

Emily Walsh
Social Foundations – Hyman
Contributing to the Field

Co-Teaching as a Model for Congregational Schools

The recent surge in literature written about Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in Day Schools, has provoked me to think about the issue of teachers' personal and professional development. PLCs are organized systems for teachers to work together in an ongoing process of research, planning, teaching and reflecting in order to better serve students. In a recent article in *Jewish Educational Leadership*, Heather Clifton and Peggy Kasloff argued that the most essential elements to a PLC are collaboration and reflection. They name some of the benefits as an increase of positive teacher morale; a feeling of less isolation; and a regular habit of working together. After reading their article, I thought critically about how this sort of methodology could improve the teaching communities of congregational schools.

Congregational school teachers could really benefit from a system in which they have the opportunity to collaborate and reflect with one another. However, a shortage of resources and time could become an obstacle to the potential success of a PLC. It seems as though they need a daily commitment, something many of the employed part-time teachers simply can't make. I'd like to argue that this method could be achieved in a similar model of co-teaching. Through co-teaching, congregational schools could move in this direction, and provide their teachers with the benefits and support listed above while requesting a realistic amount of time from their teachers. Co-teaching has the potential to provide teachers with many of the same personal and professional benefits that are found in PLCs, and while doing so in a more contained relationship that demands less time and resources.

Congregational school teachers come from all sorts of backgrounds bringing with them various reasons for teaching. Many are parents who receive discounted tuition for their own children; others may be college students looking toward a career in education and/or the Jewish profession; and there may be some who do it for the joy of giving back to their community. Regardless of their reasons, they are all handed the same task: to impart Jewish education to the next generation. However, even with this shared goal, teachers often feel isolated from each other. This feeling is not only due to the variety of experiences and objectives each bring to the classroom, but also the reality that teaching can in fact be an isolating experience. I believe the

method of co-teaching has the potential to bring teachers together not just physically in the classroom but also in a meaningful way that fulfills their own emotional and psychological needs.

The age-old phrase, “two heads are better than one,” certainly applies to teaching, and this could not be more true in a setting in which teachers do not see students on a daily basis and have such limited time with them. Co-teaching brings many benefits to the table, many of which I have seen in my own co-teaching experience this year. Earlier this year my co-teacher wanted to teach a lesson based on a certain *parsha* (Torah portion). Though she had clearly thought out the themes and issues in which she wished to focus, she felt that her lesson lacked activities that would engage the students. With my help in brainstorming she was able to design a creative lesson that pulled together the content she had already constructed. It was a great moment of collaboration, and personally fulfilling for us both to be able to give and take. Our relationship strengthened tremendously after that instance.

Research in secular schools has proved that “co-teaching helps educators meet their basic psychological needs of belonging, fun, choice, power and survival” (Santamaria & Thousand, p.4). The feeling of isolation that so many teachers feel can be erased by having a partner in the classroom. In co-teaching, teachers also have someone to whom they are accountable (in addition to the students), and feel a sense of obligation to their partner. I have experienced this with my co-teacher this year in instances where our deadlines held more weight because we are depending on each other’s work. Each week, my co-teacher and I divide our responsibilities so that we are each in charge of one whole section of a lesson. However, we utilize one another to help implement that piece in a variety of ways (the article will later refer to different models of co-teaching). Knowing that my co-teacher’s performance depends on her comfort and preparedness with the material, I strive to provide for her my lesson plan well in advance. She does the same for me because we have this understanding of being accountable to one another.

Due to the various backgrounds of teachers I described earlier, each teacher brings with him or her a certain set of expertise. In an ideal relationship co-teachers will use this to their advantage. Mara Judd, a rabbinical student currently co-teaching at a large synagogue in Los Angeles, explained that she felt as though she and her co-teacher balanced each other well. “Where one has knowledge the other is lacking, and visa versa,” Judd described her co-teacher

and herself. She explained that she brings a large amount of Judaic knowledge, and her co-teacher brings a proficiency in pedagogy. In this respect, they balance each other perfectly.

The most important benefit, however, is what the students gain. Students see a model of teamwork. They have greater access to teachers – a critical aspect in a setting where time and access is so limited. For this reason, co-teaching is especially beneficial in schools with limited space that have classes of twenty or more students.

Though the co-teaching model is one with many strengths, it is not without obstacles. As with any relationship, co-teaching requires a certain amount of work. The relationship must have good communication, a high level of respect, and a good amount of trust. Without these elements, the co-teaching relationship could be disastrous. Other elements such as teaching styles and personalities could present potential challenges. Co-teaching pairs should complement each other in regard to these factors, and a pairing without chemistry may not work well. Co-teachers must also manage their planning time spent outside of school well. Most teachers in congregations have other jobs and responsibilities. A successful co-teaching relationship requires more outside work. These challenges to co-teaching are indeed a reality, however they can and should be addressed in order to create a meaningful relationship.

Throughout the rest of this article, I will lay out steps for what I believe to be a successful co-teacher model that addresses these obstacles and attempts to maximize the benefits. I have based these steps on both my own experience as a co-teacher and research in the field (which mostly consists of secular full-time schools).

Step #1: The Right Match

Before the teachers themselves do any work, the educator must create pairings with the most potential success. Congregational schools with a high rate of retention are at an advantage here. Not only can the educator pair teachers based on his/her own knowledge and perceptions, but ideally these pairings could rollover from year to year, ensuring continuity and deeper development of the relationship between the co-teachers. Congregational schools with a high rate of staff turnover must overcome this challenge by doing their homework. Educators should ask new teachers for copies of old lesson plans, and have them fill out surveys about their working habits. They should find out details about their work history and experiences. When interviewing new teachers, educators should assess their personalities, maybe even have them

take a personality test of some sort. Even though much of this is subjective, it is up to the educator to create co-teaching pairs with the most potential success.

Step #2: Meet & Greet

After pairs are selected, the school should build co-teaching meetings into their summer orientation before the school year begins. Co-teachers should be given organized time to meet and discuss goals, styles, and other relevant information. Wendy W. Murawski created a system that she named S.H.A.R.E., which stands for “Sharing Hopes, Attitudes, Responsibilities, and Expectations” (See Table 1). She suggests this as a starting point for a conversation essential to opening up communication.

Table 1

<p>Sharing Hopes, Attitudes, Responsibilities, and Expectations (S.H.A.R.E.) (adapted from Murawski’s model)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My main HOPE for co-teaching is: 2. My HOPES for creating a Jewish community within our classroom are: 3. My basic ATTITUDE/philosophy regarding teaching is: 4. My basic ATTITUDE/philosophy regarding teaching Hebrew, prayer, Torah, etc. is: 5. I see my RESPONSIBILITIES as: 6. I would like my co-teacher to have the following RESPONSIBILTIES: 7. I see our RESPONISBILITIES as Jewish role-models playing out: 8. I have the following EXPECTATIONS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regarding classroom management & discipline • Regarding class work • Regarding building Jewish knowledge • Regarding planning • Regarding giving/receiving feedback from each other • Regarding ... (etc.) 9. The biggest obstacle I EXPECT we will have to overcome is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe this is how we can overcome it: 10. I EXPECT that our students’ Jewish identity will ___ throughout the year. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe this is how we can achieve it:

During these preliminary conversations co-teachers should also set up the method in which they will communicate. How often will they meet in person? What will they want to accomplish at these meetings? If they do not plan to meet weekly, how will they communicate each week – phone calls, via email? Communication will play a vital role in establishing a successful co-teacher relationship.

Step #3: Classroom Models

Once in the classroom, co-teachers will find that there are many ways to work together. My co-teacher and I experimented with a variety of models, and found a few that worked well for us. Many times, one of us teaches while the other observes. The observer is watching for two things: (1) classroom management and discipline issues; (2) things in which she can relay in feedback to the one teaching. In their book Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals, Marilyn Friend and Lynne Cook identify a list of Six Approaches to Co-Teaching, and they call this first method: *one teach, one observe*. Friend and Cook would add that to make this method most useful, co-teachers should agree in advance what should be observed.

Often when my co-teacher or I are teaching, the other will serve as their assistant. This is the second of Friend and Cook's approaches, and can be extremely valuable in helping individual students.

Another frequent strategy of my co-teacher and I experiment with is to divide the students in half and have the same discussion with both groups, which Friend and Cook would label this third model as *parallel teaching*.

The fourth model Friend and Cook describe is *station teaching*. My co-teacher and I have found it works best for teaching Hebrew. Students are split into small groups, and given individual or small group work. My co-teacher and I agree ahead of time which groups each of us will work with, and then circulate among those groups. This allows for students to have time to work independently while having easy access to one of us.

Alternative teaching, the fifth model, is when one teacher takes a large group while the other works with a small group of students who may need more individualized attention. This model could also work well for skills based material, such as Hebrew.

Finally, *team teaching* is when both teachers instruct together in the same space and at the same time. My co-teacher and I found this most challenging in terms of timing and transitions, and Friend and Cook agree this is the most complicated of the models. These models and approaches can be practiced in a variety of ways, and educators should provide co-teachers with them as resources and tools.

Step #4: Reflection

The most valuable part of my co-teaching experience has been the ability to reflect with someone else. All too often in our world of drive-thrus and take-out, we move from one activity

to the next without stopping to reflect on our work. Ideal co-teaching relationships build in time for reflection during their in-person meetings. This reflection should include time for each partner to share his/her thoughts on his/her own teaching practices as well as offer feedback to each other. Additionally, reflection time can be used to discuss issues that have come up with students and brainstorm the best way to handle these situations. Unfortunately, these opportunities of reflection are so often missed in congregational schools, mostly due to lack of time. Additionally, teachers who teach alone rely mostly on the educator for a small piece of meeting time. By building ongoing and rigorous reflection into a regular schedule, co-teachers can be certain that they will engage in this vital conversation.

I have presented just a basic outline about what has the potential to be a rewarding teaching model for congregational schools. In some ways, one might consider this to be a “how-to” for co-teaching. However, co-teaching requires more than these basic steps. A certain sort of culture is needed in a congregational school make co-teaching a successful model. Dedication from educators and teachers is a must. Challenges may arise, and everyone involved must be willing to work through those challenges with a constant view on the shared goals and educational vision. This culture should be set from the top levels of administration and feed down to all teachers. The educator and administration must be supportive and available for co-teaching teams. They will be responsible for possible mediation, and should even be flexible enough to know when to make changes in pairings. Teachers need to be open-minded and willing to learn from each other and from the model. They will need to be extremely communicative and supportive of one another; after all, they are on the same team! Finally, ongoing teacher development meetings that address these issues can help keep co-teachers focused and motivated. The type of ongoing support listed above is such that creates and maintains a culture suited for co-teaching.

Co-teaching has the potential to greatly heighten the level of professionalization of the congregational school system. Not only does this model require teachers to take their jobs more seriously, but it requires the educator and administration to share more support and resources with the teachers. It builds a community of teachers who value collaboration and reflection, and who can work together toward the common goal of Jewish education.

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