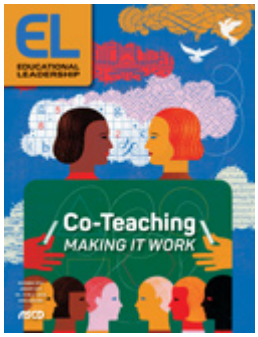
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

December 2015/January 2016 | Volume **73** | Number **4**
Co-Teaching: Making It Work Pages 62-67



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Lifting the Status of Learning Support Teachers

Ochan Kusuma-Powell and William Powell

The equal status of co-teachers within schools is key to fostering learning.

Read Abstract

Status, the perception of where one stands in relation to others in a social group, has long been shown to influence learning. The negative effects of low status are well-documented (Cohen, 1998; Jensen, 2013; Nisbett, 2010). Students with low status speak less and are listened to less than their high-status peers. They have limited access to materials and consequently learn less (Cohen, 1998). It's easy to spot students who are low in the pecking order. These are the kids often left out of learning exchanges among peers or between teachers and students.

Students with special needs often suffer from low status because of their difficulties with learning or social skills. Thus, ironically, many students who don't find school learning easy might also find themselves in a daily environment that's unsupportive of their learning.

As educators who consult with schools around the world to help them become more inclusive for students with special needs, we perceive another related problem, one with implications for co-teaching partnerships that aim to teach students with learning disabilities in an inclusive environment. At many schools, the special education programs (sometimes called learning support programs), as well as the teachers who serve students with special educational needs, have low status. No one intentionally maligns the program or its teachers, but special education programs are often marginalized by default. When a key component of inclusive education suffers from issues of low status, we have to consider what else students might be missing out on.

This question is especially important now. As demographics and our understanding of what makes special education effective have evolved, service delivery models have shifted—as have the roles of special education teachers and regular classroom teachers, who now often co-teach. It's crucial to probe the role that social and professional status, for both students and educators, plays in student learning. Consider a few instances we've observed of status issues getting in the way of a rich education for all.

Low Status and No Status

We recently observed a mainstream 3rd grade class in a large American-style school in Asia. The class was in transition between lessons. Within minutes, it was clear which students enjoyed high social status, and which had low status. High-status students were consulted by others. They provided organizational advice to their peers and spoke frequently, with confidence and authority.

We also quickly identified the student who suffered the lowest status in the class, a child who seemed out of sync with the others. In the space of four minutes, the teacher had called this student's name five times, each time issuing a corrective. ("Jane, put your books away." "Jane! Get away from the window.") It was easy to guess why the other students avoided Jane.

Throughout the lesson, Jane received similar corrections. And although she frequently raised her hand to respond to questions, she was rarely called on. In one instance when the teacher did call on Jane, she ultimately rejected Jane's response, with words to the effect of, "Well, that wasn't the answer I was looking for." When the task was to "turn to a neighbor" to process a question, no student sought to partner with Jane. The learning support teacher came to her rescue and sat with her on the floor.

Although there may have been no intention to marginalize Jane, she became increasingly isolated, socially and academically, throughout the lesson. Research suggests that without a sense of belonging and membership, learning is greatly inhibited (Lieberman, 2013; Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2010).

Another student seemed to operate outside the framework of the class. He interacted only with one other adult, someone we easily identified as the class assistant. While the other students settled on the floor, he sat with the assistant at a table away from everyone else, working on something different. Our assumption, later confirmed, was that he was new to the English language. Well-meaning educators had decided he needed to work apart from the group. ("He can't do this work yet, so we gave him something at his level that he does with the assistant.") While Jane had the lowest status, this child had none.

Status of Teachers Matters, Too

For the most part, students are aware of teacher status and will seek out high-status educators to learn from. We've seen students miss out on the benefits of learning from two well-trained teachers when one teacher was less involved in instruction—and was likely perceived as "less significant" in the classroom.

A short while ago, we were invited to observe classes at an international school. In the process, we saw several teaching partnerships made up of a classroom teacher and a special educator teacher working together in classrooms. Generally, the classroom teacher provided the instruction while the special education teacher sat by, waiting for that instruction to finish before helping the students on her caseload with their assignments. Although there were two adults in the room, in practice there was only one person teaching at a time.

Perceptions of teacher status are important. Like adults, children will choose whom they learn from, partly on the basis of social status. It's likely that students will learn more—and more effectively—from a teacher they perceive as highly respected and authoritative than from one who is less so. Bateson (1995) observed how children from upper-middle-class British families in the

1950s responded to the nannies who cared for them. The nannies often came from provinces with very different accents from those of their employers. None of the children picked up their nanny's accent, even though they often spent more time with the nanny than with their parents.

The implicit status of a school program influences whether leaders prioritize it; low status often leads special education programs to get shortchanged. A few years ago, while conducting a review of the learning support program in a large international school, we were surprised to discover that a similar review had been conducted five years earlier. Many of the conclusions and recommendations made by the first reviewing team were identical to ours. In effect, little had changed since the first report was written.

"What happened?" we asked the head of school. "Not much seems to have changed since that first report."

Shaking his head, he replied, "There were other priorities, and we simply forgot."

These observations aren't unusual. They underscore the lower status frequently accorded to students with learning issues and those who support them. One of the biggest challenges facing schools is providing high-quality service to learners with special needs.[1] Schools must develop new practices, such as true co-equal co-teaching that draws on each educator's expertise. But an invisible barrier to doing so may be the failure to ensure that programs have the social and political status necessary to safeguard opportunities for learning. As our colleague, Kevin Bartlett has noted, "Inclusion means being a part of, not *apart from*."

Raising Status

We've observed three areas of promise in elevating the status of special education support teachers and programs.

Leadership

Several years ago, we began working with Next Frontier: Inclusion (NFI), a collaborative group of schools committed to becoming increasingly inclusive of students with special educational needs. We noticed that schools with robust programs of learning support had heads of school or principals who were either directly involved in the programs or highly supportive of them. At the time, we weren't sure what it was about the involvement of a school leader in these programs for students with special needs that lent to their robustness. Now we think it might've been that the head's involvement lent status to the programs.

Our attempts to support international schools in becoming more inclusive were initially focused on developing the capacity of school leadership—but subsequently, our design team rethought this notion. Gathering 5 to 10 heads of school at each of our professional conversations, although effective for those heads of school, proved ineffective in changing the status quo. We realized it was better to encourage schools to convene in teams that included administrators, learning specialists, classroom teachers, and members of the school's board of directors.

Having all these stakeholders present allowed several things to happen: All teachers saw that the head of school or principal was truly interested in inclusion, school administrators grasped the expertise of their staff members, and being present at such an event raised the profile of the learning support programs. As one administrator said to us after an NFI-convened conversation, "I never realized there was any expertise involved in learning support. I had thought of learning support teachers as kindly individuals who wanted to be helpful, but I didn't think there was a body

of knowledge connected to the help they gave."

One of school leaders' roles is to bring together the collective expertise surrounding efforts to teach children with special learning needs, both to create genuinely responsive programs and to foster respect for special education teachers and their students. Facilitating roundtable conversations among different stakeholders will allow everyone to develop respect and support for one another's expertise. Recruiting high-caliber learning support staff is also important. Next Frontier: Inclusion has a protocol for a self-review of a school's programs that includes reflection on where the school is in terms of developing community commitment, providing services, enhancing professional expertise, and evaluating programs.

Reciprocal Relationships and Equivalent Responsibilities

In the past, when learning support services were provided through a pull-out model, the various educators' roles and responsibilities seemed clearer than they do now. The class teacher had little to do with what went on in the pull-out situation, and the special education teacher was rarely answerable to others.

The move toward Response to Intervention to serve students with special educational needs has required greater clarity on the question of what all students need to learn—and from whom. With the focus on all students accessing the same curriculum, the pull-out model has fallen into disfavor. In addition to the difficulty in sustaining high-quality instruction in one-to-one settings, the interventions provided in those settings were often disconnected from the regular class curriculum. Responsibility for special needs students' learning sometimes fell through the cracks.

Providing in-class support has come with its own set of challenges as teachers with different kinds of expertise struggle to establish their roles and responsibilities in a shared space. Because the classroom has traditionally been viewed as the mainstream teacher's domain, much of the struggle to carve out a valued professional role has fallen on special education teachers.

Too often, the classroom teacher teaches the lesson while the other teacher sits through that instruction, then circulates and helps students. Classroom teachers have perceived their role as deliverers of content; teachers with expertise in special education have viewed their role as advocating for students on their caseload. At times, the special education teacher has felt like nothing more than a glorified teaching assistant, and the classroom teacher has felt that her territory has been invaded.

One way to mitigate this situation is to be sure teachers preparing to co-teach have open and explicit conversations about how they'll work together—who'll take responsibility for what throughout the teaching cycle, including planning, instruction, assessment of student learning, and reflection on process. Co-teachers must plan the unit of study together. To lift the status of the "support" teacher, it's important that the tasks assigned to each co-teacher be of equivalent value in the eyes of both teachers and students.

Establishing co-equal status doesn't happen by accident; it requires deliberate planning. Consider this dialogue between a Grade 8 English teacher (Sabinne) and a learning support teacher (David). Note how David and Sabinne share responsibility for whole-class instruction and learners with special needs.

> **Sabinne:** At our last meeting, we agreed on two objectives for the next unit. We want to engage students in both literary analysis and constructing a well-developed paragraph.

David: I think those objectives are sound. I just wonder how some of the students who are still learning English and who may have learning issues are coping with *Julius Caesar.*

Sabinne: I've been concerned about that, too. I'm also concerned about the quality of the paragraph writing—it's inconsistent at best. Maybe we could give them a prompt from the play and then scaffold a paragraph ...

David: We could use that protocol I've been using with some struggling students. It would benefit everyone.

Sabinne: What role would you like to play as we design this lesson?

David: I'm really interested in making the play accessible for all the students, but at the same time I'd like to work with some of the high flyers. Maybe we could do some different groupings and then you and I could rotate through them.

Sabinne: That's fine. Why don't I take the lead on developing a writing prompt, and you could take the lead on developing a differentiated approach to writing paragraphs. Maybe your direct instructions to the whole class on paragraph writing should come first, because the literary analysis is really the application.

We've heard some leaders describe co-teaching as an expensive model that "allows one teacher to have a coffee break while the other is involved with students." Nothing could be further from the truth. In true co-teaching, each member of the team is actively involved in instruction, whether offering an alternative form of teaching, observing how learners respond, or noting what exactly happened—and why it was effective—when good pedagogy took place.

A Broader Identity

Co-teaching can be a robust form of teacher professional learning that enhances classroom practice. For this to happen, special education teachers must be leaders of adult learning as well as teachers of children.

People's identity influences their behavior and decision making. In the context of work in schools, special education teachers have traditionally given voice to students who haven't been able to speak for themselves and have interpreted to learners on their caseloads key understandings that their classroom teacher has communicated as part of instruction.

Although being an advocate is important, if special education teachers only develop this particular part of their identity, they'll limit their capacity to do other important work on behalf of students—to facilitate, encourage, and structure professional learning for colleagues. As leaders in a fast-changing field that remains relatively unfamiliar to many teachers, learning support teachers shouldn't miss any opportunity to support collegial learning and understanding about how to work with children with special learning needs.

Thus, these teachers need opportunities to develop strengths in group facilitation. They need to be up-to-date in their reading and understanding of current research. They must be able to speak with authority and credibility and offer new understandings in ways that will be palatable to peers and colleagues.

What True Co-Teaching Looks Like

When steps like these create greater respect for special education teachers, and when such teachers begin to advocate for themselves, low status need no longer thwart great co-teaching. We've seen this happen in schools. Recently, we observed an elementary classroom in an international school. A reading specialist we'll call Martha had asked us to observe the interaction between herself and the classroom teacher, as this was going to be the first time they would co-teach a lesson. We agreed to focus our observations on the interactions between this specialist and the classroom teacher; specifically, to script everything Martha said.

As the lesson began, Martha seated herself beside the classroom teacher. A note of surprise passed across the teacher's face. Still, she went ahead and presented the lesson with Martha sitting beside her. Much of the first part of the lesson was dominated by the classroom teacher, but at one point, Martha broke in to connect what her co-teacher was saying to a learning experience students had had in the days leading up to this lesson.

After that first instance, the presentation became more shared. The nature of the two teachers' contributions also changed. When we reviewed the script after the class, we realized that, whereas at first, Martha's contributions mainly involved offering logistical advice or requests to students, as she became more confident, her verbal contributions had more to do with the actual *teaching* of the lesson.

Martha later told us it was the first time she had sat in a chair in that class. She usually sat on the floor, working with "her students." She felt good about her growing confidence.

Enhancing Our Humanity

Raising the status of learning support programs within schools is key to developing effective programs. Sadly, when learning support efforts are ineffective, school communities lose the opportunities for reciprocal learning that such programs (and the teachers and students connected to them) offer—opportunities to enhance our humanity and value others. When everyone understands the value learning support programs can offer teachers as well as students, everyone gains.

IN MY EXPERIENCE ...

It Was More Powerful When We Stepped Out Of Our Usual Roles

A classroom community is built on people working together and forming relationships. Of course, we expect all teachers to form communities with their kids, but when there's another adult in the room who's deeply involved in what's happening, the community becomes richer.

The first couple years I was in the classroom, my school had a strong co-teaching system. I was the subject-area teacher for 8th grade science, and my co-teacher

and I met regularly—at least once every few days—to plan the lessons and explorations we were going to focus on. We looked deeply at not only the content and how we were going to explore it, but also how we each envisioned our roles.

In the beginning, it seemed to make sense for my co-teacher to support the students in his special education caseload and for me to assist him with that, but mainly to serve as the subject-area teacher. But within a few months, we saw that it was more powerful when we became more indistinguishable. When you co-teach, it's an opportunity for students to see you working alongside another educator, melding your individual strengths. It helps students see that, yes, we're all different, but we don't necessarily have to label ourselves. If the special education teacher just works with the students in special education, it gives off a very different vibe.

So we made it a requirement that both he and I shared the content-delivery role and the student-support role. Our roles were fluid. We shared responsibilities —planning, looking at student work, brainstorming ways to help students who were struggling, and so on. It was one of the richest teaching years I ever had.

I would offer co-teachers this advice: Be comfortable stepping out of your normal role. Make sure you move toward a co-teaching model that forces you into something you don't normally do. Serving in a student-support capacity while my co-teacher taught science was one of the best things I could have experienced. Whatever co-teaching model you choose, it's important that it doesn't result in the classroom teacher remaining just the classroom teacher.

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Endnote

1 This challenge especially exists in international schools, which have been seen as places of high-quality education for academically able students and have little experience teaching students with special needs.

Ochan Kusuma-Powell has developed inclusive special education programs in many countries. William Powell has served as an international school educator for 30 years. They are members of the design team for Next Frontier: Inclusion and coauthors of *How to Teach Now: Five Keys to Personalized Learning in the Global Classroom* (ASCD, 2011).

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