

CO-ENROLLMENT AS A PLACEMENT OPTION FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES AND CAVEATS

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RELEVANCE

Inclusion is currently a hot topic in the field of education, with an increasing international focus on providing an inclusive education for all students (International Disability Alliance, 2009). Co-Enrollment is one model of inclusion for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) students. A critical mass of D/HH students are educated alongside their hearing peers in a general education classroom which is co-taught by a general education teacher and a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing (Kirchner, 1994; Kreimeyer, et al., 2000; Luckner, 1999). Co-enrollment is an attempt to provide the best of both worlds to D/HH students by allowing them access to the general education curriculum, while still providing direct communication to staff and peers who sign. Researchers have found that co-enrollment offers positive social, academic and communication outcomes for both D/HH and hearing students (Bowen, 2000; Jimenez-Sanchez & Antia, 1999; Kluwin, 1999; Kreimeyer et. al, 2000; Luckner, 1999; McCain and Antia, 2005); nevertheless to date only a small number of investigations of co-enrollment have been completed and co-enrollment is not yet a widely available placement option.

Researchers have found positive, direct correlations between degree of academic engagement and levels of achievement (Greenwood et al., 1984). Researchers also have found positive, direct correlations between supportive peer relationships and higher levels of academic engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Kindermann, 2007; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). It is reasonable to hypothesize that D/HH students in a co-enrollment classroom will demonstrate levels of academic engagement similar to their hearing classmates, partially as a result of the D/HH peer group that exists in this unique setting.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are educators' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of co-enrollment programming for various stakeholders: Deaf or Hard of Hearing Students, Hearing Students, and Educators?
2. What are educators' perceptions of the level of academic engagement of their Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) students in comparison to their hearing peers?
3. What advice do teachers, administrators and support personnel have for educators who plan to establish a co-enrollment program?

METHOD

The method of data collection for this qualitative study was anonymous, on-line surveys.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analyzed by coding survey results into emerging/recurrent patterns and themes, then placing this information into meaningful categories for analysis. Finally, data was analyzed by synthesizing participants' input to answer the research questions. A second investigator reviewed the analyses to ensure accurate interpretation of the data.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The participants were teachers and staff who serve students in a stable, 17-year-old co-enrollment program in the Southwestern United States. This co-enrollment program consists of 3 multi-age classrooms (grades K/1/2; 1/2/3; and 3/4/5). Each classroom is co-taught by a general education teacher and a teacher for the deaf and hard of hearing. Two, full-time interpreters are assigned to each classroom, and one instructional assistant is shared by all three classes. Additional support personnel include a school principal, therapists, and special area teachers (art, music, library, P.E.). Twenty-six survey invitations were sent out; 11 staff (42%) responded: 6 support personnel, 1 general education teacher, and 3 teachers for the deaf and hard of hearing, one of whom is Deaf herself. Most of the participants had experience working with D/HH students in other settings such as residential schools or traditional mainstream settings. The years of experience that participants had with serving D/HH students in a co-enrollment setting varied from 8 years to 17 years.

RESULTS

	Benefits	Challenges
For D/HH Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher academic expectations (6)¹ • Peer models (3) • Interaction with hearing (3) • Access to students and staff who sign (2) • Access to the general education curriculum (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None (4) • Some students, for example students with additional disabilities, need more one to one attention than what can be provided in this setting. (3) • Larger class size (Note, we presume the respondent meant that the class size is larger in comparison to a special, self-contained class for D/HH as the class size would not be larger than other general education classrooms.) (1) • Classroom can be noisy. (1) • Frustration communicating. (1) • Isolation as they get older due to limited deaf peers. (1)
For Hearing Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign language acquisition (6) • Diversity appreciation (4) • Empathy and acceptance of special needs (3) • Visual learning (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None (5) • Communication: frustration communicating with hearing impaired and acquiring ASL skills. (2) • Wait time can be too much. (2) • Students with disabilities such as autism or Asperger's syndrome sometimes have difficulties in the co-enrollment program. (1) • The range of abilities in the class may result in teachers spending more time focusing on the neediest students. (1)
For Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team-teaching and planning (2) • Expansion of skills through learning from each other (2) • A unified classroom with all students working together (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None (4) • Heavy workload and time needed for collaborating with a co-teacher (3) • Initially teaching in a co-enrollment program is a stretch for general education teachers who have to acquire a wider skill-set. (1) • Frustration with learning a new language. (1)

Almost one-half of the participants stated that they felt there were no challenges or obstacles to co-enrollment programming for either D/HH students or hearing students, nor for educators. Here is what one support staff had to say about this: "As the Visiting Artist in co-enrollment classes, I literally have never had a challenge that was any different than the other classes I teach in. Never!"



¹ Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of participants who made each statement.

Caveats and Advice to Educators for Establishing a Co-Enrollment Program

- “Go for it! It is the best program ever for all children!”
- Buy-in: You need support and commitment from the whole school, from site administration and central administration.
- Staffing: the program needs to be well staffed to handle the range of ability levels. Teachers have to be willing to put in the time to collaborate and work together. Teachers need to accept that as a team, all of the students in the class are the responsibility of both teachers.
- “All staff have to be willing to learn some basic signs and how to accommodate for HI students.”
- Financing: Budgeted funds for support of the program. Although the number of staff may seem heavy for the amount of students, it is necessary for success of this model and it is still cheaper than mainstreaming all students with full time interpreters and an itinerant HI teacher in their home school.
- “I wouldn’t recommend a co-enrolled classroom without two teachers [gen ed + deaf ed] plus interpreters.” [Insertion mine.]
- Shadow an existing successful program and elicit their help in establishing your own program.

ENDORSEMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS

“I have taught in a variety of settings, and the co-enrollment setting solves some social isolation issues along with challenging each deaf student to achieve the same academic standards as their hearing peers.” *-D/HH Teacher*

“When the program is well run and managed, it benefits both hearing and D/HH students. They become a single class and community.” *-Support personnel.*

DISCUSSION

All participants had a very positive attitude about co-enrollment and stated many benefits for all stakeholders. Nearly half did not perceive any challenges or obstacles unique to this setting. The number one cited benefit of co-enrollment programming for D/HH students was that of higher academic expectations. Sign language acquisition was the number one cited benefit for hearing students. The most specific, and in our opinion most significant, cited benefit for educators was that of skill expansion through working together. For instance the teachers for the deaf and hard of hearing deepen their knowledge of the general education curriculum and learn large-group classroom management techniques from general educators, while the general educators expand their skills in implementing differentiated instruction and use of varied strategies.

When asked specifically about the level of academic engagement (attention, participation, and time on task) of D/HH students compared to their hearing classmates, educators perceived the D/HH students as being at least as engaged as their hearing peers. (One respondent viewed the D/HH students as being more engaged due to the need to attend to an interpreter.) When asked about what placement option they would choose for their own D/HH child on the continuum of placement options (from self-contained/special school, to individual mainstreaming in a general education classroom), participants were almost unanimous in their decision that co-enrollment would be their first choice of placement, with the stipulation that co-enrollment may not be the best option for a D/HH student with additional disabilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The preponderance of educator's perceptions of positive benefits of co-enrollment programming, combined with the positive communication, social, and academic outcomes of co-enrollment documented by other researchers (Bowen, 2000; Jimenez-Sanchez & Antia, 1999; Kluwin, 1999; Kreimeyer et. al, 2000; Luckner, 1999; McCain and Antia, 2005) indicate that this is a model worth expanding and offering on a wider basis; however we feel that these cited benefits of co-enrollment have implications for provision of services to D/HH students in other placement settings as well. For example, the consensus that co-enrollment programming results in higher academic expectations may indicate that educators providing services in a self-contained setting should strive to increase their academic expectations for students.

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the fact that this study was conducted in a single setting, it would be valuable for future researchers to repeat the study in a variety of co-enrollment settings to either confirm these results and/or to acquire additional insights. Additionally we recommend that future researchers include interviews as a methodology in order to have the ability to follow up and clarify survey responses that may need explanation. For example, one participant responded that the co-enrollment programming was difficult for students with autism or Asperger's syndrome, but no explanation was given to explain what it is about this program that would create challenges or obstacles for this type of student. In another example one respondent indicated that wait time can be too much for hearing students. It is not clear whether this statement refers to wait time for receiving individual attention, or possibly wait time in the context of class discussions or lectures due to possibly providing a slower deliver pace of information or pausing for processing time. As wait time and the need for greater individual attention were mentioned as challenges for both D/HH and hearing students, we consider this to be worthy of further exploration, particularly in light of the fact that co-enrollment would seem to offer a high degree of small group and individual attention due to having the support of two full-time teachers.



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SURVEY QUESTIONS

Participant Position: (Check One)

- General Education Teacher
- Teacher for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Support Personnel: administrator, therapist, instructional assistant, or interpreter.

1. How long have you worked in a co-enrollment setting?

2. Have you worked in any co-enrollment settings other than at this school?

3. Have you worked with D/HH children in settings other than co-enrollment (for example at a center based school or in a traditional, individually mainstreamed setting)?

4. What do you view as the main advantages of a co-enrollment program for the following participants:

- Deaf or Hard of Hearing Students -
- Hearing Students -
- Teachers or Therapists -
- Other participants not previously mentioned -

5. What do you view as the main disadvantage or challenge of a co-enrollment program for the following participants:

- Deaf or Hard of Hearing Students -
- Hearing Students -
- Teachers or Therapists -
- Other participants not previously mentioned -

6. If you were the parent of a deaf or hard of hearing student, which placement option would you most likely consider for your child? (Check One):

- At a center based school. (Residential or Day School for the Deaf in a small, self-contained class for deaf and hard of hearing students.)
- Mainstreamed in general education classes at my child's home school. (In this setting my child would likely be the only deaf or hard of hearing student in the class, possibly the only one at the school, possibly with consult services or itinerant support from a teacher for the deaf and hard of hearing.)
- In a Co-Enrollment Program. (Attending general education classes but with a group or other deaf or hard of hearing students in a class co-taught by a general education teacher and a teacher for the deaf and hard of hearing.)
- It would depend on the specific needs of my child.

7. Consider the academic engagement of your students. Academic engagement refers to students' degree of class attention, participation and time on task. In comparing the degree of academic engagement of your deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) students to your typical hearing students, do you feel that your D/HH students are: (*Check one*)

- Not as engaged as your hearing students
- About as equally engaged as your hearing students
- Less engaged than your hearing students.

8. What advice would you give to the administration, faculty or staff of a school considering implementing a co-enrollment program?