

## **Evaluating Co-Teaching in Performance Incentive Systems: Implications for Teacher Education** COMMENTARY

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### **Introduction**

One of the most controversial areas of focus in the reform movement relates to the appraisal of K-12 level teachers' instructional effectiveness, particularly as measured by the achievement levels of their students. While one would expect teachers to be accountable for student learning and be evaluated for their instructional efficacy, the discussion has now expanded into the domain of performance-based pay for teachers—directly based, at least in part, on student growth factors. This issue is critically relevant not only to the K-12 educational workforce, but also to teacher educators involved in preparing these teachers to be effective and successful in their roles.

### **Increasing Momentum for Performance-based Pay**

Performance-based pay and its direct association with student growth has taken on increasing importance, due in no small measure to the legislative reform agenda. The Teacher Incentive Fund and Race to the Top, funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, highlight the relationship between financial incentives and teacher efficacy (Gratz, 2011; Laine, Potemski, & Rowland, 2010; Teacher Incentive Fund, 2010; The White House, President Barack Obama, 2009). References to the connection between teacher compensation and evaluation may also be found in *A Blueprint for Reform, The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, which was published in March 2010 (United States Department of Education, 2010). Moreover, as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has yet to be reauthorized, the federal administration has provided the option of flexibility for some of its requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b), but even with this flexibility, a foundational element of implementing the requirements is the relationship between teacher effectiveness and student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a).

### **Teacher Evaluation**

At first glance, the issue of teacher evaluation and consequent financial compensation may appear to fall exclusively within the domain of the state boards of education and/or the local school districts. While this perception is essentially the case in regard to the actual assessment process and salary determination, the responsibility for ensuring that educators are adequately prepared for such an approach inherently includes the involvement of pre-service teacher preparation programs.

One would expect that the training received through Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) may have a direct and substantial impact on a teacher's instructional efficacy and subsequent pay-for-performance assessment, regardless of particular areas of content focus or educational environment. There is, however, a specific instructional situation which has been exposed as a major quandary by this emphasis on relating student growth to teacher compensation, namely the equitable evaluation of co-teachers, who may have responsibility for the same roster of students and their levels of achievement. As this shared teaching dilemma is particularly apparent in the inclusive classroom, where both general and special education teachers instruct students with and without disabilities, this instructional setting will act as the

backdrop for the discussion of the potential contributions of teacher education toward equitable performance-based evaluation of co-teachers.

### **Co-Teaching in an Inclusive Classroom**

Before specifically addressing teacher education's role in performance-based evaluation, a brief review of three major concerns related to teacher accountability in a co-teaching environment will provide additional insight and make a stronger case for the need for IHE involvement. These are not the only issues which have been raised in regard to performance-based pay, but they are examples of questions which typify the concerns specific to co-teaching settings.

As student growth is clearly a major factor for consideration, one of the most conspicuous questions is how one determines the degree of influence that each of the instructors in a co-teaching environment has had on individual pupil achievement. The division of instructional accountability for a student's achievement between the special and general educator may be unclear (Teacher Education Division Council for Exceptional Children & Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE), 2010). The second concern is related to the first, as it brings into question the methodology which would be implemented to measure the growth of students as a factor in the performance-based pay assessment of co-teachers. Although various evaluation models exist, there are relatively few which measure the achievement levels of students with disabilities in association with teacher influence (Holdheide, Browder, Warren, Buzick, & Jones, 2012). These authors note that "unfortunately, little is known—in terms of research and practice—about whether student growth can be adequately measured for students with disabilities and appropriately attributed to teachers for the purpose of teacher evaluation" (Holdheide et al., 2012, p. 1). A third consideration is directly related to the functioning of the general and special educators' partnership in a co-teaching environment. Could financial rewarding based on student achievement have a negative impact on the collaborative relationship so vital to the co-teaching environment, and instead promote competition between instructors (Burns & Gardner, 2010; Clabaugh, 2009)?

Although concerns such as the aforementioned exist, there is a strong likelihood that teachers will be in instructional situations where they are responsible for the learning of both students with and without disabilities. "Today the majority of students who have disabilities spend a great deal of time in general education classrooms, have greater access to the general education curriculum, and are expected to learn the general education curriculum alongside their peers" (Blanton & Pugach, 2007, p. 8).

The implication for pre-service teacher education seems clear: Teacher education programs must make collaborative teaching in their course content and field placements a major priority. Not only is student growth of all individuals in one's classroom the definitive goal of instruction and a fundamental indicator of instructional efficacy, but it is now a major component in determining financial compensation and potential livelihood.

### **Collaborative Teacher Preparation for Education Majors**

Although definitive answers may not yet be available for the aforementioned questions, performance-based pay associated with student growth for teachers, including those in co-teaching settings, appears to be on the fast track to fruition. Pre-service teacher education programs must work to ensure that their graduates are prepared to work collaboratively and with a comprehensive knowledge base in both content and pedagogy, so that they will be better able

to be effective and successful with students, regardless of the teacher evaluation model and procedures implemented.

The conventional approach for preparing general and special education teachers through dual and separate systems does not seem to adequately correspond to the realities of the school environment, particularly in co-teaching situations. Many times with such a segregated approach to teacher education, the focus on subject matter expertise becomes secondary for pre-service special educators, while pre-service general educators may often lack much formal exposure to information about the instruction of students with disabilities.

Other approaches to teacher preparation may include collaborative seminars and simulation activities (Arthaud, Aram, Breck, Doelling, & Bushrow, 2007), combined curricula and dual certification options (Kim, 2011), or integrated programming where general and special education are still separate programs but there is increased emphasis on faculty collaboration and interdependent coursework and field experiences (Blanton & Pugach, 2007). Although these orientations are preferable to the aforementioned discrete system, perhaps an even more appropriate paradigm for preparing individuals to be co-teachers is the merged program model in which both special and general educators participate in the same course of study and field experiences, focusing on the needs of both students with and without disabilities (Blanton & Pugach, 2007). While an in-depth discussion of the merits and disadvantages of the various approaches to preparing teachers for co-teaching in inclusive environments is beyond the scope of this discourse, this author strongly supports the merged program model as it is based directly on the collaborative model of education and closely corresponds to the authentic educational environment pre-service teachers will experience in an inclusive classroom. “Perceived levels of teacher efficacy in coping with the demands of the inclusive classroom are often determined by the ‘sufficiency’ of training for inclusion” (Hsien, 2007, p. 52).

If IHEs implement an alternative approach to a completely merged model for teacher preparation, then at minimum, content knowledge, pedagogical expertise, collaboration skills, and authentic classroom experiences should be addressed. Certainly, some of the general recommendations which follow may already be implemented in particular teacher education programs, but the current emphasis on performance-based evaluation has intensified the need for continued, wide-scale re-examination of teacher education programs.

In regard to course subject matter, there should be a marriage of the two traditional emphases in teacher preparation, content knowledge and pedagogical skills, as all teachers need to gain expertise in instructional topics and the skills required to teach that material effectively. Particularly with increasing numbers of students with disabilities gaining access to the general education curriculum (Blanton & Pugach, 2007), the conventional approach to special education teacher preparation—which focused more on such topics as interventions, assessment (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010) and individualization—needs to be expanded to include more exposure to content-based academic information (Council of Administrators of Special Education, Inc., n.d.). Moreover, general educators not only require content expertise and instructional effectiveness, but also a repertoire of instructional accommodations for addressing the needs of students with disabilities. The inclusion of additional aspects of pedagogy and methodology of specific focus in special education teacher preparation, such as instructional strategies, classroom and behavioral management, and collaboration (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011) should also become vital components in the preparation of general educators. Coursework focusing on such areas should be coupled as much as is feasible with corresponding field experiences so that the teacher candidates may gain essential practice of the concepts and skills

learned. “It seems that, when concrete strategies are taught through coursework and then implemented in carefully structured field experiences, preservice special and general education teachers improve their knowledge of, confidence in, and use of inclusive and evidence-based practices in classrooms” (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Murphy, 2012, p. 8).

### Collaboration

Collaboration, specifically, should also be a primary focus of preparation programs for special and general educators. The concept and practice of collaboration should be approached from a programmatic viewpoint, not just restricted to nominal discussions in individual courses (Blanton & Pugach, 2007). In addition to collaboration coverage throughout coursework and direct training in collaborative skills, the need for pragmatic application of concepts learned again points to the essential practice of field placements in actual school settings, including student teaching/internships. Being placed in authentic co-teaching environments will also provide the pre-service teachers with on-site models of collaboration.

A clear implication of these recommendations is the need for a strong cooperative partnership with local schools. Local school districts and IHEs have long collaborated on field placements in education, but the current emphasis on high-stakes teacher evaluation demands an even greater level of cooperation to promote teacher success. With multiple collaborative field experiences being a proposed hallmark of teacher education, the teacher candidates will receive feedback not only from university personnel, but school practitioners throughout the program, not just at specified intervals.

### Conclusion

With increasing numbers of students with disabilities being educated in general education settings (Blanton & Pugach, 2007), both special and general educators must gain expertise in areas outside the conventional jurisdiction of their educational training. Many of the teacher candidates will participate in co-teaching situations in inclusive classrooms, which presents a particular dilemma for the equitable implementation of performance-based pay models. Although many questions are still unanswered, what is clear is that both special and general educators will need to be prepared to be proficient collaborators and experts in both content knowledge and pedagogy. For practitioners to be effective instructors foremost, and secondarily to be prepared for participation in such high-stakes assessment, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs become increasingly proactive in their structure and methodology and reflective of current trends in educational practice.

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