

Instead of making co-teachers indistinguishable, good co-teaching partnerships celebrate and embrace the differences they bring to the classroom.

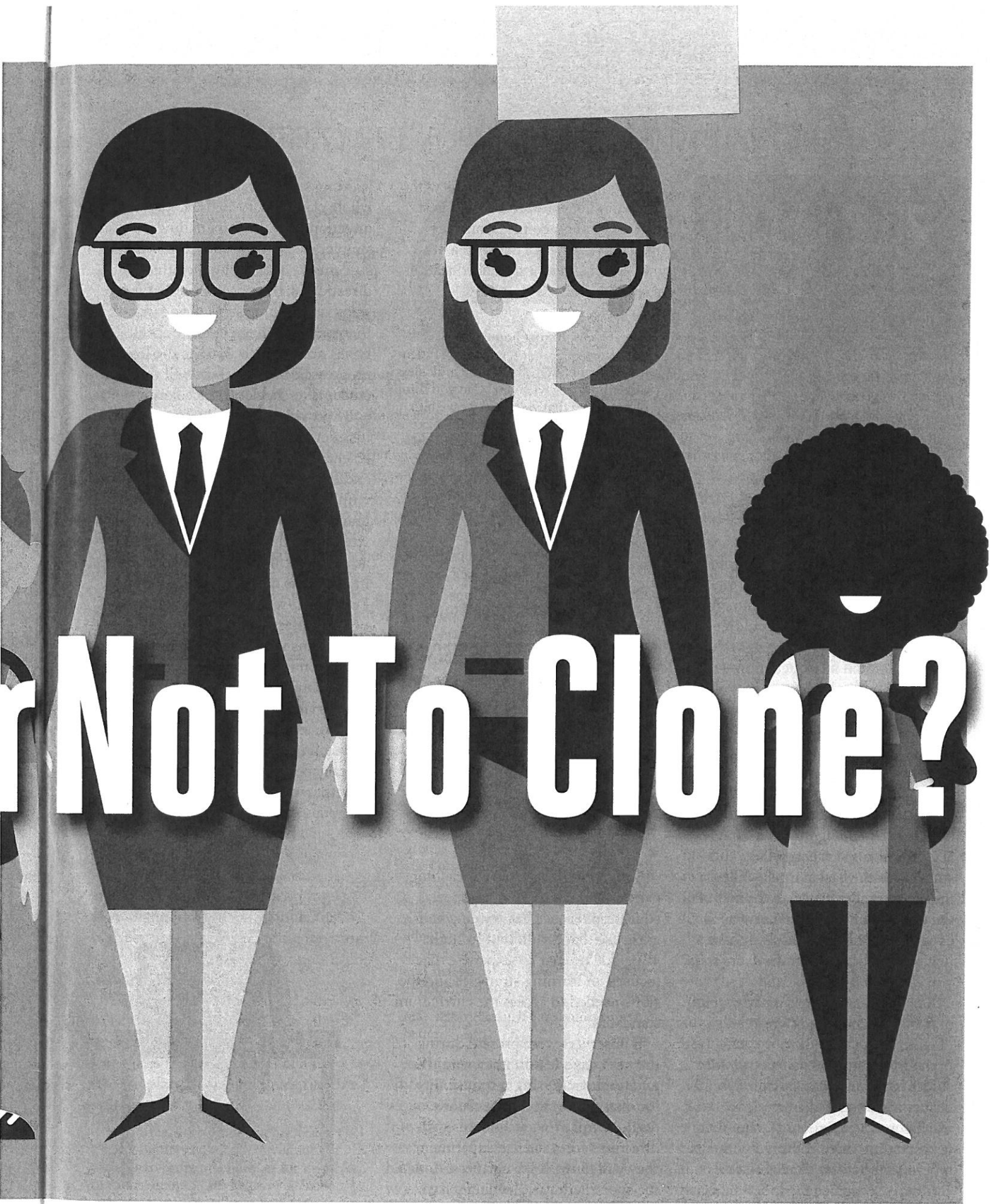
To Clone or

Anne M. Beninghof

A small group of educators have gathered with me after school to learn about co-teaching practices. In the room are school principals, instructional coaches, classroom teachers, and a variety of specialists with expertise in special education, English language acquisition, speech, and fine motor skills. All have put in a full workday, but all are leaning forward at the student desks, eager to talk about the possibility of initiating a co-teaching model.

I dim the lights in preparation for showing a video of two educators teaching together, and then I post the following prompt on the screen: *Which of the two teachers in this video clip is the special education teacher?*





Not To Clone?



Before I even hit the play button, a principal in the back of the room shoots his hand up with a comment: “In good co-teaching we shouldn’t be able to tell which is which, right?”

This common misconception—that good co-teachers become clones of each other—often results in poor outcomes for students.

What Is Co-Teaching?

Co-teaching is not one teacher leading while the other grades essays. It’s not both teachers doing the same thing at all times, a specialist pulling “her” students to the back corner while the main teacher instructs the rest of the class, or one teacher acting as the expert while the other is always the helper. It’s not teaching the same way you always have.

Rather, co-teaching is a partnering of two teachers with different areas of expertise to provide more comprehensive, effective instruction to students. Co-teaching most frequently occurs with a special education teacher and a classroom teacher, but it’s becoming more common with all types of specialists. That’s because educators recognize the inherent sense

in bringing together individuals with different talents to produce the best instructional outcomes. Consider the following e-mail between a 4th grade teacher and a special education teacher:

Hi Anne,
When I was driving home today I was reflecting on how several of our students had difficulty focusing on the multistep directions we gave today. Can you think of a strategy that we could weave into our content instruction over the next several days that teaches direction following? You could lead the instruction/practice on that skill, and we can figure out a way to weave it into homework assignments, too. Let me know what you think. —Lora

I’ve consistently found the greatest positive effect on students to be in classrooms where the specialist is doing something special.

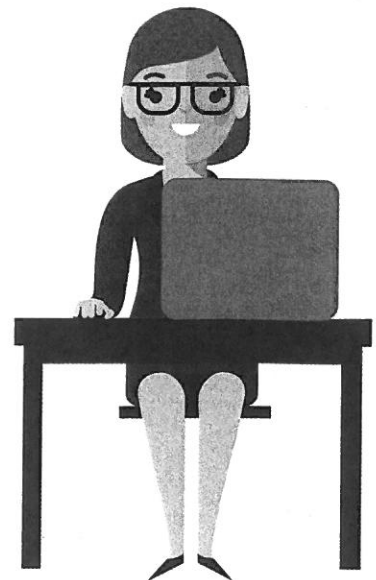
Both members of this co-teaching partnership realize that the special education teacher has training and expertise that is different from the 4th grade teacher’s—expertise that focuses on learning strategies and the skills needed to access the curriculum standards.

If observers were present during the next day’s lesson, they would see two teachers sharing responsibility for instruction. Lora, the classroom teacher, will provide students with directions for a science experiment they will do with lab partners. Anne, the special educator, will emphasize

learning strategies by showing the whole class how to analyze complex directions, breaking them down into simpler steps. Anne and Lora will ask students to justify why they think a direction might be composed of two steps versus three steps. Anne will then guide students to draw check boxes next to each step. As the lesson progresses, both teachers will remind students to check off the boxes.

By providing specially designed instruction, the special education teacher is not only meeting her ethical and legal responsibilities to students with individualized education programs (IEPs), but also supporting all students in developing an important academic skill. After having observed in hundreds of co-taught classrooms, I’ve consistently found the greatest positive effect on students to be in classrooms where the specialist is doing something special.

Specialized instruction is not just the purview of special educators. An English as a second language specialist, an occupational therapist, a literacy coach—all of these specialists have pursued in-depth training in

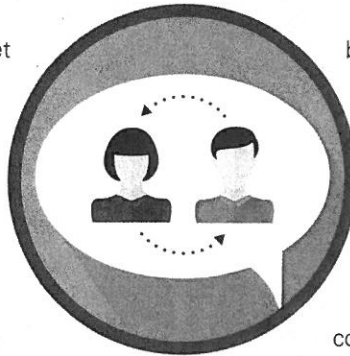


SOMETIMES YOU NEED TO HAVE A STATE OF THE UNION CONVERSATION

Team teaching can be phenomenal if you get along well and you lay out responsibilities evenly at the beginning of the year. I've taught with five different special education teachers, and I've had some amazing experiences.

One benefit is that if one teacher is having a bad day, the other teacher can step in, and you can readjust the workload. But the best part of co-teaching is being able to have a conversation about a student with another teacher who's seen the student's behavior or academic problems firsthand. I had one team teacher who'd been on child study teams previously, so she had a vast working knowledge of different learning disabilities, and how the system worked. It was great to have someone with that kind of background in special education, who knew what to do if we had students with problems we couldn't quite sort through.

It can also be helpful to have a co-teacher who's used to providing lots of scaffolding for students and who can say, "We can help this student by giving him a graphic organizer," or "We should give this student a handout with sentence stems." You don't have to think of everything yourself; someone else is reminding you. I think you become a



better individual teacher after you team teach.

I've found that the key to avoiding problems is being proactive and setting up norms or protocols at the beginning—saying, "Here's what I want this to look like. What do *you* think this should look like?" Set up a plan for what you're going to do if one of you feels that the co-teaching arrangement isn't working well: When would we need to have a little State of the Union conversation? Otherwise, if you have an issue, it festers. If you can raise the problem directly and both people can be professional about it, you can fix it, and you and the students will have a much better year. It's incumbent on the school leader to make a good match that works for the students and for the teachers, but it's incumbent on the teaching team to say, "Here's how we want this to work, and here's what we're going to do if we have a problem."

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an area that's typically outside the expertise of a classroom teacher. In addition, schools recognize that some students are not experiencing success in the typical general education classroom. If co-teaching is the solution to this problem, isn't it logical that the co-teaching partnership doesn't just double the number of teachers providing the same instruction, but instead fully uses each person's unique expertise?

Consider this excerpt from a discussion between a middle school science teacher and her literacy co-teacher as they sit together at a lab table to plan an upcoming lesson for a unit on cells:

MRS. BERRY (6th grade science teacher): On Monday, I'd like to introduce students to proper techniques for using a microscope. They'll have to share,

though, because we don't have enough microscopes for everyone to have their own. I think sharing will be a challenge for a few of them.

MRS. PEREZ (literacy specialist): I agree. Why don't we split the class into two groups? You can work with half the class on microscopes while I work with the other half on a text annotation strategy. Then we'll switch groups halfway through the lesson. That will allow you to address any problems students have with sharing the microscopes and also give us a chance to boost their annotation skills.

MRS. BERRY: Great. That sounds much better.

In this example, the literacy expert takes advantage of an opportunity to weave skill-based literacy instruction into the science lesson. The previous week, a brief exit ticket assessment had indicated that many students were struggling with summarizing

key ideas. To provide guided practice with this skill, Mrs. Perez chooses a magazine article related to their current unit on cell biology. She gives each student a copy of the article in a plastic page protector and a dry erase marker. As a group, they read the first paragraph. Mrs. Perez then challenges students to write a summary in the margin, using only three words. Students share their work and discuss why they chose their three words. After practicing with each paragraph, students wipe the pages clean for the next group.

Mrs. Perez is actively pursuing her role as an expert rather than a clone. By doing so, she's ensuring that students in this co-taught class will receive enhanced instruction, rather than just help from a second set of hands.

Identifying Talents

To maximize the talents of both teachers, it's helpful for the partners to have a frank discussion in which they identify their strengths. Some teachers may shy away from this conversation, feeling that it sounds like bragging. In addition, generational differences may significantly affect the flow of communication between partners. New teachers may hesitate to claim expertise, even though they have just graduated from a top-notch program with the most current research-based strategies. Veteran teachers may be worried that talking about their strengths sounds like one-upmanship.

If teachers are hesitant to talk about their strengths, try approaching the discussion from a different angle. When I coach co-teachers, I might reframe this discussion by emphasizing the efficacy and efficiency that comes from identifying and using each person's unique expertise. Teachers quickly realize that it makes sense to divide some of the responsibilities by expertise.

To facilitate this discussion, partners can explore the following questions together:

- What do we see as the significant differences in our expertise?
- What specific expertise have you developed recently (or over time) that you are ready to integrate into our teaching?
- What specific content, unit, or skills do you love teaching?
- What do you feel most confident about when working with students?
- What do you think you bring to our co-taught class?
- Do you have any hobbies or talents that we might not yet have considered, such as art, music, or storytelling?

Some teachers may need a bit of think time before answering these questions. A proactive coach could



With a few reflective conversations, we can make full use of both co-teachers' expertise.



provide both partners with this list in advance and ask them to reflect on the questions before coming to their next co-planning meeting.

Who Does What?

Following the initial discussion of talents and expertise, partners should outline specific roles and responsibilities. Why does this step help? Picture the last holiday meal shared by your extended family. Mom is in the kitchen, racing from the cutting board to the sink to the oven. As guests arrive, they carry steaming dishes into

the kitchen and offer to help. Everyone is reaching over one another, bumping elbows, and chatting pleasantly. Suddenly, Mom raises her voice slightly and, with just a touch of annoyance in her tone, suggests, "Why don't you all grab a drink and go relax in the living room while I finish up?"

An old proverb captures the situation perfectly: "Too many cooks can spoil the broth." As more hands participate in a task, the roles can become unclear. "I thought you were taking care of that!" becomes a common lament. A partner who assumes her colleague is responsible for something without actually talking about it is engaging in *assumicide*, as defined by the Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com): "when your assumptions lead to dire consequences that could lead to your potential demise." Too many co-teaching relationships fail simply because teachers never talk explicitly about how to share responsibilities or because they burn out by attempting to be clones of each other.

Mr. Calhoun, a veteran English language specialist, found himself spending hours each night trying to become an expert on world history for his co-taught class, while also developing differentiated materials for the English language learners. His instructional coach, noticing his exhaustion, probed a bit to find out the problem. It became clear that he was trying to fully take on both roles. The coach sat down with both teaching partners and facilitated a frank discussion about what roles and responsibilities were realistic for each.

The Collaborative Teaching Responsibilities Checklist (fig. 1) offers co-teaching partners a structure for discussing common tasks. After completing the initial checklist, partners can customize the form by adding additional tasks, such as making

FIGURE 1. Collaborative Teaching Responsibilities Checklist


Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner and reach a conclusion in each case regarding who will bear the responsibility for the tasks.

Who will be responsible for	Classroom Teacher	Specialist	Other	Shared
Identifying goals and objectives for the course?				
Designing individualized objectives for the target students?				
Planning instructional activities to achieve the goals?				
Selecting and organizing instructional materials?				
Teaching specific class content?				
Teaching study skills and learning strategies?				
Collecting data on student performance?				
Establishing and implementing grading procedures?				
Establishing and implementing a classroom management plan?				
Maintaining home contact?				
Modifying and adapting curriculum and materials as necessary?				
Designing tests and homework assignments?				
Providing individual assistance to students?				
Taking care of daily routines (for example, attendance, lunch counts)?				
Directing paraeducators, parent volunteers, and other support personnel?				
Communicating to all appropriate parties regarding the target students?				

Source: Adapted from *Co-Teaching That Works: Structures and Strategies for Maximizing Student Learning* (p. 31), by Anne M. Beninghof, 2012. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Copyright © 2012 by Anne M. Beninghof. All rights reserved. Adapted with permission.

copies, taking attendance, tracking missing assignments, posting to the class website, creating flipped lessons, setting up materials, purchasing supplies, completing and submitting required paperwork, and decorating bulletin boards.

Rather than attempting to clone co-teachers, let's celebrate and

embrace the differences they bring to a classroom. With a few reflective conversations, we can make full use of both co-teachers' expertise for the sake of our students. 

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