Co-Teaching Experiences: The Benefits and Problems That Teachers and Principals Report Over Time

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Abstract

This report describes a 3-year study of 18 elementary and 7 middle school teams involved in the development and implementation of building-level programs designed to support students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. All of the teams used co-teaching as an integral part of their service delivery models. During the investigation, 119 teachers and 24 administrators participated in 1 or more years of data collection. The emerging benefits and persistent problems that participants identified in the development of their models are described.

The Eighteenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) shows that more than 95% of all students with identified disabilities receive their education and related support services in the public schools (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 1996). For many students with disabilities, this does not mean separate classes in the same buildings as their peers. Today, this means full-time participation in general education classrooms with typical peers. During the 1993-1994 school year, more than 2 million students with disabilities received all of their special education and related services within the context of their general education classrooms (USDE, 1994). This figure reflects an increase of more than 100,000 students in full-time general education placements from the previous year (USDE, 1996).

Given the national trend to place students with disabilities in general education classrooms on a full-time basis, it is not surprising that many school systems are changing their special education delivery models to make them more “inclusive” (Creasey & Walther-Thomas, 1996). Those changes, however, are drawing mixed reviews by observers (Korinek, Laycock McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 1995). Some proponents see full-time mainstream experiences as long overdue and predict that students will benefit from these experiences academically and socially (e.g., Kunc, 1992; Snell & Janney, 1994; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 1994). Others question the soundness of the changes and the ability of the general education system to meet the many unique learning needs of these students (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995).

The emerging models of inclusive special education share several prominent features. First, many models emphasize various instructional procedures that have been proven to be effective with diverse learners. Well-known examples include peer tutoring (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1985), curriculum-based assessment (Deno, 1985), cooperative learning (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989), cognitive learning strategies (Deshler & Schumaker, 1988), adaptive education strategies (Wang, 1992), and integrated curriculum approaches (Drake, 1993). These procedures help students with disabilities and their peers become more effective and efficient learners, and they provide many students with structured opportunities to develop competencies in communication, peer interaction, social skills, and problem solving (Slavin et al., 1989).

Second, most models are based on one or more collaborative structures to facilitate ongoing problem solving and interaction among professionals (Laycock, Korinek, & Gable, 1991). Some structures focus primarily on collaboration between pairs of teachers (Idol, 1988); other structures are designed to meet the needs of larger teams (Fuchs et al., 1989). Some structures are designed primarily for use by general educators as they work with colleagues to address the learning needs of low-achieving students (Chaffant & Pysh, 1989), whereas some structures emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration (Walther-Thomas, 1997).

Most collaborative structures are based on fundamental principles of
effective communication and problem solving and can be readily adapted to meet participants specific needs; consequently, many local variations exist. Some well-known collaborative structures include cooperative teaching (Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land, 1996), collaborative consultation (Idol, 1988), peer coaching (Joyce & Showers, 1988), peer collaboration (Pugach & Johnson, 1988), and various classroom assistance models (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Fuchs et al., 1989; Giancre, Cloninger, Dennis, & Edelman, 1994).

Most structures focus on professional collaboration outside general education classrooms. As student problems arise, classroom teachers meet with designated colleagues to discuss their concerns. The sequenced format found in many of these structures facilitates communication, information sharing, and group problem solving, and fosters development of classroom intervention plans. Few collaborative structures require the participants to spend significant time in the classrooms of the teachers for whom they have developed intervention plans. As a result, most classroom teachers engaged in collaborative relationships receive many good ideas but little actual help in implementing these strategies.

Cooperative teaching, or co-teaching, is a notable exception. It is based on co-teachers’ (e.g., special educators, Chapter I specialists, reading educators, school counselors, alternative education teachers) active, ongoing classroom involvement. Bauwens and Hourcade (1995) described the co-teaching process as “a restructuring of teaching procedures in which two or more educators possessing distinct sets of skills work in a co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly teach academically and behaviorally heterogeneous groups of students in integrated educational settings” (p. 46).

Ideally, co-teachers work together an hour or two per day during instructional periods deemed to be critical for students with disabilities (e.g., reading, math, language arts, secondary content subjects). Co-teaching partners share responsibility for direct instruction, curriculum development and/or modification, guided practice, reteaching and enrichment activities, progress monitoring, communication with families, and student evaluation (Walther-Thomas, 1996). Both teachers provide all students with instruction, discipline, and support. This method of instruction helps co-teachers avoid unintentionally stigmatizing students with identified needs, and it helps eliminate the mental walls some teachers possess by reminding them to think about all class members as “our students” (Walther-Thomas et al., 1996).

Co-teaching provides classroom teachers with assistance in the development, delivery, and evaluation of effective instructional programs. It provides specialists with critical information about classroom setting demands, teacher expectations, and current student performance levels. This knowledge enables specialists to provide more appropriate recommendations regarding the instructional procedures that are most likely to benefit students with disabilities and many of their low-achieving peers. Co-teaching fosters ongoing support, collaborative problem solving, and professional development for both teachers.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the emerging benefits and persistent problems that 23 school teams encountered as they implemented inclusive special education models. The teams used co-teaching as an integral part of their service delivery models. Changes were recorded over a 3-year period through a series of classroom observations and individual interviews.

Method

Participants and Settings

Twenty-three school-based teams in eight Virginia school districts participated in this investigation. Teams consisted of approximately five members: one principal or assistant principal who was responsible for the school’s special education students, one or more general educators, and one or more special educators who co-taught with the participating general educators. Teams at 18 elementary schools and 7 middle schools participated.

School teams were selected on the basis of three criteria. First, the team members were recommended by district-level administrators. Most administrators recommended teams that were recognized for their innovative special education programs. Some administrators who were unfamiliar with building-level practices, however, asked principals to volunteer if their teams were involved in inclusive special education service delivery and if they were interested in participating. Second, all of the potential teams were observed to determine whether (a) inclusive service delivery programs were in place and (b) daily co-teaching was a key component. Most of the teacher participants had 12 to 18 months of co-teaching experience at the beginning of the study. All of the co-teachers taught with their partners on a daily basis for at least 1 hour; most reported 1 to 2 hours of daily co-teaching. Many of the special education participants were also engaged in one or two other co-teaching partnerships. These other co-teachers were not included in the study, however, because of data-collection limitations. Finally, all team members (i.e., special educator, general educator, principal or assistant principal) had to be willing to participate in the investigation.

A total of 143 participants (119 teachers and 24 administrators) participated in 1 or more years of this investigation. Because of staffing changes (e.g., voluntary transfers, family moves, co-teacher conflicts) and new classroom assignments for students (e.g., Year 1 third graders became fourth graders during Year 2), approximately one third of the teacher participants changed over the 3-year period. One administrator was reassigned during this period.
Student Information. This investigation focused on the professionals who served students with disabilities rather than on the students themselves. Consequently, minimal student data were kept. In general terms, students who were served in these inclusive classrooms represented a broad range of disabilities and functioning levels. Not surprisingly, most of the identified students had mild to moderate disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, speech-language disabilities, hard of hearing). Typically, these students had received previous special education through resource room programs. Some students, however, had more severe disabilities and had been educated in more restrictive settings (e.g., self-contained classrooms, day schools, residential programs). All federally funded disability categories were represented by the students in this study.

Data Sources

Given the limited research related to inclusive programming, a qualitative investigation of current school delivery models seemed like a logical starting point. Naturalistic inquiry methodology was used (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The three primary data sources were classroom observations, semistructured individual interviews, and school-developed documents. These data sources were also supplemented by informal conversations with participants between site visits.

Classroom Observations. Most of the co-taught classrooms were observed at least once during each school year. Generally, observation periods lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. Graduate students trained as observers/interviewers collected the classroom observation data. During classroom observations, the observers/interviewers kept running notes on the co-teachers' use of various instructional procedures (e.g., peer tutoring, cooperative learning, cognitive strategy instruction) and such recognized co-teaching procedures as modeling, demonstrating, monitoring, and presenting (see Walther-Thomas, 1997; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996).

Observers/interviewers collected data regarding students' disability codes and classroom characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, gender, class size, available support resources). Most of the classroom observations were conducted by pairs of observers/interviewers, an approach that enabled these data collectors to compare notes and discuss their observations to ensure the accuracy and completeness of their reports. Following the observation period, observers/interviewers asked co-teachers about various activities and interactions that had taken place during the instructional period, to ensure reporting accuracy.

Graduate students in the School of Education at the College of William & Mary were trained as observers/interviewers. Each year, four to six students worked as graduate assistants on this project. Initially, these students studied naturalistic inquiry methodology and reviewed past data-collection and coding efforts. These experiences helped them gain a better understanding of the process and the purposes of this investigation, and provided periodic checks to verify data-gathering, coding, and analysis efforts. Observers/interviewers were trained via approximately 10 to 15 hours of group instruction, independent readings, supervised practice, site visit debriefing sessions, and individual feedback. New observers/interviewers' field notes were reviewed and discussed. Regularly scheduled meetings were held with the observers/interviewers during data-collection, coding, and sorting periods; generally, these meetings lasted approximately 2 hours.

Semistructured Interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with participants each spring to review their school's inclusive service delivery progress during the past school year. The interview sessions lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. Teacher participants were asked about the co-teaching process, for example, about planning, student scheduling, staff development experiences, internal and external sources of support, observed changes in students' performance, performance monitoring procedures, and so forth. Administrator participants were asked about their roles as facilitators in establishing more inclusive service delivery services (e.g., reporting progress to others, scheduling students, ensuring scheduled co-planning time, providing teacher support). All participants were asked to discuss both the benefits and the problems they were encountering as they changed their service delivery methods.

Observers/interviewers took detailed notes during the interview sessions. In addition, interviews were audiotaped, with the participants' permission. Audiotapes (a) helped ensure the appropriateness of the procedures that observers/interviewers used during the data-gathering process, (b) allowed observers/interviewers to review comments several times so that long or complex answers were accurately understood, and (c) provided more opportunities for quoting participants directly.

Observers/interviewers asked open-ended questions (e.g., "How do you find time to plan instruction with your co-teacher?"); additional probes were used to help clarify comments and/or to gather other relevant information (e.g., "Will you give me an example of this?"). During the last 5 to 10 minutes of the interview period, interviewers reviewed the participants' comments with them to clarify statements and ensure the accuracy and completeness of the notes that were taken. During the second and third years of the study, observers/interviewers reviewed past notes taken with the participants and asked relevant follow-up questions (e.g., "Last year you mentioned that co-planning time was a problem for you and your partner. How has this changed?").

School Documents. Relevant school- and district-generated docu-
ments were requested either when participants mentioned the documents during interviews, or when these items were used during classroom observations (e.g., record-keeping forms, lesson planning sheets, staff development materials) or during informal contacts between visits.

**Informal Contacts.** These interactions took place in various contexts (e.g., telephone conversations, university or school district meetings or conferences, graduate courses) and most were related to teacher requests for information, questions regarding instructional programs, and/or inquiries about possible professional development opportunities. No formal data were collected during these interactions.

Contact between visits was maintained with many teams through other professional activities. As a result of their involvement in this study, participants received registration fee waivers that enabled them to attend annual 2-day symposia on inclusive education. Many of the participants presented sessions at these meetings that described aspects of their inclusive education programs. Participants were also invited to attend sessions at the symposia in which study findings were presented for their review and discussion. In addition, many informal conversations took place during these annual meetings.

Ten study participants enrolled in graduate education programs at the sponsoring college during the course of this investigation. Their direct contact with the faculty researcher increased as a result of course work, advising sessions, informal conversations, and supervised fieldwork. During the study, some participants served as cooperating teachers for student teachers. Weekly supervisory visits were made to their classrooms. Many participants, enthusiastic about their work, voluntarily sent notes, newsletters, curricular materials, newspaper stories, and other documents to provide new information about their schools’ activities. Finally, during the last year of this investigation, three schools were studied in greater depth because of observed differences in administrative leadership, teacher support, and school-wide involvement in the ongoing development and maintenance of their inclusive special education models. Additional site visits, interviews, and informal conversations were conducted in these schools (Walther-Thomas, 1995).

**Data Analysis**

All data were coded, reviewed, and analyzed by the faculty researcher and a number of graduate assistants enrolled in master’s- and doctoral-level programs. Following site visits, the observers/interviewers reviewed all field notes and audiocassettes. Details from the audiocassettes were added to the written notes. Observers/interviewers coded their notes and transferred discrete data units onto color-coded index cards. In addition to coding, each card contained additional coding information about the participant, his or her professional role, school location, site visit date, and observer/interviewer identification information.

The faculty researcher met regularly with the observers/interviewers to review data and sort cards. Categories were developed as the participants’ responses to interview questions were systematically reviewed. For example, a staff development question generated a broad range of responses, and various staff development subheadings were created on the basis of these responses (e.g., “Professional Opportunities,” “Limited Resources,” and “Other District-Level Priorities”). As the database grew over time and the sorting process continued, some subheadings were merged to form new categories. Other subheadings were subdivided into more discrete units; for example, “Professional Opportunities” comments might be separated into smaller units to reflect different types of opportunities (e.g., workshops, site visits, graduate classes, independent readings).

Most study participants reviewed and commented on the benefits and problems identified in this study. This review process was accomplished through annual site visit discussions, regional and local conference presentations, research review sessions, and earlier drafts of this manuscript. Data collection and data-analysis procedures were also discussed with faculty colleagues.

**Results**

The findings presented in this article represent a portion of the data that were collected during this investigation. This preliminary report addresses two dimensions of inclusive service delivery models: lasting benefits and persistent problems. Providing an initial report on these dimensions seems appropriate for several reasons. First, there is a high level of convergence among participants on these benefits and problems—they were reported with great consistency across participants, schools, and school districts. Second, the potential benefits and problems of inclusive service delivery models are of considerable interest to teachers and administrators. As schools consider changing their current special education service delivery models, professionals, families, and other advocates want to know what they can expect. A better understanding of frequently reported benefits and problems can provide useful information for those assessing their own situations and formulating service delivery plans for the future.

Involvement with these schools over 3 years gave participants time to be reflective about the evolution of their service delivery models. For example, they had time to separate significant issues from concerns that may have seemed important at the onset of this study but, as time progressed, were deemed to be less relevant. This research approach also facilitated participants’ examination of unique elements that appeared to be site specific (e.g., a dynamic co-teacher team work-
ing with a nonsupportive principal, outspoken parent advocates, competing school-level initiatives). The timeframe permitted participants to watch how unique elements played out, and periodically, participants and researchers could assess how these factors inhibited and/or facilitated local program development efforts.

**Benefits for Students with Disabilities**

Throughout this study, participants reported many benefits for students with disabilities, their general education classmates, and the participants themselves. These benefits related to various dimensions of student performance, professional performance, and school culture. In general, the benefit themes presented in this section grew stronger over time. These themes reflect broad-based support from both teacher and administrator participants. Four major benefits were identified for students with disabilities: positive feelings about themselves as capable learners, enhanced academic performance, improved social skills, and stronger peer relationships.

**Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem.** Most participants reported that inclusive programs helped improve identified students’ feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence. One special educator noted that these students “have greater faith in their abilities to succeed in school and they are feeling better about who they are.” A number of teachers noted that many students with disabilities “lost” their labels when the special education service delivery format changed. Teachers noted that many identified students developed better attitudes about themselves and others; they were less critical and defensive, more motivated, and more capable of looking at their own strengths and weaknesses objectively. Teachers indicated that the identified students paid more attention to their schoolwork and physical appearance, and many showed increased school attendance. They also participated in classroom and extracurricular activities more actively.

Many middle school teachers reported improvements in students’ beliefs about themselves as learners. One teacher told about a bright boy with a serious learning disability. During the sixth grade he had worried a lot about being able to finish high school. His family was college educated and he was afraid he would not measure up to the family standards. By the end of his seventh-grade year, after successful experiences as a fully mainstreamed student, he talked about his college plans. His teacher noted, “Brent’s attitude about himself has changed. He now believes that he can make it in the ‘real’ world!”

**Academic Performance.** Over the 3-year study, teachers reported very few students who had failed to succeed in appropriately supported mainstream settings. Teachers used terms such as “blossoming,” “soaring,” and “taking off” to describe how many students with disabilities performed in their mainstream classrooms. A number of teachers reported that students with disabilities learned that many of their skills were actually better than those of some of their nonidentified peers. As one special educator remarked:

It had been 4 years since Sean had been in a regular class. He was truly amazed to find that he could do OK in here. He discovered that there were many things that he could do that he didn’t think he could—and a lot of things that some of the other kids in this class couldn’t do. When he realized all of this, he was willing to work harder than he ever had in the self-contained classes. He really rose to meet our expectations—and his own.

Some participants reported that their middle school students with disabilities experienced difficulty adjusting to the higher expectations of their mainstream classes (e.g., more homework, harder tests, higher grading criteria). This was especially true during the first 9 weeks of school. Initially, some students earned lower grades in their mainstream classes than they had in their previous special education classes. Although this was a concern for some parents, it was not a serious issue for students. As one teacher noted, her students saw their mainstream grades as “real grades” as opposed to the grades they had previously earned in special education classes. Students saw a C in the mainstream as more valuable than a B in special education.

A number of participants reported that in the beginning of the year, they consciously tried to assist several nonidentified peers before checking on the progress of identified students during independent work periods. This helped to keep students with disabilities from feeling “singled out” by their teachers. Frequently, general educators provided the first round of monitoring for special education students, while the special educator helped other students. This helped establish the special educator’s credibility with the general education students. A number of teachers indicated that this approach to classroom assistance helped identified students settle into their new learning environments. By delaying the individual attention these students received for a minute or two, teachers reinforced their special education students’ independent work behaviors and enhanced their self-confidence as capable problem solvers. Some of the teachers noted that their identified students were surprised to find that many peers also had difficulty learning new concepts.

**Social Skills Performance.** Teachers reported that students with disabilities learned appropriate classroom behaviors from their peers and performed more appropriately in mainstream settings than they did in special education classrooms. Participants attributed students’ improved social skills performance to a number of factors: good role models, direct instruction, structured practice experiences, and a strong desire by many students to “fit in” in the general education classroom.
Some schools provided a combination of inclusive (i.e., co-teaching) and traditional (i.e., self-contained and/or resource) services because of miscellaneous problems in special education staffing and/or student scheduling. In several situations, special education teachers reported that their students with disabilities exhibited more inappropriate behaviors in special education classes than they did in mainstream classes. This point was well illustrated during a site visit by a member of the research team:

I arrived a few minutes before the scheduled co-teaching observation. I went to the self-contained eighth-grade SED classroom as the special education teacher had directed me to do. This class consisted of seven boys and one girl. Just as I entered the room, a chair flew past me and crashed against a back wall. One boy (Brian) had attempted to hit another boy (Ralph) with the chair. An intense verbal exchange was underway. Ms. Crane, the teacher, and the para-professional kept the boys on separate sides of the classroom. Over a period of several minutes, the teacher issued several warnings, including “Straighten up, Brian, or you won’t go to math today!”

I was surprised that this statement helped Brian and other students calm down. During the next few minutes, Brian and Ralph maintained an uneasy peace. Finally, the bell rang and four students (including Brian and Ralph) headed for pre-algebra. They were followed by Ms. Crane. The other four students went to related arts classes (i.e., music, physical education, art).

Walking into pre-algebra, Ms. Crane gave the math teacher, Mr. Barons, a quick nonverbal signal that was clearly meant to be, “Watch out for Brian!” Brian stomped to his desk, slammed his book down, and immediately put his head on the desk. Ralph, on the other hand, looked calm and talked quietly with other students. During the next few minutes other students settled into their seats. The bell rang and teachers started a lesson on integers. Within 5 minutes, Brian sat up and began paying attention. It seems he likes math and during the lesson he made several good contributions. During a small-group activity, Brian and Ralph both worked well with other partners on the assigned task. The only behavior problems that occurred during this period were initiated by students without identified disabilities.

**Peer Relationships.** Participants reported that students with disabilities adjusted well socially in inclusive classrooms. These students developed friendships, visited peers’ homes, played with classmates during free time and at recess, and attended parties held by peers. They were also selected for classroom teams and activities and special awards, and several were elected to student council positions.

Clearly, the classroom observation data and interview comments show that many co-teachers valued positive peer relationships. They provided their students with direct instruction and supervised practice to facilitate the development of essential social skills and to foster peer relationships. Co-teachers also used other devices, such as class rules, bulletin boards, co-teacher models, and structured free time options, to help students establish positive peer relationships.

**Benefits for General Education Students**

Five major benefits were identified for most students in the co-taught classrooms: improved academic performance, more time with and attention from the teacher, increased emphasis on cognitive strategies and study skills, increased emphasis on social skills, and improved classroom communities.

**Academic Performance.** Many participants expressed concerns about low-achieving students who do not qualify for special education services. Many of these students have complex academic and/or social learning problems that are rooted in chronic poverty; neglect; neighborhood violence; racial, ethnic, and/or linguistic differences; untreated illnesses; and limited nurturing and protection from adults (Wang, 1992; Williams, 1992). Unfortunately, schools have few resources for addressing the academic and social needs of these students. Many administrator and general educator participants supported inclusive special education because it offered them hope that some of the needy but unidentified students they teach will receive additional attention. Participants reported that many students who do not qualify for special education perform at much lower levels than their identified peers. Many of the classroom observations supported these reports. Observers/interviewers did not ask the co-teachers to identify students with disabilities before the observations were conducted. Many times the observers/interviewers were unable to correctly identify the special education students in these classrooms. It was not uncommon for the observers/interviewers to learn that the students who had required the most teacher support and supervision during the observation periods were not identified students.

It was not surprising to find that many participants reported that their low-achieving students did better in co-taught classrooms than they did in more traditional settings. Almost without exception, middle school general educators reported that low-achieving students were more successful in their co-taught classes than they were during class periods when general educators taught by themselves. The presence of an additional teacher in these classrooms increased the amount of time, individual attention, and supervision low-achieving students received.

**Teacher Time and Attention.** The reduced pupil–teacher ratios in co-taught classes provided all students with more teacher time and attention. This increased the opportunities teachers had for monitoring student progress; providing individual assistance; conducting student conferences; and providing enrichment, reteaching, and guided practice activities.

On the whole, these co-taught classrooms seem to be active learning
environments. Typically, while one teacher instructs, the other teacher moves around the room, checking student work and refocusing attention if class members begin to drift off task. Several teachers reported that they had asked their students' opinions about their co-taught classes. In general, students liked the extra attention and support they received but complained that it was harder to "get away with things" in these classes.

**Strategies and Study Skills Instruction.** Co-teaching partnerships provide unique opportunities for many special educators to share their knowledge and expertise about effective cognitive strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, mnemonics, reading comprehension) and study skills (e.g., notebook organization, homework completion, time management). A number of co-teachers, particularly those who worked with upper-elementary and middle school students, reported that the increased attention to the development of study skills and cognitive strategies had helped improve many students' classroom performance.

Teachers reported that students outside their co-taught classes also benefited from the emphasis on cognitive strategies and study skills development. Middle school participants reported that they learned how to teach study skills and cognitive strategies during their co-taught classes. They liked the student performance improvements they saw and went on to teach these skills to students in their other classes.

**Social Skills Development.** Many teachers reported that the social skills of students without disabilities also improved in inclusive classrooms. Participants provided a broad array of behaviors as examples of improved social skills, such as fewer fights and verbal disagreements, less name calling, better problem solving, "overt acts of kindness," better materials sharing, fewer classroom cliques, and more cooperation during group work assignments.

As noted earlier, many of the co-teachers emphasized social skills development through direct instruction, practice opportunities, and feedback. Many participants reported teaching their students various communication, coping, and problem-solving skills. In addition, these teachers posted classroom rules and other reminders that emphasized students' responsibilities to "show kindness," "respect others," and "remember feelings."

**Classroom Communities.** Many participants talked about their classrooms and schools feeling more like "an inclusive community." Teachers and administrators reported a broad array of formal and informal structures designed to foster collaboration and communication among students, teachers, administrators, staff, families, and other community members. Many of these ideas were part of their schools' restructuring efforts. Some of these initiatives were based on activities that took place at the classroom level (peer tutoring, multi-age instructional grouping, friendship circles, cooperative learning), while others represented school-wide efforts (e.g., foster grandparent programs, peer mediation groups, cross-grade tutoring and friendship programs, partnerships with local community businesses). Participants reported that inclusive thinking had provided many students with "stronger support systems," "family-like feelings," "a sense of community," and opportunities for "caring and being cared about."

**Benefits for General and Special Education Teachers**

The benefits for general and special education teachers that were reported by both teacher participants and administrator participants included increased professional satisfaction, opportunities for professional growth, personal support, and increased opportunities for collaboration.

**Professional Satisfaction.** Consistently, co-teachers reported high levels of professional satisfaction as a result of their students' success in these classrooms. They reported that their students' academic and social progress told them that they were "on the right path." Many indicated that they felt good about their participation in this effort because they saw that their programs were getting better over time; they were seeing more benefits and fewer problems and believed that their efforts were paying off.

**Professional Growth.** Many co-teachers reported that the experience of working so closely with other professional educators had been the best professional growth opportunity of their careers. Ongoing opportunities to share their unique knowledge bases and professional skills had allowed many to explore new ideas and content areas, and to expand their professional skill repertoires. It is important to note that many also believed that they had never worked harder in their professional careers than they had since implementing co-teaching and related inclusive programming.

**Personal Support.** Many of the teacher participants noted that teaching is often a lonely profession—conversation and moral support from others are often limited to brief noontime conversations. Many participants reported that it was very rewarding to have another adult in the classroom "to share the good times and the bad times." As classroom concerns arose, it was reassuring to know that someone else was just as concerned and committed as they were to finding appropriate solutions. One teacher compared teaching alone to single parenthood:

*You can do this alone, but it's a lot more fun and more rewarding if someone else is there with you... someone who cares about the students the same way you do. Someone who will appreciate it when they are absolutely wonderful—or absolutely awful!*
Increased Collaboration Among Faculty Members. Participants noted that, on the whole, an appreciation for professional collaboration was increasing in their schools. Many participants reported that their colleagues now seemed more interested in teamwork today than they had in the past. One principal noted that co-teaching and inclusive thinking are no longer viewed as the "exclusive property" of special education. Participants reported that other teachers and specialists (e.g., art, music, and technology teachers; counselors; alternative educators; school psychologists; gifted education and reading specialists) were getting involved in more direct classroom participation. A number of co-teachers reported sharing their professional skills and knowledge with other building and district colleagues; some were asked to conduct staff development sessions, workshops, and classes for colleagues. Others indicated that sharing took place more informally, through classroom modeling, peer coaching, individual consultation, and building- and/or district-level support groups.

Scheduled Planning Time. Finding scheduled time for co-teachers to plan together during school hours is a serious problem for many schools. Teacher participants reported a broad range of time spent in weekly co-planning sessions with their partners (0 to 360 minutes). Most teachers indicated that they needed at least 1 hour per week to plan five class periods with their partners. Whereas teachers reported some planning problems in Year 1, many reported more problems by Year 3. This was due, in part, to new co-teaching relationships that many special education participants had developed as interest in this approach to service delivery expanded in their schools. During Year 3, many special educators reported that they co-taught with two or three partners on a daily basis. Some general educators also established new co-teaching relationships with other school specialists (e.g., reading specialists, gifted educators, other general educators).

Planning seemed to be a serious problem for many elementary teams. Planning periods in elementary schools are often broken into small segments of time (e.g., 20 to 25 minutes), which makes in-depth planning and preparation sessions difficult. Many principals reported that they tried to provide teachers with larger blocks of planning time whenever possible. Unfortunately, it was difficult to coordinate the teaching and planning schedules of co-teachers to ensure that their planning periods coincided.

Most middle school teams reported few planning problems. Planning was facilitated by the organizational structure of many middle schools, in that schedules are designed to facilitate ongoing teamwork and collaboration (see Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Walther-Thomas, 1997). Many models provide two scheduled daily planning periods, during which students attend other classes (e.g., health, physical education, choir, band, art, foreign language). Teachers working together in grade-level teams of four to six teachers meet during one planning period (of approximately 45 to 60 minutes) to discuss various topics, coordinate their weekly schedules, plan instruction and upcoming events, address student problems, and develop plans as needed. During the second planning period (lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes), these teachers work alone in planning and/or preparing activities or, in the case of co-teachers, working together. The planning problems that middle school teams reported were related primarily to student scheduling problems, which will be addressed in the next section.

Although co-teachers' planning schedules became more complicated as their co-teaching relationships increased, teachers reported that planning with the same partner did get easier over time. Most teachers attributed this to three factors. First, over time, co-teachers developed their own planning routines that enabled them to work together more efficiently. Second, as the specialists became more familiar with the general education course content and their partners' expectations, less time was spent on background information, and planning moved at a faster pace. Finally, as working relationships between the co-teachers developed, many felt more comfortable working with each other. They were able to discuss their concerns, ideas, and interests more candidly with each other, and with less anxiety about offending or disappointing new colleagues. Typically, if co-teachers did not develop a positive working relationship during the first year, they did not continue working together the following year. The underlying reasons for a team's breakup were not always clear. Teachers were reluctant to make negative comments about colleagues and often attributed their problems working together as "differences in philosophy."

Student Scheduling. Many teams experienced problems with scheduling students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms and coordinat-
ing co-teaching schedules. A number of teams reported that assigning student placements required thoughtful consideration by planning teams (i.e., administrators, guidance counselors, classroom teachers, and specialists) to ensure that heterogeneity was maintained in classrooms and that adequate support could be provided for students and teachers. This entailed a lot of “hand scheduling” instead of use of computer programs to randomly assign students. Because this was a labor-intensive process, it often met with resistance from staff members who were traditionally responsible for scheduling decisions.

Many participants reported that the principal’s role in this effort was critical. His or her attitudes about scheduling seemed to influence the actions and attitudes of other staff members. In many schools, principals were needed to “override” computer scheduling, to ensure active teacher involvement in scheduling decision, and to modify individual student schedules as needed. The importance of the principal’s role was illustrated in two middle schools within the same school district. Both schools used the same computer program for student scheduling. In one school, the principal saw the value of scheduling students with disabilities and their special education teachers onto the same teams. Hand scheduling was supported, and participants noted few scheduling problems. Less than 5 miles away, at the second school, scheduling persisted as a problem throughout the study. The principal indicated that it was “impossible” to modify or override computer decisions, and staff members would just have to live with the outcomes. This caused continual problems for teachers and students and often necessitated teachers’ working out “deals” behind the principal’s back.

Teams indicated that clustering students with disabilities in designated classrooms was essential for reducing the number of settings that specialists needed to support. This was especially true in schools where special educators had caseload responsibilities across several grade levels. It is important to add, however, that clustering must be approached cautiously. Participants noted that too many academically and/or behaviorally needy students (i.e., identified and/or at-risk learners) in one classroom can undermine the effectiveness of inclusive education.

Typically, schools that experienced fewer student scheduling and classroom support problems followed basic criteria proposed in the literature (Brown et al., 1989; Creasey & Walther-Thomas, 1996; Giangreco et al., 1994; Thousand et al., 1994; Walther-Thomas, 1997). For one thing, these schools did not view co-teaching as an enterprise belonging exclusively to special education. In these schools, related services professionals (e.g., teachers of English as a second language [ESL], counselors, speech therapists, Chapter I teachers, alternative education teachers, occupational therapists) provided inclusive mainstream support through co-teaching, consultations, and other supportive activities. Professional and paraprofessional help was distributed fairly across all classrooms to ensure that students with special needs and teachers received support.

Furthermore, students were assigned to general education classrooms using “natural proportions” (Brown et al., 1989). For example, if approximately 25% of a school’s population had mild to moderate learning and/or behavior problems (e.g., identified disabilities, language differences, reading problems), then 5 or 6 students with special needs would be assigned to each mainstream classroom of 25.

Planning teams must consider the strengths and weaknesses of all students before making class assignments. For example, if five students with identified mild to moderate disabilities are assigned to Classroom A, then a similar number of students with other unique needs (e.g., Chapter I, ESL, alternative education) will be assigned to Classroom B. All remaining students will be equally divided between the two classrooms on the basis of academic and/or social skill levels, to ensure heterogeneity. Ideally, a special educator will work closely with the classroom teacher and students in Classroom A, and another specialist will work with the teacher and students in Classroom B. It is important to note that because students with more severe disabilities have greater needs, only one or two of these students should be assigned to any given classroom; the number of other students with other special needs should also be reduced. Heterogeneity in student skills and abilities helps ensure that appropriate instruction and support is provided to all class members (Brown et al., 1989; Snell & Janney, 1994; Thousand et al., 1994; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996).

Participants reported a number of scheduling “horror stories” about poorly planned classrooms. For example, due to lack of planning and/or faulty administrative logic, some classrooms ended up heavily weighted with students who had learning and/or behavior problems. Unfortunately, these ill-fated classrooms set teachers and students up for failure and frustration.

Poor program planning undermines future efforts because teachers, parents, and other administrators hear about the problems that are inevitable in classrooms where there are too many low-achieving students and limited professional support. A number of administrator and teacher participants noted that it does not take long before the word gets out about these bad situations and quickly gives inclusive classrooms a bad name.

In general, middle schools reported fewer scheduling problems than elementary schools did. This was due, at least in part, to the larger student populations found in the middle schools. In the elementary schools, special educators’ caseloads often spanned several grade levels (in some schools, specialists may be responsible for as many as five grade levels). In middle schools, however, many of the special educators reported one grade level assignment.
The established format of grade-level teams in middle schools also facilitated the scheduling process and student monitoring. Most middle school participants reported that students with disabilities were assigned to one team at each grade level. Similar numbers of other at-risk students were assigned to another team. Most of the grade-level teaching teams consisted of four or five teachers, who were responsible for the basic content areas, and one specialist, who provided support for targeted students and teachers through co-teaching and consultation. These teams developed the students' daily schedules within the core classes and determined when and where co-teaching would be most useful. Consideration was given to these placements to ensure that heterogeneity was maintained. In some schools, co-teachers worked together in reading and/or math classes only; other schools, however, reported that co-teaching was useful in social studies and science classes, where additional help with reading comprehension and strategy development was needed.

**Caseload Concerns.** Closely tied to scheduling problems were concerns about special educators’ caseloads. Throughout this investigation, participants consistently reported that more specialists were needed in their schools to ensure adequate classroom support for students and teachers. Many caseloads were so large that it was difficult for many special educators to meet general education teacher requests for co-teaching and/or consultation. During this study, few participating schools received additional personnel to help reduce general education or special education caseloads and/or increase the level of classroom support.

Very few official caseload reductions were made in these districts during this study. Two districts made minor reductions in their resource teacher caseloads but did not adjust self-contained teachers’ assignments. Several school teams reported that they had successfully lobbied their central office administration for an additional staff member. Several schools that were initially very satisfied with their inclusive programming efforts because fewer referrals were made by teachers, lost staff members as their caseload numbers declined. As one of the teachers at this school complained, “I’m afraid that our success is going to kill us.”

In the face of limited resources for meeting student needs, some schools reported that they had creatively redistributed teachers’ caseload assignments to reduce the number of classrooms they served. Virginia is a categorical state (e.g., students with learning disabilities are taught by teachers who hold learning disability certificates); all special educators maintain roll books that reflect their official categorical caseload assignments (e.g., learning disabilities; mental retardation) and their class code designations (e.g., self-contained, resource). Unofficially, many of the special education teachers reported that they served students in a cross-categorical manner (i.e., special education Teacher A serves younger students with LD, ED, and MR labels; Teacher B serves the older students in these categories). This approach worked well in schools where many, if not all, of the specialists were providing direct classroom support. It allowed specialists to engage in co-teaching time in fewer classrooms and reduced the number of specialists with whom classroom teachers were required to plan and coordinate activities.

**Administrative Support.** Participants reported that their schools initiated inclusive service delivery for various reasons, the most common of which were (a) special education teacher interest, (b) building-level leadership, and (c) district-level initiatives. Over time, these factors seemed to influence the extent to which school-level models flourished or foundered (Walter-Thomas, 1995).

It was not surprising to find that schools where the principals were actively involved in the development of new special education services seemed to do better over time. Clearly, abundant research has shown that administrative support is a critical factor in successful implementation efforts (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 1991, 1993; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Administrative support, at both the building and the district level, helps ensure that new initiatives receive the support, school and community validation, and resources needed to sustain these efforts (Creasey & Walther-Thomas, 1996; Fullan, 1991, 1993; Sarason, 1993).

Participants indicated that the principals performed multiple roles in establishing the credibility of new special education services. Some of these roles were described as “advocate,” “promoter,” “advisor,” “team leader,” and “official spokesperson.” One teacher described the efforts of her principal as those of “head cheerleader.” She said, “Her enthusiasm and commitment kept us all going. Over and over again she kept telling us ‘We can make this happen!’ Her strong belief in inclusion and her obvious support for us kept us going.”

Participants also noted that the interest and support they received from central administration was important. At the beginning of this study, three of the eight school districts were working on more inclusive options for all students with disabilities. These districts had produced written documents for teachers, administrators, and parents; assigned staff members to provide technical assistance to schools; and conducted some staff development sessions. A fourth district was committed to the development of more co-taught classes for students with learning disabilities: A district-level specialist was assigned to work with interested schools in developing those classes. This district was not working on programs for students with other disabilities.

The remaining four districts were interested in learning more about inclusive services and were supportive of this study; however, central office...
personnel indicated that placement decisions and service delivery options were viewed as building-level issues in their systems. Very little changed in these districts over the 3-year period. One district became more actively involved in inclusive program development, while another school district became less so. In the district that lost some of its initial momentum, principals and teachers suggested that factors such as serious cutbacks in local funds, several new initiatives, negative press about inclusion in the area, and new leaders in key central office positions may have contributed to waning district-level enthusiasm for building-level efforts.

**Staff Development.** During each interview session, participants were asked to describe staff development experiences of the past year that had been designed to improve their skills in co-teaching and/or inclusive program development. Most participants indicated that there had been very few school- or district-sponsored opportunities to increase their skills in these areas. This was due, in part, to the serious cutbacks in staff development funds that have been made during recent years, and to the limited time that has been set aside for new skill development.

On the whole, most of the teacher participants appeared to be skilled co-teachers. Many participants who volunteered for this investigation were veteran teachers who became interested in co-teaching because they were looking for new professional challenges and/or wanted to find ways to fine-tune their skills in teaching students with problems. To the co-teachers' credit, however, classroom observations showed that most of them did understand the process and used it appropriately.

Many participants expressed the need for additional staff development. In some districts, participants were viewed as the "experts" because they had been working on inclusive program development for several years, but were uncomfortable with that role. Although some participants reported that they had "figured out the right answers" over time, many expressed concern that there were still serious gaps in their knowledge and skills. As one teacher reported:

In our district we are the experts. At our school we laugh about it. People are calling us all the time for advice on what they should do—and, most of the time, we don't know. We really don't know what's the "right way" to include kids. We still have a lot of questions: How many kids with disabilities per classroom? How much time teachers should co-teach every day? How many teachers can one special ed teacher really co-teach with? We don't know. Most of the time we just do what we think sounds reasonable and if it feels right we keep at it; if it doesn't, we change it.

Many of the teacher participants indicated that additional staff development would help improve their own co-teaching skills and would be valuable for all teachers and related services professionals embarking on changes in current service delivery programs. The most commonly reported topics for skill development included scheduling students, co-planning and co-teaching skills, writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for mainstream settings, and communicating more effectively to facilitate teamwork and collaboration (e.g., conflict resolution, negotiation, problem solving).

**Discussion**

Given the multiple complex problems that schools face as they implement new programs, it was surprising to find that these schools were as successful and satisfied with their own progress as they seemed to be. During Year 3, most participants reported higher levels of co-teaching, professional collaboration, and inclusive support services for students with disabilities than existed when the study began. Some teams reported approximately the same level of inclusive services, and three schools actually reported less inclusive programming.

The schools that were less successful in their implementation efforts experienced many of the persistent problems noted earlier in this article. Some of these schools also experienced additional obstacles, including the loss of key players in the implementation process, interpersonal communication problems, poor co-teaching, incompetent teachers and administrators, competing school and/or district priorities, and school politics.

Many schools continued to provide a combination of inclusive and traditional services. Most participants indicated that traditional services were maintained because of staffing limitations (e.g., one elementary resource teacher per school) and/or scheduling problems (e.g., two reading classes at 10:00 a.m.). Occasionally, participants reported that these services were used because unique student needs could not be adequately addressed within mainstream classes.

Most of the schools where steady progress was being made (manifested in more co-teaching partnerships, more students with a broad range of disabilities being served in mainstream classes, and more reported benefits and fewer reported problems) shared several features. First, the teachers, principals, and district-level administrators tended to speak the same language about inclusive programming and appropriate learning opportunities for students with disabilities. Second, these schools and schools systems seemed to provide their teachers with more moral support, recognition, and, sometimes, resources to help them in their program development efforts.

It is important to note that the more successful schools did not necessarily achieve their current levels of success without experiencing some of the basic implementation woes. Many participants in these schools complained about the same problems as other implementers did (i.e., planning, scheduling, caseloads, support, staff development, IEPs). One difference, however, was their school team's commitment to "stay in the muck" and
find solutions, as one principal reported. This same principal, who sees changing special education services as an integral part of her school's overall restructuring plan, described professionals who successfully change school programs as "survivors who just keep going because they have the kids' best interests at heart. They are people who have huge expectations—for their students and for themselves." Similar sentiments were expressed recently by the superintendent in one of the more successful districts as he discussed his system's experience in developing inclusive programs:

We simply believe that we must find better ways to include all kids. We're fooling ourselves and others if we try to say it's going to be easy to accomplish. It's not easy, but we'll keep working at it because we know it is the right thing to do.

This study explored the implementation experiences of a limited number of school teams during the early stages of their inclusive special education program development. Although a set of common beliefs about benefits and problems emerged, it is important to remember that each of these schools contained unique elements that may have helped or hindered their implementation efforts. In many ways, these schools represent 23 different versions of inclusive programming. Additional research is needed to determine the importance of these benefits and problems to inclusive program development. Continued research will help educators, administrators, and families establish minimum criteria for inclusive classrooms, to ensure that they are appropriate learning environments for all students.

REFERENCES
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