachers had been implementing this model for a few years with some apparent success.

Contact with the Special Education Director at Newton Hollow via email explaining my study netted a positive response; she was agreeable to my observing and interviewing in the high school and solicited volunteers on my behalf. She later described her recruitment as follows: “All of our co-teaching partners at the high school were informed of your research project and were allowed to ‘sign up’ for the opportunity to assist you with your research and to possibly get some feedback on their collaborative efforts.” I was put in touch with Carol, a special education teacher, and Janice, a Global History teacher who co-taught a ninth grade class.

In fact, I had a prior relationship with Carol, though we had not been in communication about the study. Carol had served as a long-term substitute teacher when I was on a leave of

² All names of participants, colleagues mentioned in interviews, and the school district name have been changed.

absence in another district some distance away, so while we had not worked together, I had been on her interview committee. I had spoken with her several times during that school year, and later invited her to address a college class on her experiences as a first year teacher. In addition, we had mutual friends, and were “friends” on Facebook. In fact, she posted the following on my Facebook page: “Hi Sue! My boss emailed me last week to inform me that you are going to be observing the 9th grade global class that I teach--what a small world!” I responded, “and i was surprised to see your name on the memo! :) I knew you were a hs sp ed teacher at Newton Hollow, but i just never had made the connection. I’m observing and interviewing (if you agree) a pair of co-teachers for a research project. Looking forward to seeing you!” I tried to stress the voluntary nature of the study, assuming, perhaps erroneously, from her email that she had been assigned to this study. I then moved the conversation to a more private forum.

At the time, I was chagrined that her participation appeared to be a directive from her supervisor. After completing the interviews and observations, I asked her to describe how she was recruited for the study, and she replied, “Barbara [special education director]³ knew that Janice and I were pretty comfortable co teaching together so she asked if we would be willing to allow you to come in for your project.” While these accounts do not mesh perfectly, and new teachers may not feel that they can say no to their supervisor, it does appear that participation was voluntary.

Carol presented as a willing participant, and my prior relationship with her made for easy communication. She helped me by presenting me in a positive light to her co-teacher, and our conversations were enhanced by the common reference point of our former district to compare,

³ Throughout this paper { } indicates material omitted and ... indicates a speaker’s voice trailing off as they talk. Words added to clarify the speaker’s meaning are indicated [].

contrast, and illustrate points. Of course, there were potential drawbacks to too much familiarity, and the possibility of similar background leading to less explanation, but this did not seem to be a problem. Carol was quite articulate, and with occasional prompting and clarifying questions on my part (member checking), I felt that she fully illustrated her responses.

Knowing Carol provided me with an entrée into her classroom that I do not believe a stranger would have been offered in the same way. There were clear advantages for me, but there were complications as well. Carol looked at me as an authority, to some extent, and I had to be careful not to guide our interviews too much. I also experienced a potential ethical dilemma: Carol seemed a bit nervous about certain things getting back to her supervisor. I needed to understand the vulnerability of a young, untenured teacher who perhaps felt responsible for the success of her co-teaching arrangement, who feared to criticize her supervisor on tape, although she was a willing, in fact, enthusiastic, participant. I needed to be scrupulous in maintaining confidentiality, especially with the special education director, who was eager for “results” of this study. I maintained a vigilant approach to ethical issues throughout the study, and worked to reflect Glesne’s (2006) stance that “ethical considerations are inseparable from your everyday interactions with research participants and with your data” (p. 129).

My relationship with Carol also made me concerned that I was perceived by the general education teacher of the pair, Janice, as very much allied with the special education teacher, both by profession and prior relationship. This was less of a problem than it might have been, as this pair truly seemed to have good, open communication and no rivalry. Furthermore, after my second visit, when I interviewed Janice, I established a one-on-one relationship with her as well. I still made an effort, however, up through my last-minute emailed questions, to present this

study in a way that emphasized that Janice was an equal partner in this study, which indeed she was.

I was grateful to Carol and Janice for opening their practice to me. I believe that they found the chance to reflect on their practice with a good and supportive listener helpful. I tried to offer the type of listening Glesne (2006) describes—careful, serious to “give them a sense of importance and specialness” (p. 143). I also tried to honor their participation by treating the data they provided with mindful attention and honest analysis. I understood that there are subtle ways in which participants can signal ambivalence or not quite cooperate—forgetting appointments for interviews, not getting back to me on scheduling, not telling me about a field trip, not leaving my name in the office. None of these things happened. I was welcomed, given the teacher’s desk at which to sit and a place for my things, and was not hurried through interviews that took the teachers’ entire prep period.

Researcher Positionality -- What I Brought to the Study: Me, but not “too much about me”
(Peshkin, 1988, p. 20)

Glesne (2006) wrote that subjectivity is always a part of research; and our obligation is to be aware of and to describe those subjectivities (p.119). Peshkin (1988) also told how “researchers should be meaningfully attentive to their own subjectivity” (p. 17). As I planned and conducted this research, I became more aware of ideas that I held as “fact” that were truly assumptions, and I strived to keep those in perspective as I watched, listened, thought, and wrote.

Collaboration between special education and general education teachers in support of inclusive schooling has been a theme of my work as a teacher and as an instructor of new and future teachers. I came to this study with a belief that social justice is served by promoting inclusive education, and that one of my most important endeavors as an educator was making

inclusive education work for students with special needs, as well as their classmates, their teachers, and the school community as a whole. I had been a certified special education teacher for a number of years, and was employed as such for approximately 15 years. I had taught in a small rural school district, in a high school, demographically similar to the setting of the study, and I implemented a model (direct consultation) that has many similarities to, and some important differences from, the co-teaching model that I studied (NYSED, 2013). Specifically, the direct consultant teacher model is structurally identical (two teachers in the classroom together), but focuses the special education teacher's efforts differently. In both models, a general education teacher and a special education teacher are paired to teach a class, with both present at all times, and with some shared responsibilities. In the direct consultation model, the special education teacher's role is primarily to modify the curriculum for and provide assistance to special education students in the class; whereas in the co-teaching model, the expectation is that both teachers have curriculum planning and instructional roles and have shared responsibility for the class as a whole. Regardless of the model and terminology, I had struggled with many of the issues that I was investigating in the current study.

An additional relevant experience was my work teaching pre-service and in-service general and special education teachers. I taught a unit on co-teaching as part of a master's level course, and I had an opportunity to observe changing attitudes toward co-teaching over my years of that experience.

As I examined the beliefs about co-teaching that I brought to this study, I found that they included a general assumption that the co-teaching model was a positive one, as it aligned with current initiatives in education, supported inclusion, and represented the continuation of a trend, first articulated as part of the Regular Education Initiative in the 1980s (Will, 1986), toward

melding general and special education. Further, I believed, based on my prior experiences, that the co-teaching model was poorly understood and implemented unevenly, and that general education and special education teachers experienced different challenges in implementing the co-teaching model (Mastropieri et al., 2005). My interest in effective co-teaching also reflected my valuing of the equity that I believed co-teaching promoted in inclusive classrooms, Peshkin's (1988) "Justice-Seeking I" (p. 19).

The background that I brought to the study as a special education teacher provided many advantages. Glesne (2006), speaking of another's research, described "the way in which her topic is autobiographical" (p. 121). I understood the setting (a small rural district), the student population (rural, mostly white, poor, working, and middle class), the grade level, and the general parameters of the job of a special education teacher in such a setting.

This background came with disadvantages as well. It was tempting to assume that I knew far more about Newton Hollow High School than I did, and that similar demographics meant more than they did. It would have been easy to assume that the challenges I had encountered in my own practice would also be found there. Reflecting on my first observation and interview, I saw that I needed to be less quick to jump in with assurance that I knew all about any problems that are raised. In fact, I did not. I needed to talk less in the interviews, confirm less, direct less. My background as a teacher in a similar situation was extensive, but it was mine, not theirs. Because I truly wanted to learn from the teachers in this setting, I needed to "make the familiar strange," to be open to what I saw and heard that was not what I expected, as well as what was. I also needed to present myself in the setting as truly open to learning from the teachers there.

Collecting Data

I faced my first visit to NHHS with apprehension—First, over the drive: How much would it snow? Would I get lost? Would I be on time? Was I really prepared for the interview? I worried about my potential reception: Did the Global History teacher really want me there? Did they really understand my explanation of the project? Were they welcoming me only because the Special Education Director told them they were? Finally, technology concerns added stress. Would my new recorder work? If not, was the mic for my computer strong enough? Would Carol (the special education teacher) be put off by my recording?

I enter the school—parking is easy, the main entrance is clearly marked. I am on time, with 5 minutes to spare. The main office is easy to find, the secretary is brief but helpful. I sign in. Apparently I don't need a visitor's badge; I am expected. I get directions to the ladies room, then make my way upstairs to the classroom. Janice's name is on the door. Carol's is not.

(field notes, March 22)

I visited Newton Hollow High School three times during March and April. The first time, I observed Carol and Janice co-teaching a ninth grade Global History class and then interviewed Carol. The following week, I interviewed Janice and then observed the class again. My third visit, the week after that, I observed again, and conducted follow-up interviews. In addition to these three observations and four interviews, I also obtained and reviewed the training materials used for an in-service on co-teaching that both teachers had (separately) attended.

After explaining the study and obtaining written consent, I audio-recorded interviews with Carol and Janice. I took detailed notes on my observations and expanded these into field

notes. I wrote memos, which ranged from brief notes to longer narratives. These longer notes chronicled new ideas and times when I found myself excited, puzzled, or frustrated. I transcribed my interviews, then listened to my recordings again, checking the text, but also looking for something new that I might not have heard before.

Analyzing Data: Discovering What I Saw and Heard

After several weeks of thinking about my data, writing memos as ideas occurred to me, and adding new thoughts to my field notes on an ongoing basis, I began more focused data analysis. My activities consisted of reading over interview transcripts and field notes, making margin notes, reading again, organizing those notations into a list of potential codes, making a concept map of those codes, seeing possible relationships among the codes as they formed categories, looking back at my research questions, determining which questions I had material to address, formulating new questions, returning to my list of categories, and again revisiting my data, similar to the process described by Emerson et al., 1995). This was a recursive process. Every time I thought that I was “done,” I seemed to start again. I would remember something I had missed in an interview --although I didn’t really miss it, because it was lurking in my memory.

After reviewing my interviews and field notes, I generated categories including (a) roles within the co-taught classroom, (b) co-planning—ideal or reality/obstacles, (c) communication, and who bears primary responsibility, (d) co-teaching metaphors and language, (e) co-teaching and general education students, (f) the co-teaching model and pre-service teachers, (g) role of content knowledge in special education teacher’s ability to effectively co-teach, (h) students’ views of co-teaching, and (i) co-teaching as a justification and support for tracking.

During my third observation, I focused on what each teacher was doing simultaneously and recorded this in a more systematic way than I had in my field notes from the first two observations. I then coded those activities. I had considered using existing frameworks for sorting co-teaching activities (Friend, 2014), but opted to begin with my data and look for categories there. These were the paired behaviors or activities I coded: (a) leading the class / working individually with a student, (b) circulating around the room and providing help or supervision where needed (done by both teachers simultaneously), (c) observing while the other teacher leads the class, (d) administrative tasks not directly involving students (paired at times with each of the other activities), (e) assisting while the other teacher leads the class, and (f) conferring with each other.

I continued to analyze the data, writing as I went along. I was amazed at the process of uncovering information in data that I compiled myself from my own observations and interviews I conducted. How could there be things there that I hadn't seen, when I was there for it all? Emerson and colleagues (1995) wrote of "the ethnographer ... approach[ing] her notes as if they had been written by a stranger" (p. 145), and this described me at times.

At this point, I revisited my original list of questions: (1) How do teachers who have grown up with the image of a lone teacher in her own classroom deal with sharing that role and space? (2) How do co-teachers negotiate their roles within the classroom? (3) Do teachers like the co-teaching model? (4) Do special education and general education teachers answer these questions differently? (5) What role sharing is really taking place?

As expected, my data did not address all of these questions, and I found others that were equally compelling. I addressed roles in the classroom to a large extent, and attitudes of special education and general education teachers to some extent. I saw differences, along with a

surprising number of similarities, in how the special education teacher and the general education teacher answered my questions. I was able to investigate the larger topic of changing classroom culture only to a limited extent, with the small sample, short time frame, and one very new teacher and another teacher with extensive co-teaching experience.

Validity

Guided by Maxwell's (2005) work, I assessed the validity of this study. I was not able to have the type of intensive, long-term involvement that Maxwell prescribed. My sample was small -- two teachers, one pair, one classroom. I believe that my data meets the description of "rich" data—verbatim transcripts of interviews and detailed field notes of my observations. I worked hard to include all my findings, and I did not pick and choose what to report based on how neatly it fit—in fact, I have reported contradictory data in some areas of this investigation.

I believe that the participants in this study, with whom I have shared in only a general way, would agree and be comfortable with my conclusions, though I am sure they could add additional insight. Many of my tentative conclusions were their ideas—training as presently conceived has limited utility, communication and good will between pairs of co-teachers is paramount, and the importance of content knowledge of the special education teacher is under-recognized. I have not been able to address all topics of concern in this paper, or to give voice to all their insights, but I believe that what I have shared reflects the spirit of what they showed and told me about their work.

I reviewed my interviews to determine if I included member checking as I went along, stating back what I thought they were telling me and following up during the next visit, and I believe that I did this. Since completing my visits to Newton Hollow, I have emailed with follow-up questions and have received prompt answers. Some of these are found in this paper.

I have not shied away from discrepant evidence, but have cited data, supporting and disconfirming, relevant to any topic I addressed in this paper. I used my participants' words to illustrate what I believed they were saying; I have not twisted or edited them to make a point. I have provided triangulation in the form of observations that shed further light on comments in interviews, and have used interviews to illustrate things I saw in the classroom. Again, my sample was small, the study was short, all data was collected in one setting, and my research methods, though I believe I applied them well, were few.

With all this in mind, my conclusions are about these two teachers, their school, and their experience. My reader will need to decide if my conclusions ring true, and if they have validity beyond this small sample. My experience tells me that they do; others may bring different perspectives.

Findings

Evolving Roles and Developing Relationships

I began this study interested in how special education and general education teachers negotiate their roles within co-teaching. I found that first I needed to understand how the teachers themselves understood those roles. Within the pair that I observed and interviewed, Janice, the general education teacher, saw her role as being open to new ideas, suggestions, and curriculum modifications. "Nothing is ever, you know, 'Well, this is how we're going to do it.' I kind of do my lesson plans in pencil." She also felt that she should share her materials, ideas, and plans, communicate readily, and be pleasant and welcoming in her classroom. Janice described this: "I think that I'm pretty good about listening to what she [Carol] has to say. I don't think that she feels like she doesn't have a voice." Both teachers appeared to assume that Janice would take the lead in planning for the class, and Carol would weigh in as she needed to and was able.

Carol, the special education teacher, saw her role as being flexible, communicating well, saying, “We get along, and we're able to be honest with each other, and talk about things,” being present and working hard while in the classroom, and being tactful. “We haven't really had any disagreements. We have some differences of approach,” was Carol’s way of framing potential conflict. She and Janice both assumed that she (Carol) needed to give first priority to the core special education responsibilities of her job. For example, when Carol had several Committee on Special Education (CSE) meetings in one week, with the accompanying task of writing several Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Janice understood that she would do less preparation, grading, and other work for the Global History class.

There were limits to role sharing. Both teachers told me that Janice’s name was the one “on the student’s report card” and therefore she was seen as ultimately responsible. Janice said, “The bottom line is...my names on the schedule. And, I think, definitively, I'm the one who gets the final say, but that's not how I run it.” There seemed to be a generally unspoken recognition that it was the general education teacher who might grant certain access, participation, and decision-making authority, but not the other way around. Only Janice’s name appeared on the classroom door; Carol had her own smaller room in which she met with small groups of special education students for extra support.

Within the classroom, both teachers played a wide range of roles. I saw both teachers leading the class, working individually with students, circulating around the room and providing help or supervision where needed, observing while the other led the class, performing administrative tasks that did not directly involve students such as taking attendance, assisting while the other led the class, and conferring informally with each other. I looked hard at these activities, looking to see if one teacher usually took the lead and the other adjusted her teaching

role in response, but I did not find this. In addition, these two teachers often “tag teamed,” trading off mid-lesson, as well as both interjecting information, answers to questions, additional examples, illustrations, and prompts for students while the other teacher led the class. In my field notes from March 22 was an example of Carol interjecting a clarifying question during a lesson led by Janice.

Janice moves the class discussion to the topic of feudal society.

Janice: What is a Lord?

She explains that she doesn’t mean Lord as in God, but as in “Lord of the manor”

Student: Like a landlord?

Janice praises the student for making the association.

Carol: Who has a landlord?

Most of the students raise their hands.

Carol makes sure that this connection works for the students.

In this next example, Janice supports Carol’s instruction:

Carol (now leading the class): Andy, where is your packet?

Janice: I’m on it.

As this interaction goes on, Janice is writing a pass for Andy to go to his locker.

She confers quietly with him. He goes out and returns with his materials promptly.

(field notes, April 1)

In the first example, Carol supported Janice’s instruction by offering additional information and probing questions as she saw students in need of additional clarification. Janice

supported Carol as she led the class by taking care of an individual student's needs. This happened simultaneously and smoothly.

Because of the short timeframe of this study, I was not able to observe and document how the pair's co-teaching relationship developed over time. I came in mid-year to established teaching routines, so had no opportunity to see how roles were negotiated early in the school year and in the co-teaching relationship. I asked for Janice's retrospective ideas on this, asking how long it takes to "hit your stride" and how the relationship changed over time. She replied, "It takes more than a year. You have easier rapport as time goes on. They [special education teachers] know your expectations, are comfortable speaking up." Carol, who had not at this time yet had the experience of teaching in one setting for more than a year, offered her perspective on how her relationship with Janice had grown over this school year. "Our approach to teaching has changed, and I think I've helped her see some different ways of approaching things, and to understand that our kids don't all learn the same way, and what worked with the guys last year isn't working with these guys this year, and I think that was hard for her to come to grips with, a little bit. { } As far as how our relationship has changed, that's hard for me to put my finger on at the moment, looking back to September, other than the fact that we know each other better."

She went on to tell about an incident in which she and a student had become very angry with each other, and Janice had been able to step in and diffuse the situation. Both teachers mentioned this incident to me as an example of something that might have proceeded differently in September, when each would have been hesitant to "step on toes."

Carol also shared, "It's important, I think, to find a co-teaching partnership that works and keep it going. If you're switching the people you're teaching with every year, you never find that consistency and really get to where you want to be." She credited her administrator for working

to maintain co-teaching partnerships: “Barbara, once she starts those partnerships, she really tries to build them and keep them going.”

Throughout my interviews, I sensed that the burden for making the co-teaching relationship work fell more heavily on the special education teacher of this pair. Carol described another teacher who chronically had no written plans, and whom she had to ask in the hall, “Hey, what are we doing today?” as “a little more laid back,” though in a later interview, she added that “it makes co-teaching very, very difficult.”

I asked in our second interview, “Do you think, in general, that there's more pressure or responsibility on the special ed teacher for making a co-teaching relationship work versus on the gen ed teacher?” Carol replied, “I work with four different teachers with four different teaching styles and four different routines, and I definitely have to adjust to their classroom and how they do things. I don't come in and say, ‘Well, this is how I do it.’ And in some ways I do see it as their classroom. { } I don't know if I would call it pressure—more, adjustment on my part, things that I have to adjust to and accept about their teaching environment and classroom.”

Behind the diplomacy of this response is the reality that Carol's co-teaching relationships, while functional, respectful, and well regarded, showed a lack of parity. This collaboration involved the general education teacher as the main classroom teacher, and the special education teacher as a consultant who came upon the scene later with the tools, expertise, and mandate to recommend modifications to the existing classroom structure and curriculum. The term “push-in” is frequently used to describe this role for a special education teacher.

Carol offered this advice to a special education teacher beginning to co-teach: “You have to go in knowing that this teacher has the classroom already in place, and they've had a system, maybe for years, of how they do things.” Describing how her year started, Carol said, “the day

before school started, she [Janice] said, ‘This is my classroom,’ and we kind of just started.” She described the co-planning process, “We really try to find some time to sit down together and look at—she has materials, and I’ll look at what she has, and I’ll say, ‘I don’t think that’s going to work,’ or, ‘Let’s change this,’ or, ‘What are your thoughts on doing...’ And I’ll bring my suggestions, and she’s pretty open to those suggestions,” again describing a collaboration in which one partner does, and the other responds.

Co-planning: Common Planning Time is Only the First Challenge.

Co-planning was a topic of much commentary in this study. In this setting, common planning time was not something that was built into the teachers’ schedules. Carol’s planning period did coincide with Janice’s lunch, and another teacher with whom Carol co-taught had a planning period during Carol’s lunch, and all seemed willing to use this time. In addition, both teachers mentioned several times that they used brief encounters constructively to plan, or as Janice described, “At some point we steal minutes, we steal just a few minutes here and there, and we know where we’re going.”

However, it appeared that common planning periods were not the only obstacle to a higher level of collaboration. Both Carol and Janice presented as unrealistic the idea that Carol could actually co-plan with four teachers in a meaningful way. Carol described her other three co-teachers, with whom her work is less collaborative, though cordial, but in which she does not play as large a role in the classroom. Carol, who carried a caseload of 34 ninth and tenth graders, cited competing priorities. “I mean, how do you really plan with four different teachers, manage a caseload, write IEPs...?”

Co-planning as described by these teachers did not involve jointly constructing lessons—it consisted of Janice presenting plans and Carol reacting to them with suggestions for

modification. Janice's expectation of possible input from a special education teacher was that the special education teacher might ask, "Can we space out the questions? Can we make the font bigger?" Another example: "I do the lesson plans, but then I photocopy them and give them to her [Carol] so she has at least a plan of what we're going to do." Carol described, "I'll look at what she has, and I'll bring my suggestions, and she's [Janice] pretty open to those suggestions." While this did not describe the co-construction of lessons, it contrasted with Carol's description of the more common role for special education support teachers and staff: "you take notes, you tap the kids, tell them to pay attention," or Janice's description of a former colleague, "it was more she just kind of showed up, and was kind of the bouncer at the back of the room."

How Do Students See Co-teaching?

I was not able to interview students to get a firsthand account of their views of co-taught classrooms or of their co-teachers. I observed the classroom with the above question in mind, and asked both teachers for their perspective on how their students viewed co-teaching. Carol responded, "In Janice's class, I think they see an equal. A lot of those kids I see all day long, so I'm definitely their teacher! In the other classes, I think it's about the same." Asked how the general education students in her classes view her, she offered, "I don't think they say, 'Oh, you're not my teacher,' or, 'You are my teacher.'" Janice described how she and Carol get up in front of the class and introduce themselves as the teachers at the beginning of the year, and said, "I don't think they've ever looked at us differently. Like I said, she's up in front of the class just as much as I am... They don't think of her as—'No, I want to talk to the social studies teacher. No, I want the social studies teacher to answer the question.' I don't think that they would ever say that."

While my observations corroborated this, and I saw little evidence of students making distinctions between the two teachers, I did see Carol, who is certified in social studies as well as special education, making frequent references to Janice as the source of the global history information and materials the class was using. Overall I saw students readily approach both teachers, with proximity and availability seeming to be the determinants of which teacher was approached, though I did see a few instances of students appearing to find Carol not just available, but possibly more approachable, including this incident of a student approaching Carol about a possible test grading error made by Janice:

The students have apparently recently gotten back a test, and Janice talks to them about doing test corrections. A student asks Carol a question about the test corrections. Carol confers with Janice. It turns out that Janice had made an error.

The student is given a lollipop for catching the teacher's error.

(field notes, March 22)

I could not determine, during any of my observations, which students were special education students and which ones were not, which was an unusual experience for me as an experienced special education teacher. I was surprised, and felt that this was an important indicator. In many ways, Carol and Janice's relationship did not reflect an equal partnership, did not reflect equal ownership of the classroom space, was not based on co-constructed lessons, and lacked common planning time, often cited in the literature as essential for effective co-teaching (Sileo, 2011). However, in spite of all of this, they created a classroom in which special education and general education students worked and learned together without noticeable distinctions, and students related to their co-teachers in a largely undifferentiated way.

How Do You Learn to be a Co-teacher?

Both teachers described the co-teaching trainings they had attended. Carol reported, “It was good because we were able to have that conversation [about division of labor on homework and grading], and to be honest, it was even better because we actually had the afternoon to plan together. So, while the first half, the morning, was, ‘Here's how co-teaching should look,’ the afternoon was just planning time, which is what we don't have a lot of.” It seemed that rare common planning time provided in conjunction with the training might have been the most valued aspect of the training to these teachers. Janice said, “You don't learn by sitting in a workshop from eight in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon listening to someone tell you how to co-teach. The more successful situations were workshops where you and the co-teacher went off and were given opportunities to plan together and talk together and that kind of thing.” Another interesting finding was that these pairs of teachers did not attend the training together. Janice said, “I have not done it [co-teacher training] with Carol, but I know Carol went with Evan Smith across the hall.”

Neither teacher had significant pre-service exposure to co-teaching. This seemed more telling in Carol's case, as she was a recent graduate. She described her own student teaching experience, “When I was doing my student teaching { } the special ed teacher was kind of the helper. So, no, [I was not exposed to co-teaching] in my coursework and not in any of my placements for observations or student teaching.”

Carol described a situation in her present position in which one of her co-teachers had a student teacher for a time. She characterized her interactions with him as “very minimal { } We did not do any co-planning together. { } He was receptive to my suggestions { } and was willing to listen to my ideas. However, to my knowledge there were no ‘official’ expectations or

requirements for him with regard to working with special education staff. Most days, he would teach and I would sit in the back of the room and take notes/observe or circulate when students were doing independent/group work.”

Talking About Co-teaching

The language of co-teaching sometimes called to mind the euphemistic treadmill (Pinker, 1994) that has turned for years in special education and disability services. The term “co-teacher” was typically used to describe the special education teacher in the partnership. Janice was described as the social studies teacher, and Carol as the co-teacher, though I also heard them collectively called “co-teachers.” However, a single individual referred to as a co-teacher nearly always meant a special education teacher.

Janice, describing her changing role over the years, talked about how she has been co-teaching since she started teaching, then spoke about how she “started teaching in [area school district] and I had a co-teacher, special ed teacher that pushed in with me there.” She then described her unique experience, “and I *was* the co-teacher, when I started here,” meaning that she had played a support role in what she described as someone else’s classroom. In addition, Carol frequently spoke of “pushing into” a general education teacher’s classroom. This trend was not universal, however. Carol did refer to general education teachers who work with a special education teacher in a hypothetical example as “your co-teachers.”

If indeed this use of “co-teacher” as a new name for a special education teacher is prevalent, it is similar to a common use of the term “inclusion” to mean something other than a system of educating all children including those with disabilities. The “inclusion classroom” has come to mean the designated classroom into which students with disabilities are placed. An “inclusion teacher” is a special education teacher. Thus inclusion, especially when used as an

adjective, often denotes not a concept or service delivery model, but a new word for an old idea.

I wondered if “co-teacher” was following this pattern as well.

The teachers in this study used two telling analogies to describe their co-teaching relationships. Several times, Janice compared her co-teaching to parenting, and compared the two teachers to a mother and father, particularly in situations involving negotiation of rules or discipline. “If they have a problem with one of us, they can come to the other. Mom versus Dad, you know!” She extended this further to describe benefits of having a co-teaching partner, by comparing solo teaching to single parenting. “It's like parenting, you know what I mean? If you're a mom and you have to do it all by yourself, it's harder.”

Janice also shared a popular metaphor for co-teaching as a marriage. “When we did some co-teaching training, Barbara, who is our CSE Chair, said it's like a marriage – it has to be like marriage – not many of us enter into arranged marriages [laughs], you know, so you cannot automatically throw a special education teacher and a classroom teacher together and say it's going to be great.” She reflected on the process involved in pairing co-teachers. “They pick this good classroom teacher and this good special ed teacher and say, ‘OK, you two do it.’ { } I don't think that it always just works because you say, ‘OK, you are doing that.’ It has to be very intentional.”

The analogies used to convey understanding of the co-teaching relationship offered insight into the intensity and challenges of this relationship, and also hinted at the cultural sea change that this level of collaboration represented in the lives of some teachers. Carol said, “It's kind of how we've been brought up in the education system and what we've seen and what we're used to, whereas older teachers, you could close your classroom door, and that was your room, and you did what you wanted to do.”

Limitations and Next Steps: If I Knew Then What I Know Now...

If I were to repeat this study, with the knowledge and experience that I have gained, there are things that I would do differently. I would spend more time and study several pairs of teachers in more than one school. A larger sample of co-teaching pairs, in more than one setting, would add additional insight and perspective to this study. While the validity of qualitative research does not depend on a representative sample, a somewhat larger sample would bring more voices and more ideas.

The most important change I would make would be to conduct this study starting in September, at the beginning of the school year. Because of the relatively short timeframe, I was not able to observe and document how co-teaching relationships develop over time. I came in mid-year to established teaching routines, so had no opportunity to see how roles in this co-teaching relationship were negotiated early in the school year. Of course, I asked in interviews for the teachers' retrospective thoughts about this, but to be able to interview and observe teachers over time, as the school year progressed, would have the potential to reveal changes and developments that I did not see and that the teachers may have long forgotten. This would have been especially valuable because one of my research questions dealt with how co-teaching relationships evolve over time.

I would focus a co-teaching study more on interviewing and less on classroom observation. The observations have been helpful in giving background, seeing for myself what I heard about in interviews, and providing triangulation of interview findings, but the interviews provided my richest data. I wished I could have done several follow-up interviews with each teacher, as there was so much more to explore! However, each round trip to Newton Hollow was

almost 100 miles, a challenge of research in a rural setting, and my time and resources did not allow this.

Another change I would make is to plan for the study to include a few brief interviews with students. I really wanted to know how both classified special education and general education students viewed the roles of the general education teacher and the special education teacher in the classroom, and I have only my observations and the teachers' thoughts to address this.

Ideas for Further Study

My thinking about co-teaching evolved along with this study. Unfortunately, the topic of evolving relationships and roles of the two teachers are not ideally studied over a period of weeks that began in March, and any longitudinal information I obtained on that topic relied on the recollections and projections of the participants. Some ideas that emerged from my first interviews were that (a) communication was crucial, and (b) common planning time was a highly desirable component but chimerical as well. Further, while this school had a strong commitment to co-teaching, and to nurturing co-teaching relationships, (c) the relationship, at least on the secondary level, was far from equal, and it seemed structurally impossible for it to be otherwise.

I found new areas to explore emerging even from my first interview. The idea that co-taught classes have become a new low track is something I had not considered before as it is contrary to my own experience, but that is how the model was implemented at Newton Hollow. Co-teaching was used to provide a higher level of support to the lowest track of students within the high school. Janice described this, "those C.T. students [special education students placed in the co-taught section] are grouped with other weaker students who might not qualify for CSE services, to try to benefit and get two birds for one stone." This was echoed by Carol as well. It

sounded logical, as well as practical in a time of declining resources. But tracking has fallen out of favor in most schools, and I found it disturbing that co-teaching might provide a rationale for its return, at least in a limited way. My interest in co-teaching comes from a belief that it provides a tool for inclusive education, which promotes social justice. I believe that social justice is served by maximizing educational opportunities for students with disabilities, and that inclusive educational opportunities especially serve this cause, so this finding bears further study.

In Conclusion

Although I believed that I was well-informed and armed with relevant practical experience going into this study, co-teaching turned out to be a more complex topic than I ever imagined; that complexity emerged from studying a single pair of teachers in one school.

Looking back at the definition of co-teaching that I began with, a partnership between teachers who share instructional responsibility for a diverse group of students in a shared classroom space (Friend & Cook, 2007), I considered the question -- is this what I saw? My data suggested that classroom ownership, grading decisions, and being the teacher of record were roles retained by the general education teacher. Adapting flexibly to existing classroom practices, initiating communication, advocating tactfully for gradual change in practices to better serve the needs of special education students, and juggling multiple relationships as well as traditional special education tasks were the roles of the special education teacher. If the goal of co-teaching is parity, full role release, and equal ownership of classroom space, this co-teaching partnership, while collegial and collaborative, did not meet that standard. Yet Carol, describing the sorting of roles and responsibilities, said, "...for us it works, because we get along, and we're able to be honest with each other, and talk about things."

If the goal of co-teaching is to promote inclusion and to create a general education classroom setting where children with and without disabilities learn together without apparent differentiation or labels, taught by teachers who appear to them to be undifferentiated as well, then the co-teachers I studied achieved this with remarkable success.

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Author Biography

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Sue received her Ed.D. in Educational Theory and Practice from the State University of New York at Binghamton in 2014, and her M.S.Ed. in early childhood special education from the same university. Her B.A. in Child Study is from Tufts University. She has presented papers at national/international and regional conferences including the Council for Exceptional Children Division on Career Development and Transition, New York State Council for Exceptional Children, and New York State English Council. Her most recent position was Visiting Assistant Professor at Binghamton University.