Part One

Collaboration and Co-Teaching

Chapter One

Why Collaborate?

Collaboration is no longer a choice; it is a necessity. Working together. . . is essential in order to address the increasingly diverse and sometimes daunting needs of students. If we work together, both when it is easy and when it is difficult, we can meet these needs.

Marilyn Friend, University of North Carolina

Collaboration involves planning, learning from one another, and taking small steps toward a more integrated co-teaching model. Collaboration can happen among a team of educators, an entire staff, or simply between two teachers. Regardless of how many are involved, our primary goal is always to increase and ensure student learning. In his book *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities,* Richard DuFour asserts that educators can help every student achieve high-level learning only if we work together collaboratively (DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour, 2005). In 2005, Valerie Chrisman investigated why only 83 of 430 identified low-performing schools in California (under No Child Left Behind) managed to sustain growth in test scores over two years. She discovered that one consistent factor contributing to success in those schools was the regular use of collaboration time that administrators gave to teachers (Chrisman, 2005).

We have found that any combination of teacher teams, whether of general educators, special educators, paraprofessionals, or a mixed pair, can plan and share expertise with great results. For example, as the special education teacher Mindy brings her special education expertise to the general education classroom. She knows what her students with learning disabilities need in terms of their learning goals, and the curriculum modifications that will help get them there. Maureen, as the general education teacher, is the curriculum expert who knows what standards all students must meet in her particular content area. She is familiar with what types of lessons have been successful in the past and which ones require modification. During every planning session, whether for one lesson or an entire unit, we learn from one another and continue to evolve as teachers. An unintentional but welcome outcome of this arrangement has been rejuvenation and truly joyful teaching.

"Collaborative conversations," writes DuFour (2005), "call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively."

What is Co-Teaching?

We define co-teaching as two credentialed teachers teaching together at the same time in the same classroom. Any pair or group of people can collaborate without co-teaching, but effective co-teaching cannot exist without collaboration.

In our case, one teacher is a special education (SE) teacher and the other a general education (GE) teacher. Co-teachers decide together what students should know, understand, and be able to do, and they plan lessons as partners. The advantages are clear:

- Downsizing an overcrowded classroom
- Managing behavior challenges
- Designing curriculum to meet a greater variety of student needs
- Sharing various classroom responsibilities, including grading, providing feedback to students, and communicating with families
- Modeling teamwork for students

Through trial-and-error, we have found what works best for our students and for us as teachers. Our instinctive evolution parallels the recommendations produced in research done by Marilyn Friend:

- Co-teaching a whole class lesson
- Each teacher working with a predetermined small group (variety of models used; see "grouping")
- Both teachers assisting students who need help during independent work time
- Both teachers holding individual conferences with students, such as during writing workshop

- Separating the class into two, each partner teaching a lesson (same or different) to one-half of the class
- One teaching a whole class lesson while the other performs a variety of duties, including but not limited to teaching one-on-one, assessing, grading, planning, and so on

The Benefits of Working Together

Anyone who has ever been part of a team knows that working together is vital to the success of all. Our experience with collaborating and co-teaching has further validated this philosophy.

We are middle school teachers in rural northern California who began collaborating in 2001 at the Redwood Writing Project Summer Institute. Mindy, a special education teacher, had spent the previous school year piloting an integrated core program at McKinleyville Middle School. Maureen had recently been informed that she would be the next GE core teacher to work with an SE teacher the following year. Our collaborative efforts began that summer at the Summer Institute and during an invaluable district-sponsored in-service on differentiation with Nancy Craig, whose job title is gifted and talented education (GATE) coordinator for the Sacramento City Schools. Over the ensuing years, a respectful partnership evolved, and we began to share our story and our strategies with other educators in Humboldt County. Following a presentation at the National Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development in New Orleans in the spring of 2003, we were struck by how many educators left wanting to know still more about our experiences. Half-joking, Mindy said, "We should write a book!" This is the product.

We do not claim that the information here is new. However, it offers a fresh perspective on best-practice teaching that benefits every member of a learning community—students; veteran, aspiring, and new teachers; paraprofessionals; and administrators. Some educators have pointed out that collaboration and co-teaching is too costly, too time-consuming, or simply not for them. But on a practical level, such collaboration and co-teaching naysayers cannot deny that engaged learners retain information, and it logically follows that they will perform better on assessments. At McKinleyville Middle School, for instance, our state scores have continuously increased since we started our collaboration model. In our opinion, the practice of teaching through collaboration and differentiation has even more valuable long-term benefits: bringing to students a curriculum that is accessible and challenging, and learning experiences that nurture a lifelong love for learning.

Developing differentiated units and lessons does require time and creative energy, which a single teacher may rarely possess in the current educational climate. It makes perfect sense, therefore, to team up and share with another. Furthermore, working together in differentiation of curriculum is more important now than ever:

- High Objective Uniform State Standards for Educators (HOUSSE) require veteran teachers to demonstrate subject matter competence in alignment with No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB Reauthorization, 2006).
- Districts are mandated by NCLB to meet benchmark standards.

○ "The No Child Left Behind Act neither excludes nor includes gifted learners (National Association for Gifted Children, 2003), encouraging many states to compromise services for the gifted in order to focus on specific mandates addressed in the legislation" (*Roeper Review,* 2006). For the most part, servicing gifted needs is left to the discretion of the local education agency, which makes it all the more crucial that we as professionals take on the responsibility of servicing them.

○ In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA Reauthorization, 2004), educators are required to offer instruction for special education students in the "least restrictive environment," to the maximum extent that is appropriate.

○ According to the Five Core Propositions of the National Board (www.nbpts.org), "Teachers are members of learning communities," and "Accomplished teachers contribute to the effectiveness of the school by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development, and staff development."

Mindy's Story: One Special Education Classroom

This is a story of one teacher's evolution—my evolution—over the past seven years. At one point in my career, I heard comments being made every day, sometimes aloud by students in my class but more frequently on the playground by their peers:

"This class sucks!"

"I don't care. I'm in the 'special' class."

"Hey, retard!"

It occurred to me by day three in my new position as a resource core teacher in a traditional pull-out program that this was a ridiculous idea: place all the identified learning-disabled students in grades six through eight in the same room and teach them.

"You're supposed to have those kids."

"You're the specialist."

"I don't know how to help them."

These comments were from my fellow teachers, who knew only that the SE teacher was supposed to teach a certain group of students. Apparently, in this system, educating these students was my responsibility and mine alone. I needed support, any support, but I feared that my experience and ability would come into question. It must be my fault, not the system's, that I hate this job, right?

Only fifteen or thirteen kids in one room at a time! Sounds great in theory. I mean, we even had a paraprofessional. But of the twenty-eight students I had, one was reading only a year below grade level and the rest were two to four years below in reading and writing. Two were labeled emotionally disturbed, and most of them had been in some facet of special education for at least two or three years. They had mastered the attitudes that the labels "stupid," "retarded," and "special" earned them. Top this off with the hormones and peer pressure of middle school, and our classroom was a minefield ready to explode every day. It took every ounce of my energy to maintain control of the students. Never mind that the seventh and eighth graders bragged endlessly that they had gotten the last teacher fired, and that my paraprofessionals kept quitting!

Worst of all was the realization that I was turning into the teacher that I swore I would never become. I hated myself for it. I had always wanted to be a teacher who reached the "hard to teach." I had always strived to be a teacher from whom kids would learn not only skills but also life lessons. I had always dreamed of inspiring them as my teachers always inspired me. Instead, I began to fill the detention room with "my" kids. I became a reactive teacher instead of a proactive one. This was not fun, it was not enjoyable, and I knew it was not beneficial for the students or me.

Colleagues and parents, however, gave glowing reviews of my job performance, since the "resource" students were not seen very much in the principal's office. But by my own internal standards of measuring my success and that of the students I taught, my performance was far from even satisfactory. I knew these kids needed to experience success. I knew that at their age they absolutely needed to be with their peers, the ones who have the greatest impact on adolescent choices. These students, restricted to a class in the "portables," deserved and needed to participate in all the exciting curriculum activities just as their peers did. I needed to find a way for them to feel good about themselves. I wanted them to want to go to school, stay in class, and succeed. Why would they need any less than what I wanted for myself? I realized that my next, real challenge would be to convince GE teachers of my beliefs even though they were so accustomed to having the students with learning disabilities somewhere else.

Though I feared he would think I was incompetent, I decided I had to share my frustrations with my principal, Dale McGrew. I took a deep breath and with poise walked into his office and said all in one rush, "These kids deserve better. These kids are not working up to their ability because the environment that we have created for them, in their mind, confirms that they are stupid. I am exhausted mentally and physically, and I am doing all I can to redirect behaviors. I know I am a good teacher and I know I can do a great job, but right now I hate the teacher I have become."

Amazingly, he asked, "What do you suggest?"

I was stunned. The words echoed in my mind. I had no clue, but I did know I was determined to give him the best answer I could. I had research to do.

Through an Internet search and good fortune, I came across California Services for Technical Assistance Training (CalSTAT). At their annual conference, I was introduced to schools that were already successfully collaborating. I now had real models we could aspire to emulate. With Dale's never-ending support and encouragement, I continued to research schools and to gather more detailed information.

The real turning point came at the California League of Middle Schools annual conference in San Francisco, which I attended with six other teachers from my school site. One night after the conferences, I was talking with Julie Giannini-Previde, an eighth grade GE teacher from my school. I explained my frustrations with our current special education program and how I was trying to develop a more effective program for the students with learning disabilities. I shared the research from CalSTAT on their collaboration models. Julie had taught in a similar program at her previous school and it was quite successful. Then she said something amazing, a comment that made all the difference and made our program what it is today: "I'd be willing to have the resource students in my class and team-teach." Half my battle was won. I had a general education teacher who wanted "my kids" and was willing to co-teach

with me. My students and I would finally get out of the portables and join the rest of the school!

We developed and piloted the Integrated Resource Model for our school after planning through the remainder of that year, attending more conferences, and researching Paradise Unified and Elk Grove schools in California, all of which used a collaborative model for special education. Because the majority of the resource students were in eighth grade, we distributed my eighth grade core load between Julie's two core classes. All of the students were now "our" students. Right from the beginning, we made it clear that the students have two teachers, plain and simple. This is the model we use throughout the school today.

In the first year, the results—both academic and behavioral—were astonishing. Detentions were down 66 percent and suspensions reduced 50 percent for the same group of kids. Three-fourths of the learning-disabled students mastered their academic goals and objectives, compared to 45 percent the previous year. In a tribute to that success, the resource students were happy! I could see smiles on their faces as they played basketball with their peers. I could see them joking around in class and having fun, yet not being afraid or intimidated to ask a classmate for help on an assignment. I evolved from despising both the teacher I had become and the students I taught to wanting to do nothing other than work with these kids. I was excited to see the smiles on their faces as they realize again and again that they can do the work and that they are indeed capable in their own eyes. This is why I became a teacher. This is why I now love my job.

Maureen's Story: One General Education Classroom

By the end of the 2001 school year, after eight years of teaching middle school language arts and social studies, I realized that, although I was practicing all the techniques I had always believed constituted "good" teaching (including questioning through the various levels of Bloom's taxonomy and grouping heterogeneously as advocated by Howard Gardner), there were times when my students still failed. I spent endless hours creating "stimulating" and "fun" projects that were high-level and challenging. I gave specific directions for students to follow, clear expectations, and extensive written feedback on work they produced. I was (shamefully) considered a "great teacher" by parents, colleagues, and students because of the high standards I set. I did not want to blame "lazy" kids, "careless" parents, or previous teachers for not adequately preparing students. I wasn't satisfied with my teaching, nor with my students' learning—or apparent lack thereof. I have always believed that every student can, and more important wants to, learn. So why were they successful sometimes and unsuccessful at other times? I was determined to find some answers. I also needed to find answers because I was slated to participate in an integrated core program the following school year.

Most educators believe, and we all very likely embrace, the philosophy that every student can learn and ideally will be a lifelong learner. By the summer of 2001, however, I realized that unless we really know what works best for each of us as unique learners, simply knowing and practicing what the educational pundits expound, what the state expects, and what the school districts proclaim as their mission is not enough. What educators need to know is how

Tyson can learn, how Ashley can learn, and how Jake can learn. These three students and I shared a common seventh grade classroom. But one of them was reading at seventh grade level, another at second grade, and the third at post-high school level. I needed to make it my mission to more actively personalize my teaching and my students' learning.

Since 1998, I had been actively involved in our local National Writing Project site, the Redwood Writing Project. In 2001, the year in which my transformation began, I participated in the annual summer institute. As luck would have it, Mindy Fattig, my school's learning disabilities specialist, was also participating in the institute. I knew that she had just completed a year of piloting the Integrated Resource Program with great success, and I was anxious to prepare for my own upcoming experience in the fall. Together with another valued colleague, Ellen Krohn, we discussed our common frustrations and collaborated daily.

Throughout the summer institute, I borrowed and bought all the books and articles I could find about differentiation by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Diane Heacox, among others. I recognized that differentiation isn't anything new. It is simply a philosophy about effective teaching and learning. It involves many of the good teaching practices I had been applying up to this point. I realized that I simply needed to become more purposeful in their application. Differentiation and truly effective teaching involve recognizing that every student comes to us at a unique starting point. Indeed, even the Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, adopted by the California State Board of Education and published by the California Department of Education in 1999, "assumes that all learners will work towards the same standards yet recognizes that not all learners will acquire skills and knowledge at the same rate." In addition, the framework "addresses the full range of learners in classrooms" and goes on to list the various types of learners educators know personally in their classrooms from day to day and year to year: "English learners, special education students, students with learning difficulties, and advanced learners." Until this time, I had too often assumed that all students would come to me prepared to be successful seventh grade students. I was now rethinking this assumption and embracing a more realistic philosophy about teaching and learning.

I was also inspired every day by collaborating with Ellen and Mindy, and I felt recharged for the new school year. By the end of the summer, Mindy, Ellen, and I had developed a differentiated reading program for a mixed-ability middle school classroom. Differentiation truly spoke to me as I recalled the reason I went into teaching in the first place: to make learning a joyful experience for children.

In the fall of 2001, I was no longer simply a GE teacher. I still taught seventh grade reading, language arts, and social studies in my core class, but that year I co-taught an integrated core class with special education teacher Holly Matthews. Her students with learning disabilities were fully mainstreamed into the general education program, and now these kids were part of our class. They were our kids.

The road to achieving what I would consider to be the ideal differentiated teaching and learning classroom is ever evolving. Yes, it is hard work and time consuming. But as an educator, I believe it is my responsibility to constantly question and challenge my methods if I am going to make learning meaningful for every child. It is crucial, and it is definitely doable if we reflect on and share our successes and failures with one another—and most important, if we collaborate. My first years of actively differentiating spelling, reading, and writing could not have been as successful as they were had it not been for my partnership

with Holly, my collaboration with colleague Anne Hartline in our peer reading program, and my work with student teachers Cassandra Korp and Elizabeth Claasen. It is the inspiration from others, especially Mindy Fattig and Julie Giannini-Previde, the team that piloted our school's Integrated Resource Program, which has led me to this point in my teaching.

In the same way that we strive to give our students daily opportunities in the classroom that allow them to search, find, question, grapple, fail, and succeed in their learning, educators too must constantly look for and discover ways to improve teaching and learning.

Our Integrated Classroom

In the spring of 2002, we became a seventh grade integrated core team when Mindy's sixth grade learning-disabled students looped up a grade level with her. We agreed that co-teaching was one of the best things that had ever happened to us in our professional careers.

Despite Mindy's best efforts when she was alone in her traditional, isolated setting, she had felt frustrated by her students' lack of success: "These were good kids—I truly believed that. They deserved the best possible education and I did not know how to provide it. I had run out of 'expert' books and ideas. The ones acting out constantly overshadowed the ones who wanted to learn. The higher-skilled kids were bored, and the lower-skilled kids were frustrated because I was forced to teach to the bulk of the kids in the middle." Now, together, we determine what we want students to learn, how they will learn it, how we will know they have learned it, and what we do when they don't.

In our integrated classroom, not only is there often more than one adult in the room with some thirty students but there is a certain energy that was, until now, lacking. Together we are excited over new ideas. We are able to share frustrations together. We can solve problems together. We celebrate successes together. Enthusiasm infuses every planning session from the outset. To this day, it hasn't waned.