



Cooperative Teaching to Benefit All Learners: What Can Educational Leaders Do to Ensure Success?

By **Kristen Bonanno-Sotiropoulos, Ms.Ed.**

This edition of **NASET's Classroom Management series** was written by Kristen Bonanno-Sotiropoulos. With the ever increasing number of diverse learners entering our classrooms, it is imperative that educators are armed with the knowledge, means and resources to support achievement for all students. One powerful teaching strategy is cooperative teaching, also known as collaborative or co-teaching. Research has proven the effectiveness of having multiple educators planning together and teaching jointly. To ensure positive outcomes of cooperative teaching there are several responsibilities, characteristics, and understandings that school leaders must embrace. This paper seeks to uncover and explain how school leaders can support and grow the successfulness of cooperative teaching strategies.

Abstract

With the ever increasing number of diverse learners entering our classrooms, it is imperative that educators are armed with the knowledge, means and resources to support achievement for all students. One powerful teaching strategy is cooperative teaching, also known as collaborative or co-teaching. Research has proven the effectiveness of having multiple educators planning together and teaching jointly. To ensure positive outcomes of cooperative teaching there are several responsibilities, characteristics, and understandings that school leaders must embrace. This paper seeks to uncover and explain how school leaders can support and grow the successfulness of cooperative teaching strategies.

Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA) clearly states, “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (IDEA 2004). According to legislation, children with exceptionalities are entitled to receive special education service in the least restrictive environment, which in many cases is the general education classroom. Children with exceptionalities may bring a diverse set of needs, challenges, and dynamics into the general education classroom. On the other end of the spectrum, these children also bring opportunities for disability awareness, learning opportunities, and can secure collaboration efforts.

With the increase in the number of students with exceptionalities receiving services in the inclusive setting, the establishment of effective partnerships between general education teachers, special education teachers and related service providers are not only necessary but are required. How do these partnerships form and grow? How do learning environments that support collaboration and differentiation begin? These efforts must begin with the school leader. The school leader is the one individual who sets the vision and culture of the school environment. The school leader, as evident in the literature, must emulate characteristics proven to support learning environments that embrace collaboration, support, and continuous learning. This in turn provides the perfect atmosphere for all students to learn and succeed. This paper seeks to explore the most critical leadership qualities that support effective collaboration and positive outcomes for children with exceptionalities. This paper examines the relevant literature on institutional reform, individual reform, and adult learning theory in order to substantiate the identified leadership characteristics proven to successfully implement school change.

Review of the Literature

An increase in mainstreaming has led to a big challenge for educators, which is, to share the role and responsibilities of classroom instruction, addressing learning problems, maintaining classroom management, and ongoing assessment of students. Traditionally, these responsibilities have been addressed by individual educators for their respective students. With the increase in inclusion opportunities, some educators are seeking to share this role, while others may be forced to. The idea of collaborating and sharing the teaching responsibilities is referred to as cooperative teaching or co-teaching (Ripley, 1997, p.1).

School Change

Let’s begin with a look at the theory of educational change. Evans (1996), begins by introducing the effects of change on human beings. The literature looks in depth at the nature of change, suggesting that “change immediately threatens people’s sense of confidence” (Evans, 1996, p. 32). In other words, when any form of change is presented, individuals often feel a sense of inadequacy and insecurity, which leads to a feeling of loss. During a time of change or reform, any alterations to practices, procedures and routines hamper people’s ability to perform their job confidently and successfully, especially if they have exercised their skills in a particular way for a long period of time (Evans, 1996, p. 32). School leaders must acknowledge

and anticipate these effects prior to introducing the idea of change. In addition, school leaders need to be prepared to handle these effects.

How is change successfully implemented? Once the sense of loss has been acknowledged and supported, the next phase is to clearly articulate the goals of the reform. Evans (1996) discusses the theory of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership focuses on values such as honesty, loyalty, and fairness. This theory of leadership is based upon the assumption that the leader can attract individuals known as “followers” who are committed to the leader’s purpose because they are committed to the vision of what the school can be (Evans, 1996, pp.168-171). How does an educational leader create an atmosphere of transformational leadership? There are three crucial aspects of authority within transformational leadership and they are knowledge, personal experience and morality (Evans, 1996, p. 173).

For transformation to begin there must be trust. It is stated that “consistency is the lifeblood of trust” (Evans, 1996, p. 184). How does a leader convey a sense of trust? Being authentic and providing clarity and focus to the school’s community is a must. A leader must clearly state their vision for the school and be fully committed to their vision. Evans explains that a vision is rooted in the leader’s personal assumptions and beliefs about themselves. These personal assumptions include such things as individual philosophies, individual strengths as well as weaknesses, and personal experiences. Educational leaders who embrace a transformational leadership style that fosters clarity must focus on three components, the mission or the purpose of the reform, the vision or the future outcome of the reform, and the journey of change must reflect and incorporate the core values and guiding principles of the organization. (Evans, 1996, p. 207)

With regard to the focus aspect of transformation leadership, this simply refers to the idea of taking one step of the process at a time. The overall vision of the reform must be broken down into stages or smaller tasks. A good strategy for leaders would be to delegate various stages or tasks to various groups of individuals. By doing this, the leader is providing opportunities for collaboration and collegial interactions, shared governance, as well as enticing staff to become invested in the reform movement (Evans, 1996, p. 218) When assigning tasks to individuals or groups of individuals it is imperative for leaders to know the strengths of their staff members as this will maximize the success of the reform.

Moving forward in the literature, a 2003 article by DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, identifies several qualities of effective school leaders that produce positive outcomes for students with exceptionalities. The authors examined leaders who focused on instructional strategies, provided specific administrative support for special education, and offered high-quality professional development for staff. Principals who believe a school’s mission is to promote academic achievement for all students regardless of disability, communicate this belief to all stakeholders and ensures resources and supports are provided so that effective collaboration can occur between educational providers (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 6 and 9).

Special education should be viewed as an “integrated system of academic and social supports designed to help students with disabilities succeed in the least restricted environment” (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 5). What this means is that, if schools are going to ensure that students with disabilities are going to be accepted, supported, and ultimately make progress, school leaders need to acknowledge the need for collegial team effort at all times. It stands to reason that administrators who understand the needs of students with exceptionalities, the pertinent laws and regulations, as well as instructional difficulties that many educators experience are better prepared to provide the support, encouragement, and resources needed to create and maintain these learning environments (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 9). The authors continually stress the importance of the principal’s knowledge and skills within the realm of special education as a direct implication as to the effectiveness on special education within that school. This importance of school leader’s knowledge is one of the critical aspects of transformational leadership.

A 2015 article from Inclusive Schools Network, focuses on the qualities and responsibilities of school leaders that correlate to providing effective instruction for all students. Responsibilities such as facilitating collaboration, keeping current with effective instructional strategies, guiding staff toward implementing quality instructional practices, and understanding the needs of their staff and student population were highlighted throughout (Inclusive Schools Network, 2015). These responsibilities correlate to the three critical aspects of transformational leadership - knowledge, experience, and morality.

Another important component of successful reform includes recognition. Recognition is a well-documented factor in improving motivation and performance not only in children but adults as well. Recognition encompasses the acknowledgement and validation of an individual through praise, reward, and/or providing positive feedback. Most educators are very familiar with intrinsic and extrinsic rewards as these terms are popular in all educator preparation programs, classroom and behavioral management resources, and professional development. Top-down recognition refers to rewarding an individual's curiosity and exploration of something. For example, in a case of school reform educational leaders may initially reward individuals who show interest and effort toward embracing the idea of change. Lateral recognition on the other hand, focuses on assisting faculty to become adept at praising and acknowledging one another (Evans, 1996).

Interestingly, the 2015 article by Inclusive Schools Network substantiates the literature by confirming the need for school leaders that are supportive and provide praise and recognition to their staff. The article clarifies that by providing recognition, staff continues to feel motivated to learn and therefore improvements in teaching and learning are evident.

Studies of effective inclusive schools have identified five (5) instructional leadership priorities of effective school leaders. These principles include defining and communicating the school's mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supporting and supervising teaching, monitoring student progress, and promoting a positive learning climate (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.8). Synthesizing these principles along with the literature on institutional reform and adult development theory provides a direct correlation to the overarching goals of achieving effective school initiatives.

DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) examined the six standards set forth by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). According to the standards, the primary focus centers around effective student learning which includes shared leadership, building relationships, and effective communication.

Let's examine a few of the ISLLC standards. Standard II, which states that "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" focuses on the overarching idea of shared leadership (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 16). It is this shared leadership that is a necessity to implement organizational reform effectively. It is under this standard that school leaders are expected to create learning environments that "foster academic and social success for students with disabilities" through establishing learning communities and collaboration (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.17). This standard also identifies the effectiveness of school leaders who consistently monitor implementation of academic, social, and behavioral interventions for students with exceptionalities. Effective monitoring includes such things as supervision with feedback and encouragement of collaboration with specialists (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.17).

Standard IV, which states that "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources" focuses on the critical aspect of effective collaboration (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 18). It is under this standard that the idea of establishing relationships plays a role in securing and maintaining valuable resources to ensure the creation and stability of successful educational programs. Such relationships may include advocacy agencies, mental health agencies, and outreach programs. The idea is to form these relationships

thorough collaboration and collegial interactions in order to continually meet the diverse set of needs presented in the school community.

Standard VI, which states that “a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context” focuses on the idea of being a responsible communicator (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.20). School leaders need a working knowledge of special education laws in order to communicate effectively with all stakeholders. It is through effective communication that the school leader is able to promote awareness and gain “support for educational programs that serve the needs of all students” (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 20).

Benefits of Collaboration

In a 1996 article by Stanovich, the author looks at the benefits of collaboration and cooperative teaching on outcomes for all students including those with disabilities. The author surmises that in order for students to be successful in an inclusion setting, general education teachers must establish working relationships with all individuals who have a vested interest in the student. These individuals can and should include special education teachers, related service providers, families and administration, as these individuals can assist in the education of students with disabilities. These relationships can be formed and strengthened through collaboration (Stanovich, 1996, p. 2). According to Young and Celli (2013), the family and community partnerships are an indispensable aspect of a successful educational experience. Partnerships create effective communication systems that support the whole child, provides collaborative decision making and supports child advocacy efforts (Young & Celli, 2013, p. 24).

Collaboration encompasses joint planning, decision-making, and problem-solving and establishes a built-in support network. Individuals contribute to the collaborative relationship by sharing their expertise and resources with members of the group (Stanovich, 1996, p.2). Collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers should include lesson planning, instructional planning, classroom management, as well as IEP development, accommodation and modification planning, and development of annual goals. Stanovich (1996) believes that “collaboration can serve as a form of professional development” (p. 2). The 2015 article from Inclusive Schools Network supports this and the other literature by reiterating the importance of targeted and relevant professional development opportunities. One suggestion from the article recommends that school leaders use observational data when determining professional development topics in order to be sure that professional development is relevant and meaningful (Inclusive Schools Network, 2015).

The literature indicates that finding time to support such collegial efforts is the biggest challenge for school leaders. Ripley (1997) confirms what Stanovich (1996) points out in his article, which is the importance of planning time in the effectiveness of cooperative teaching. Ripley goes on to state that finding time for staff to collaborate is the biggest issue that faces school leaders. Time, according to the author, “involves support, resources, monitoring, and...persistence” (Ripley, 1996 p.2)

Stanovich (1996) identifies several key ways that school leaders can encourage valuable collaboration and that is through advocating for the purpose of the collaboration, be a visible participant in the collaboration, and provide resources and support so that the collaboration can continue to occur (p. 5). Resources and support overwhelmingly refers to the needed time for educators to meet and plan collaboratively. In return, educators need to keep the school leader informed of the collaboration efforts and results or concerns that arise out of such efforts. Educators should also encourage the school leader to participate or simply observe in the collaborative efforts (p.6).

Ripley (1997) cites a study conducted by Walther- Thomas (1996), in which schools where collaborative teaching was practiced showed the following improvements for students with disabilities:

- opportunities for individual student assistance increased,
- students displayed more motivation to learn,
- an increase in academic and social strengths was evident,
- positive social interactions and peer relationships presented, and
- a greater understanding of differences and the acceptance of others was demonstrated by all students (Ripley, 1997, p. 3).

Staff in this study, reported the following as positive outcomes as a result of collaborative teaching:

- demonstrated professional growth,
- a network of personal support, and
- enhanced motivation for teaching (Ripley, 1997, p. 3).

Adult Learning Theory

The term andragogy refers to the practice or art of teaching adult learners. (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, p.142). The authors have identified six principles that encompass and help shape the theory of andragogy which are:

- Learners and their need to know;
- The learners' self-concept;
- The learners' experiences;
- The learners' readiness to learn;
- The learners' orientation to learning; and
- The learner's motivation to learn (Knowles, et al pp.138-140)

In studies conducted by Tough, it is suggested that the role of the andragogical teacher, in the case of this paper the school leader, is that of a helping role. Tough identifies the following traits that an andragogical teacher should ultimately encompass:

- Supportive of individual identities
- Designs comfortable learning environments
- Respects differences
- Builds relationships
- Is a co-learner in the learning process and has a mutual inquiry for learning
- Encourages students to use their experiences as resources (Knowles et al, pp. 90-93)

With regards to adult learning, the literature on gender development acknowledges six repetitive themes, which include, “knowing oneself, accepting oneself, connecting with others, changing perspectives, empowering oneself, and seeking growth and development” (Ross-Gordon p. 35) In order to effectively address these areas, it is imperative that adult teaching programs are designed with teaching strategies that support adult development in mind, such as incorporating strategies that are transferable to the learner and applicable to a variety of settings, strategies that are cognizant of the learning theories related to adult gender development, and supportive of the attributes of adult development (Ross-Gordon p. 36). Finally, educators must integrate balance in the learning environment, being careful to incorporate collaboration as well as individual learning opportunities and opportunities for reflection (Chavez and Guido-DiBrito p. 45).

Application

One of the greatest challenges that school administrators face is the lack of qualified special education teachers. It is estimated that half of all new special education teachers “leave the field within the first three years as a result of poor administrative support, poor preparation, complex job responsibilities, and overwhelming paperwork requirements” (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.9) Much research supports the fact that the primary reason special education teachers leave their jobs is due to a lack of administrative support. (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.14)

Although research suggests that training for school administrators lacks the essential special education coursework needed to fully grasp the many facets of special education, such as laws and regulations, eligibility requirements, and disability awareness, DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) suggest improving the preparation process of school administrators to include more in depth special education coursework and innovative components such as “realistic coursework and on-the-job expectations” (DiPaola & Walther-Tomas, 2003, p. 21). Ripley (1997) supports this theory in her article stating that the art of collaboration is something that should be integrated into all educator preparation programs (Ripley, 1997, p. 3).

By creating educator preparation programs and school administration programs that focus on not only the critical areas of special education, such as legislation and disability awareness, but also scientifically-based instructional strategies for students with disabilities and collaborative practices, it would provide the knowledge needed to implement effective inclusive settings for students with disabilities. These competencies should be a requirement at all levels of education, or both general education and special education, as well as content area specialists. Some of these competencies could be extended to programs for related service providers such as speech therapist, occupational therapists, school counselors, and behavioral specialists to name a few in order to ensure consistency between providers.

Conclusion

The literature shows that in order for school leaders to be successful in implementing and sustaining school change there are several key characteristics that the leader must possess. According to the theory of transformational leadership, leaders must be knowledgeable and continue to increase that knowledge base. They must have personal experience that relates to the kind of reform that is being initiated. Thirdly, the leader must display moral judgment in the direction of the reform. In other words, the leader must believe that the reform is initiated in good faith and has good moral reasoning.

Looking at andragogy and the traits of an andragogical leader, it is clear that there are several traits that are critical in development of staff learning opportunities to support reform efforts. These traits include being supportive, building relationships, creating comfortable environments for learning, and showing a mutual inquiry for life-long learning.

Lastly, the ISLLC Standards for School Administrators portray important leadership themes that must be present at the school administration levels. These themes are conveying a shared vision and shared leadership, embracing collaborative efforts, having extensive knowledge in order to have responsible communication with stakeholders for the good of all school community members. The chart below displays the correlation between the themes of transformational leadership, andragogical leadership traits, and the themes of the ISLLC Standards for school administrators.

Fig. 1.1

Transformational Leadership Traits	The Andragogical Leader Traits	ISLLC Standards Overarching Themes
Knowledge Personal Experience Morality	Supportive Builds Relationships Mutual Inquiry for Learning	Shared Vision & Leadership Collaboration Responsible Communication Extensive Knowledge

Looking back at transformational leadership through the lens of benefiting outcomes for students with disabilities, there are several things that school leaders need to demonstrate. The first is clarity. The school leader must make it clear to all stake holders in the school community that students with disabilities deserve the right to the same educational opportunities as their typical peers. School leaders who are consistently clear about this in both practice and verbally demonstrate a set of values that sets the culture of the school environment. In order to successfully implement this vision, school leaders need to provide staff with the training and resources to develop effective cooperative teaching practices. One important resource is time. Finding and providing teachers the time to meet and collaborate allows teachers to learn from each other, provide support for one another, and ultimately leads to successful learning opportunities for students with disabilities. The school leader should be a visible body during these times of team planning for a couple of reason. First, to show support and commitment to the initiative. Second, to identify areas where additional training, in the form of professional development, might be needed. Thirdly, to model what effective collaboration looks like. Fourth, to identify and understand what additional resources might be needed to ensure success.

Finally, the idea of recognition is an essential component of ensuring successful implementation of a new school initiative. The literature indicates the many positives that come from providing staff with simple praise and recognition, such as and increase in motivation to carry on with the reform initiative. As discussed earlier, there are various kinds of recognition that can and should be implemented consistently. The idea of top-down recognition may encompass the school leader initially rewarding their staff for participating in the collaboration efforts. The recognition efforts may then move to more of lateral recognition where individual team members are praising one another.

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About the Author

Kristen Bonanno-Sotiropoulos, is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts. Professor Bonanno-Sotiropoulos is a doctoral student beginning her dissertation proposal at American International College where she is studying Special Education Leadership and Supervision. Professor Bonanno-Sotiropoulos received her Masters Degree in Moderate Disabilities from Bay Path University, as well as her undergraduate degree in Elementary Education. Prior to Springfield College, she taught special education in the upper elementary setting and then middle school setting, as well as spending several years as a special education supervisor. Professor Bonanno-Sotiropoulos can be reached at kbonanno-sotiropoulo@springfieldcollege.edu.