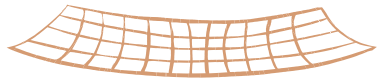


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o-teaching provides “safety net” for taking instructional risks



By Heather Hein

Having a lesson fall apart or a new instructional technique totally flop is a nightmare come true for many teachers—one made worse by the idea of another teacher in the room to witness it. But for those in a co-teaching classroom, such a witness can provide a kind of safety net, one that allows you to take risks and improve instruction in ways you couldn't, or wouldn't, have done on your own.

Janet Pratt and Linda Holmstad are veteran teachers and co-teaching partners at Ranch View Middle School in Highlands Ranch, Colo., Pratt, a 7th- and 8th-grade special education teacher, and Holmstad, a 7th-grade language arts teacher, began co-teaching language arts during the 2007–2008 school year. The class had 28 students, six of whom were special education students with a variety of learning, speech, and behavior disabilities.

Like most schools nationwide, Ranch View has used the co-teaching model increasingly over the last decade as a way to include special education students in mainstream classrooms, a requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Pratt and Holmstad had both co-taught before, but they

describe this partnership as an exceptionally enriching experience that allowed them to “strut” their strengths, gain new perspectives, try new things, and maybe as important, have fun.

Tweaking their way to success

Pratt and Holmstad acknowledge that co-teaching requires a lot of planning, consultation, and reflection. But, it also gives them the freedom to figure out what works best for them and their students. Here, they share examples of everyday innovations that they see making a difference in their classroom environment.

Building rapport with students

Pratt and Holmstad share the belief that building rapport is fundamental to the success of all students in middle school. Special education students especially benefit from that rapport when in a regular classroom, which can be overwhelming. “We play with our kids! We joke with them, laugh with them, and we teach them that school and life are things to enjoy,” said Pratt.

The teachers bring their personal experiences into the classroom; for example, playing music, using themselves as writing subjects, and having students write “behavior

plans” for them. They also make an effort to connect with the kids outside of the classroom. Pratt often eats lunch with her students, sends notes of praise home to parents, and, if students get in trouble at school, she and Holmstad are the first ones to step forward and advocate for them. Basically, the students know the teachers care about them, and that the teachers are human, too.

Changing instruction on a moment's notice

Being flexible in the classroom is a strength that both Pratt and Holmstad possess, and when motivation is low in the class or a lesson isn't working, one of them usually has a “fix.” For example, on the day before a week-long break, students were wound up and unable to focus on their assignment, which was to write about a conflict in the book, *The Outsiders*. Pratt's fix was to play some of the *Star Wars* theme song, which got them “psyched” about writing. The teachers also made the assignment more personal—students wrote about a conflict in their lives and compared it to a conflict in the book—and then Pratt dared them to write the whole time the song played, and they did.



Using technology

Technology offers unlimited ways for the two to try new things. With technology, students of varying abilities can be creative and interact in the classroom, so they use technology in some form every day. While the class was reading *The Outsiders*, Pratt and Holmstad blogged on issues raised in the book, and students were required to respond. Another assignment had students using their individual laptops to find pictures that best illustrated the characters in the novel and to use the photos in creating an online pamphlet to demonstrate their understanding of the novel.

Assessing learning

Pratt and Holmstad always offer students a choice when it comes to assessment. One student might do a skit or play to demonstrate learning while another might write a different ending to a story. With writing assignments,

students always have a chance to re-write. “At this level, kids generally consider their first attempt a trial run,” explained Pratt. “We’ve noticed a difference when we allow them to try again.” For comprehension assessment, they often ask students to devise their own ways of assessing their learning.

Keeping it light

Pratt and Holmstad embrace the “craziness” of the classroom. “We don’t take things too seriously, but we also impose boundaries and limits so the kids always know where they stand,” Pratt said. The teachers even use humor when disciplining students. If a student is making a loud tapping noise, said Pratt, “One of us will say something like, ‘I’m quite certain that wouldn’t be an animal making that noise because we left [the animals] in the barn this morning.’” Students laugh and the disruptive behavior almost always stops.

This light-heartedness helps Pratt and Holmstad deal with each other, too. When they disagree about how to teach something or how to handle an assessment or a behavior issue, “We roll with it, give it some time and space, and know we will get to a better place soon.” Disagreement is really an opportunity to gain new perspectives. “We know that we both have the kids’ best interest in mind,” said Pratt.

Overall, the duo’s success begins and ends with trust and respect for each other. Pratt said, “We are open to learning and trying different ways of doing things, doing them together, and carrying each other over the occasional hiccup in order to create a wonderful place for kids.”

Heather Hein writes and edits for McREL. She can be reached at 303.632.5520 or hhein@mcrel.org.