Coteaching in Physical Education: A Strategy for Inclusive Practice

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Qualitative research methods were used to explore the factors that informed general and adapted physical education teachers’ coteaching practices within an inclusive high school physical education program. Two physical education teachers and one adapted physical education teacher were observed over a 16-week period. Interviews, field notes, and documents were collected and a constant comparative approach was used in the analysis that adopted a social model framework. Primary themes included community as the cornerstone for student learning, core values of trust and respect, and creating a natural support structure. Coteaching practices existed because of the shared values of teaching, learning, and the belief that all students should be included. Recommendations include shifting orientations within professional preparation programs to account for the social model of disability.

If the Shoe Fits . . .

Anthony, a third year high school student in physical education (PE) with Down syndrome should know the routine with his clothes. Gym shorts, a t-shirt, and sneakers. One particular day he appeared in PE with his dress shoes—big, black and shiny. As he walked into the gymnasium, Ms. I, who worked as the adapted physical education (APE) teacher, immediately noticed his attire. Looking down at his shoes she asked, “Anthony, you know you have to wear your sneakers. These are your dress shoes. What are we going to do?” Her instructions to him were always short and simple.

Anthony’s response portrayed a look of surprise, as if this were all new information. He paused, and after a brief interchange with Ms. I, walked over to his favorite physical education teacher. “Mr. R” turned, smiled at him and said, “Love your shoes, Anthony.” This was all he needed to hear to know he had made the right decision. Returning to Ms. I he said triumphantly, “Mr. R likes my shoes, you don’t like my shoes, you really, really mean.”

Ms. I was not surprised by this interchange. Having worked with Mr. R for three years, she had learned to accept the role each teacher played in the
classroom. While Ms. I made sure that Anthony followed class protocol and standard behavior, Mr. R favored a lighthearted approach with his easy going banter, jokes, and general acceptance of Anthony’s mannerisms.

Ms. I deliberated then slowly walked over to Mr. R and asked, “You told Anthony you liked his shoes. What are you doing? You’re killing me.” Mr. R smiled and apologized for his indiscretion, telling her he didn’t mean to “throw her under the bus.” Next time, he thought, it will be best to keep my comments about Anthony’s shoes to myself.

Membership in a physical education class is dependent on many factors, including social engagement, learning outcomes, and necessary supports (Sherrill, 2004). In the above scenario, Anthony is a member of his high school physical education class. He is well liked and accepted by his peers. He participates in general physical education (GPE) three times per week in content areas such as adventure programming, fitness, and lifetime sports. Although supported by Ms. I, he is equally responsible to his GPE teachers who have a vested interest in his learning and success as a member of the adventure class. These different orientations to Anthony illustrate the need for collaborative practices that requires a joint strategy. Lacking that, potential conflicts could emerge that might impact a student’s experiences in the class.

For many students with disabilities, GPE is not a positive experience. Students face difficulties interacting with peers, marginalization, and noninteraction from teachers (Blinde & McCallister, 1998; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Hutzler, Fliess, Chacham, & Auweele, 2002). They can be socially isolated despite their inclusion in PE (Place & Hodge, 2001). While students with disabilities may need support to access the curriculum, it can be a barrier for developing relationships with peers (Goodwin, 2001). An ongoing struggle within inclusive education is the need to broaden our understanding of meaningful practices and to consider natural supports that promote positive learning experiences between students with and without disabilities.

Collaborative coteaching is one strategy for accessing the general education curriculum and bridging the gap between general and special education content knowledge (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Coteaching comprises actions between special and general educators that address pertinent issues in the classroom. Teachers must share a consensus of common goals and ownership of student learning (Hargreaves, 1994; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006). Teacher styles and personalities need to be compatible if both groups of teachers are to gain from the shared experiences (Austin, 2001; Weiss & Lloyd, 2003). Factors including administrative support, planning time, content knowledge, and levels of compatibility contribute to the success of coteaching (Dieker, 2001; Scruggs et al., 2007; Weiss & Lloyd, 2003). A common benefit for students with disabilities is the extra attention and the exposure to positive peer modeling (Norris, 1997).

While there are no specific studies that examine coteaching in physical education classrooms for students with disabilities, Vogler, Koranda, and Romance (2000) investigated the impact of an APE teacher as a “people resource model” (p. 161) in a kindergarten class. Their findings indicated high levels of engagement, motor participation, and social acceptance for students with and without disabilities.
Block and Zeman (1996) examined motor skill acquisition and attitudinal changes between inclusive and noninclusive physical education classes for students without disabilities. Improvements in attitudes toward inclusion were found in the class supported by an APE teacher. Within an interdisciplinary, cotaught unit between a GPE and second grade general educator, effective teaching was due to teachers’ common teaching philosophy, mutual respect, and trust (Chen, Purcell, Cone, & Cone, 2007).

Today, more than thirty years after the Education of All Children Handicapped Act (PL 94–142) was enacted, teachers continue to struggle with knowledge of disability and coherent strategies that address student need (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Grenier, 2007; Slee, 2001). Although a large body of qualitative research exists that examines collaboration and coteaching in general education settings, there is no qualitative research within general physical education that examines these practices in a naturalistic setting (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). Given that, specific purposes of the study were to

1. Explore the coteaching roles and responsibilities of two physical education teachers and an adapted physical education teacher in maintaining an inclusive program.
2. Examine the mutually supportive behaviors among the teachers that contributed to an inclusive PE program.
3. Explore the impact of coteaching on student relationships.

**Literature Review**

Coteaching enables teachers to share their knowledge and expertise within mixed ability classrooms. It requires flexible teaching and a responsibility to all students (Arguelles, Hughes, & Schumm, 2000). Students with and without disabilities make academic gains and benefit from friendships in cotaught classrooms (Mahoney, 1997; Welsh, 2000). Many states, including California, require students with disabilities be instructed by an endorsed APE teacher. Within GPE settings, a skilled APE teacher can provide input on teaching strategies and curricular modifications that enhance students’ participation. In turn, GPE teachers can make possible the social conditions that encourage friendships through structured, positive, physical activity experiences.

The principal coteaching variations include **supportive** teaching, in which one primary teacher takes the lead and an assistant provides support; **parallel** teaching, where teachers split the class and deliver content to groups; and **team** teaching where both teachers share coteaching responsibilities for planning and instruction (Nevin, Thousand, & Villa, 2009). In most cases, the “one teach, one assist” pattern is the dominant model for delivering instruction (Scruggs et al., 2007, p. 411).

The establishment of a school-wide culture of sharing and serving all students is needed for genuine collaboration (Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay, 2002); however, this can be difficult to attain and has largely been unmet in the schools (Scruggs et al., 2007). Magiera and Zigmond (2005) found significantly less time spent by the general education teacher with students with disabilities when a special education teacher was present in the classroom. Special education teachers rarely
take a leading role nor is there any substantive teaching by both coteaching partners (Rice & Zigmond, 2000).

The same pattern tends to exist in GPE settings. Typically APE teachers are employed as support, consultant, or itinerant teachers, serving students’ needs in a variety of settings (Lytle & Hutchinson, 2004). Factors such as the school, resources, and the teacher personalities influence their roles. Akuffo and Hodge (2008) found little accountability for learning or assessment with itinerant teachers. Teachers felt comfortable with what had been described as the “busy, happy, good syndrome” within the classes (Placek, 1983). While they expressed the need to “provide services for multiply handicapped classes and provide APE services based on need” (p. 253), none of the teachers cited collaborative practices as necessary for effective teaching, nor was there any indication that inclusion was a desired outcome. Samalot-Rivera and Porretta (2009) found that many APE teachers expressed a lack of preparedness in addressing behaviors important for students’ inclusion in PE. These differing beliefs on teaching practices are due in large part “to a lack of professional training in consultation models and methodologies” (Lytle & Collier, 2002, p. 267) that associate disability with the requisite behaviors and skills necessary for inclusion in GPE.

GPE teachers are similarly challenged within classes that include students with significant disabilities. They tend to plan globally and do not see a distinction in the way instruction should be differentiated to address individual needs (Mastropieri et al., 2005; Norris, 1997). While evidence suggests that teachers are concerned with implementing effective strategies, they do not always have the requisite knowledge for inclusion to be successful (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). LaMaster, Gall, Kinchin, and Siedentop (1998) identified a lack of support, inability to accommodate, and an absence of general knowledge of disability as factors that contributed to teachers’ inability to include students with disabilities in GPE settings. These sentiments seem to prevail throughout the literature (Hodge, Ammah, Casebolt, LaMaster, & O’Sullivan, 2004; Lienert, Sherrill, & Myers, 2001).

There has been a substantial amount of research done in the area of physical education teacher attitudes and perceived competence. This work has provided insight into the attributes and dispositions of teachers as well as the types of student characteristics that present challenges to teachers. Teachers who felt more capable teaching students with disabilities were also more likely to have favorable attitudes (Block & Rizzo, 1995; Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996; Rizzo & Wright, 1988; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1991). Perceived confidence was associated with meaningful experiences, working directly with individuals with disabilities in a variety of contexts and course work directly related to instruction (Oh et al., 2010). This qualitative research serves a complimentary function to the attitudinal research by delving into the way APE and GPE operationalize teaching when presented with the opportunity to work together.

**The Social Model of Disability**

Utilizing the social model to understand coteaching practices involves viewing discrimination, teacher attitudes, and practices as social barriers (Barnes & Mercer, 2004; Oliver, 2004). This redefines students’ disability as a social rather than individual barrier and offers a framework for identifying the way practitioners
and researchers can respond to the “problem” of disability. Disability as defined by persons with disabilities is the disadvantage caused by social organizations, which tend to limit their experience thus excluding them from mainstream practices (UPIAS, 1976).

The dominant model used in the study of adapted physical activity has been grounded in a medical tradition concurring with the notion that students with disabilities are in some ways inferior to their “normal” counterparts (Grenier, 2007). Disability is associated with a “marked identity” that discredits the individual and impacts teacher behaviors and attitudes (Rapley, 2004). Fitzgerald (2005) suggests that normative conceptions of ability that link competency with traditional forms of athleticism limit students’ participation in PE. The most recent research on inclusion suggests that teachers continue to struggle with how best to include students with disabilities in PE (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; LaMaster et al., 1998).

The social model facilitates independence for people with disabilities by removing barriers that typically disable the individual through inaccessible environments, questionable notions of intelligence, and negative public attitudes (Oliver, 1990). Disabling barriers are those contextual elements that restrict education and life opportunities (Davis, 2006). The social model removes the medical analysis of disability by allowing the student to be valued in relationship to their functional ability rather than their medical profile (M. Mansell, personal communication, January 21, 2010). Students can sometimes be placed in a situation where the environment itself prohibits individual performance, hence disabling them. “Inclusion, particularly the social aspects of inclusion, is not always a positive experience for students with disabilities. . . . GPE teachers may create situations that lead to limited interactions between students with and without disabilities” (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007, p. 116). Analyzing inclusion from this perspective shifts the responsibility for participation from the individual to the social constraints, including, but not limited to, teacher practices, support personnel, and peer relations.

**Method**

**Setting and Participants**

Instrumental, case-study research methods were used to explore the factors that inform both the APE and GPE teachers’ coteaching practices (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Stake, 1994). Site selection based on the full time presence of an adapted physical education teacher who served in a coteaching supportive role was critical for the analytic process (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993). Located in New England, Freemont High School (pseudonym) enrolled 1,700 students with a diverse range of backgrounds and socioeconomic levels. With the exception of one, all students with disabilities were educated in the general physical education setting. Two physical education teachers and one adapted physical education teacher were observed in their classes and interviewed over a 16-week period. Judy (pseudonym) and Nick (pseudonym) were veteran PE teachers, each with a master’s degree and combined for 63 years of teaching experience at both the middle and high school levels. The teachers cotaught the adventure classes and were supported by Kate (pseudonym), a young certified adapted physical education teacher (C.A.P.E.) with a master’s degree in APE. Kate had spent that last three years working in the school with Judy.
and Nick. She was a welcome addition to the physical education staff, in part due to her youthfulness and sense of humor.

Two adventure classes were observed for a total of 20 class sessions. While each class contained several students with disabilities, including developmental, cognitive, and social delays, the primary focus was students with Down syndrome (DS). The first class included a student named Stevie and the second, Anthony. At nineteen years old, Stevie was considered a senior because of his age. He was Caucasian, had significant cognitive delays, and had weak fine motor and gross motor skills. He was also classified as obese according to the body mass index scale (BMI). Although his vocabulary was very limited, he was able to identify basic symbols and pictures used to assess his learning. He tired easily, but he was willing to try most anything in the Adventure class due to the strong peer support by his classmates. Stevie had three older, athletic brothers and attended sporting events on a regular basis. As a result, he was comfortable in the gymnasium environment and attracted the friendship of his peers.

The other student, Anthony, was a first generation child of Asian descent who was seventeen years old. Academically, he had the stronger cognitive skills of the two and was able to follow simple, one-step instruction. In addition to DS, Anthony displayed autistic tendencies and perseverated on behaviors in the class such as turn-taking and needing to use equipment in a very specific way. Although overweight, he had a better level of fitness than Stevie and was able to accomplish more physical feats on the wall. Anthony identified strongly with Nick, which included a daily ritual of peanut butter on crackers before the start of class. Always concerned with his appearance, he dressed colorfully, including wearing his black dress shoes for class. Physical education was the only integrated class both students attended each day. Anthony and Stevie were part of the adventure class because they enjoyed the activities, achieved success with their social and physical skill development, and were easily supported by the GPE and APE teachers. The university research board granted approval for this study, and treatment of all participants was in accordance with the standards of the American Psychological Association. Only those individuals for whom informed consent was secured participated in the study.

Curriculum Unit

Although the overall high school GPE curriculum offered quarterly classes in adventure programming and lifetime and team activities, the adventure class was the sole curricular area analyzed as a bounded system because it exemplified collaborative practices (Hargreaves, 1994; Merriam, 1998). Its features combined experiential learning through individual and group work in ways that contributed to an inclusive environment (Merrill & Gimpel, 1998). Within the curriculum at Freemont High, students assumed increased responsibility as they progressed from simple to more complex tasks that incorporated trust elements with belaying and climbing skills (Glass & Benshoff, 2002). Students initially began with a series of team-building activities and structured games designed to enhance problem solving through cooperative work that generally lasts two weeks. During weeks three and four, students progressed to trust activities and group initiatives that culminated in a platform trust fall. By the fifth week, students began learning techniques for knot tying, securing harnesses, and belay safety. Once students demonstrated mastery
in these skills, they had the option of independently using the high ropes course elements that included 32 challenge elements.

Adventure I was a requisite class for all freshman students and included Anthony. Adventure II was a “choice” class in which students designated a preference for adventure programming over fitness or team sport classes. Stevie was enrolled in this class. Both Adventure I & II were limited to 40 students containing a balanced mix of males and females.

As the full time APE teacher for the school system, Kate was able to accommodate her schedule so that the three teachers were present on the floor at the same time. Judy and Nick were primarily responsible for developing the content, while Kate provided assistance in the areas of individualized instruction and assessment. She did not limit her contact to students with disabilities but provided support to all class members, typically supervising station work and ground belay elements.

Data Collection

Interviews, field notes, and documents were collected for analysis. The primary researcher conducted semistructured interviews with both the APE and GPE teachers at the beginning and end of the 16-week research period. Semistructured interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were similar in nature for each of the teachers. Questions included demographic information, details on the relationships between the three teachers, instructional practices, student learning, and modifications to the curriculum. Informal interviews were conducted before and after class to verify the success of learning goals and to clarify any experiences that required further explanation. These generally lasted between five to 10 minutes. Fifteen students were informally interviewed regarding classroom experiences and the relationship they shared with Anthony or Stevie.

Field notes were recorded in various locations by the researcher whose primary role was that of observer (Merriam, 1998). Unstructured observations were used to understand the cultural behavior of the gymnasium with no predetermined notions on the specificity of these behaviors (Mulhall, 2003). Observations focused on teacher and student behavior, social interactions, skill development, and instructional arrangements within the gymnasium. Although class sessions in the gymnasium served as the primary site, other locations such as the women’s physical education office and postclass observations of students and teachers as they emerged from the class provided further data. Schatzman and Strauss’s (1973) system for organizing notes was used. Documents collected for review included the lesson plans, assessments, and Nick’s portfolio for professional development on the adventure curriculum. Follow-up e-mails between the teachers and the researcher also served as a vehicle to elaborate on field notes and interview data.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the primary investigator. A constant comparative, inductive approach was used based on grounded theory (GT) methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative data analysis methods adopted from GT used coding strategies that expanded possibilities for developing “mid-level theories” (Seaman, 2008, p. 14). By using “flexible, heuristic strategies,”
the researcher was able to filter the data through a social model lens to generate a contextually rich analysis (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510).

Field notes were reviewed to insure that essential information was identified. Descriptions were completed through the cleaning process, and individual quotations were supported with contextual information. Documents, interviews, and field notes were clustered in an open coding system of categories that informed the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Themes were identified within samples and compared across subsamples in which operational codes were created. Transcripts were read and reread for relevancy and disconfirming evidence. Themes were refined as the research proceeded through multiple analyses and the integration of property details into related categories (Charmaz, 2003). In the final phase, data were revisited to support theme development closely related to daily realities of the classroom.

Merriam (1998) offers categories that strengthen the problematic issue of internal validity as it relates to qualitative research. Triangulation provided a deepened understanding of the topic through the use of multiple data sources and the logical consistency between artifacts. In-depth interviews with teachers were compared with their observed practices in the gymnasium, while the documents, including lesson plans and assessments, were evaluated for consistency with practices. Member checks were conducted regularly with Kate and Nick post analysis to insure credibility (Janesick, 1994). Transcripts of interviews were shared with teachers as were the development of themes and subthemes within the theoretical framework. Peer debriefs were conducted with department colleagues in physical education pedagogy and adventure education to insure authenticity to the established practices. Clearly defined categories emerged from the data that contributed to the primary themes.

Results

The following three key areas were identified as recurring themes throughout the text: community as the cornerstone for coteaching, core values of trust and respect, and creating support structures from the bottom-up. Although interrelated, they are presented in linear fashion for ease of reading. The first two themes address the philosophical beliefs on the nature of learning and how it was crafted between the teachers. The third theme described teacher practices that underscored their philosophical beliefs. Quotes by participants substantiate the findings and expand on the meaning of coteaching and collaboration.

Community as the Cornerstone for Coteaching

At the visible, technical level, teachers consistently articulated values confirming the need for a physical education class culture that supported the unique development of each child. Teachers described coteaching as a committed partnership that required role flexibility, compromise, and a shared sense of responsibility in developing a tolerant, accepting classroom. Nick had learned the art of working with others early in his career through his training in Project Adventure (PA). As the primary architect of the climbing wall, his investment revealed a commitment to the development of a program of instruction that brought students together. Daily
discussions to determine personal, student, and curricular goals were an essential part of the planning process. Community meant all students belonged:

First and foremost, was the belief that the students should come first and that they should respect each other. The class has responded as well to them [students with disabilities] as they have to “normal” students. Totally accepting. I wouldn’t have it any other way. (Nick)

Initially, however, he had less than high expectations for his students with disabilities. Although they were included in PE, the social aspect took precedence over skill learning.

In terms of meeting the general class expectations, I always thought that they [students with DS] needed a boost; they needed a program that was a little different from the rest of the class and I wouldn’t be as adamant of them not meeting the goals because of their disabilities. (Nick)

Early on, Kate’s practices reflected her belief that GPE was the best environment for her students. She was able to provide a level of expertise that reconfigured Judy and Nick’s perspectives of their students with disabilities. While Nick explained an activity, she modeled teaching behaviors that were hands-on. She diagramed skills for the visual learners on a poster board. She suggested the teachers use close-ended questions to Anthony and Stevie that required simple yes or no answers (e.g., “Do you want to try the climbing wall?”). She reinforced the use of imagery when presenting a task such as nitro crossing to make abstract directions more concrete.

Kate was different from the previous APE specialist assigned to the high school that had elected to work one on one with students outside the GPE setting. According to Judy, “Janet [APE teacher] worked a little bit at the high school a few years ago. But she mostly worked with students on their own . . . off to the side and upstairs. She really wasn’t involved in our classes.” This contrast between the teachers highlights the different orientations and the conditional terms of placement (DePauw & Doll-Tepper, 2000). As the APE teacher, Kate elected to provide instruction in GPE through differentiation, modifying assessments, and peer supports. “I love having her. . . . The effort she [Kate] puts forth allowed us to better understand the nature and needs of the students in her charge” (Nick).

Core Values of Trust and Respect

Research on collaboration compares the partnership between teachers as a marriage. For example, Luckner (1999) reported, “In many ways, a co-teaching partnership can be considered a professional marriage . . . it entails dealing with a series of complex issues and emotions” (p. 30). Similarly, finding one’s place in a coteaching setting requires the ability to coalesce student needs with classroom variables that include teacher personalities, content knowledge, and instructional practices. Both teachers credited Kate for the ease with which she was able to integrate into a high school physical education setting; however, this was not without its challenges. “It’s hard to step into someone else’s classroom as a new teacher. And you are in these people’s classroom. You don’t know how they act with the students” (Kate).
She progressed slowly. For the first several months, Kate was reluctant to intervene in any class activities. She watched, waiting to see what her students would do and how the physical education teachers responded.

It took a while. I can remember when I first got this job, I didn’t do anything. I just observed my students. I would watch for two weeks. I wouldn’t help them out. I wouldn’t do any of their assistance. I would observe if Nick and Judy needed assistance or if they noticed what was going on with the students. I wanted to do as little as possible. (Kate)

Kate’s assimilation into the program meant balancing student need with understanding teacher affinities. Whereas Nick was genuinely interested in getting to know his students and “egging” them on, Judy was more invested in the day-to-day logistics of attendance, grading, and assessments. Recognizing teachers’ dispositions helped her establish her identity in the class.

Nick is really good with the live belay. If they [Judy and Nick] had to observe and work with everyone at both the high and low belay it would take time away from the kids who are going to do the high belays. We figured out that I would help with ground belay and I would do all the kids there so Judy could help Nick out. . . . I could do all the ground belays and Nick and Judy could get the kids certified for the live belay. (Kate)

While Judy and Nick assessed skills, Kate helped both students with and without disabilities tie their harnesses. She supported students who needed more practice on the ground belay. In turn, Nick provided the feedback and encouragement for Stevie and Anthony to take risks on belay. On one occasion, Anthony managed to climb to the landing platform on one of the high elements but panicked when he realized just how high he had climbed. Nick’s response was to put on a harness, climb the wall, and physically assist Anthony in taking the steps needed to return to the ground.

The support each teacher provided to all students minimized barriers that could potentially lead to discriminatory practices that under normal circumstances could prohibit students from accessing the curriculum and fully participating in PE. Kate established her place in the classroom by walking the line between supports for her students and assisting all the students in the classes. The teaching assignments of the three teachers were not the determining factor for teaching responsibilities. Rather, teaching was directed toward the successful completion of climbing competencies in GPE for all students.

Creating a Natural Support Structure

Results indicated the interactional practices of the adapted physical education teacher that engaged both disabled and nondisabled students through different participation modes that provided structural supports to promote learning. Kate’s collaborations with Judy and Nick included strategies designed to promote positive peer relations. For example, the teachers grouped students with and without disabilities when presenting challenges. As one of Stevie’s classmates stated, ‘I’m
trying to teach him how to be a good student and stuff like that in this class. Most other classes he goofs off” (Taylor, student).

Oftentimes, Stevie worked with a group of four athletic boys who took him under their wing. He called them “his boys” and would actively seek them out when he entered the gymnasium. Initiation and problem-solving tasks were performed together. When belaying, Stevie acted as a back-up belayer for the climber. The students assumed responsibility for Stevie’s learning.

We can fool around a little bit but we teach him when it is time to be serious. And when he isn’t serious and he should be we tell him “Stevie, you gotta be good.” He learns how to pay attention when people are talking. When we are doing a group activity and he falls down, he understands that he has to get up or we all fail too. He learns that he has to be serious and be good. (Jeremy, student)

Kate expected her students follow the same rule as other class members. They were to arrive and leave with their classmates, dressing in the appropriate attire. Tests, quizzes, and practical experiences were assessed with a series of rubrics Kate and Judy had developed. She administered more formal assessments to the two boys by reading and simplifying the questions. She sent home progress reports and required them to complete all assignments. “If you left the classroom, would that child be able to continue on with support? Would the kids know how to support that student? Would the other teacher know how to support that student? I don’t leave my class until I know someone in that classroom can support the student” (Kate). She was able to differentiate her instruction so that the students’ learning needs were assimilated into the classroom activities.

**Enlisting Student and Teachers.** Supporting positive behaviors meant disregarding inappropriate ones that might deter her students from establishing friendships with their peers.

I’m not going to engage them [Stevie & Anthony] in conversation which is not important to them. . . . I think that they need to understand what sarcasm is, and what humor is because that’s what they are going to get from these kids. They need to understand teenage language. They need to understand personal space and boundaries. The social aspect is huge. And if they fit in socially they are going to get the physical benefits of it. (Kate)

Kate’s actions targeted natural supports. “If they [students without disabilities] understand how important they are to me, then the other student must also be important to me” (Kate). She credited the nondisabled students for their positive behaviors toward the students with disabilities by writing notes to their coaches detailing their actions. She made encouraging comments to their peers. Students strove for her approval because she promoted and recognized their behaviors as good classmates.

I like kidding around with her [Kate]. She is someone that we can get along with on a teacher/friend type scale. She’s good. She helps the kids out the whole time. She tells them what to do, when not to do something; when it’s not OK. (Nate, student)
She facilitated relationships based on mutual interests with an eye toward structured interdependence that embraced the needs of all students. As one student recalled when asked about having students with disabilities in his class, “for me it is just part of the class.” (Joshua, student)

Working with both teachers and students transformed the process of learning in the classroom for the nondisabled students.

It is good for them [students with disabilities] because they get to interact with us. We always have fun. Stevie is like the coolest kid ever. . . . They get friendship out of it. I wouldn’t say I’m wicked cool with Stevie but he follows me around. I feel like I’m a role model. (Joe, student)

Her coteachers also initiated actions that engaged disabled and nondisabled peers. Several times during the adventure unit Nick would call for seven or eight student members to assist him in doing an Australian or “lifting” belay with Stevie. During this, teacher and students would line up single file with rope in hand and hoist Stevie to the ceiling beams. At the top, the belayers would dangle him in midair while the class cheered him on. Once he returned to the group, his harness was removed and he would walk away with a smile that revealed his accomplishment. Although Nick’s actions highlighted Stevie’s differences, at the same time they defined his participation and membership in the class.

According to Biklen (2000), it is important to consider not only the student’s abilities but also the context in which learning takes place. The success students experienced in the GPE class was in large part due to an acceptance from both teachers and students. At times, Stevie was silly. For example, when students entered the class, they would walk around the gymnasium to warm-up. He would dance to the music, all the while singing to himself as he circled the gymnasium. “If Stevie did that and he wasn’t a dynamic personality supported by his friends, then he would be ostracized for that behavior” (Judy). In that context, Stevie’s behavior was acceptable. As a practitioner, however, one needs to consider whether these actions contribute to long term, appropriate social development and whether Stevie’s personal expression should be limited to more conventional behaviors.

These organizational factors supported the students in their capacity to express themselves in ways that went beyond their designated label of Down syndrome. Kate’s strategies closed the gap between the ability levels of the students by helping Judy and Nick make their classroom a place where everyone worked together. With the help of other students, Stevie and Anthony established a shared status with other class members.

She’s been able to guide me in terms of what the students are capable of and what they should be pushed to do. Because I’m not one to take them and push them beyond what I think their capacity is and she’s given me more of an understanding on how to deal with the nature and needs of those types of children. (Nick)
Discussion

Contemporary understanding of inclusion suggests that schools and practices become truly inclusive environments with an associated value system (Beckett, 2009). For the teachers at Freemont High, cohesion existed largely due to the shared values of teaching, learning, and the development of a classroom community (Chen et al., 2007; Mitchell, 1997). Stevie and Anthony’s participation in the adventure class went beyond placement to one in which planned activities, group work, and team challenges required students to work together to accomplish learning goals. Stevie and Anthony were held accountable for their learning in PE, which stands in contrast to the literature in APE (Akuffo & Hodge, 2008). The extent to which this occurred was due to the role teachers’ beliefs and attitudes played in establishing an inclusive ethos and the notion that all students were class members (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009).

Core values of trust and respect were inherent to the teachers’ relationships with each other. As the APE teacher, Kate was valued for her content knowledge, student teacher relationships and the contributions she made to the overall emotional climate of the classroom as a valuable resource for the class (Vogler et al., 2000). She relinquished her role as the “expert,” opting to support teachers in the GPE classroom (Lytle, Lavay, Robinson, & Huettig, 2003). The three teachers perceived the teaching model as being beneficial, largely due to the compatible nature of their personalities, their ability to dialogue and a general agreement of learning goals for the students (Chen et al., 2007; Scruggs et al., 2007). These findings run counter to the current literature on coteaching in which teachers’ roles distinguish who they are responsible for teaching (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005).

Creating a support structure necessitated the establishment of classroom norms based on the assumptions that all students need help and that giving and receiving help impacts positively on the social structures within the classroom. Utilizing peers was a feasible and natural support in which Kate “invited” students without disabilities into her teaching practices thereby limiting the possibility of social isolation for her students with disabilities (Place & Hodge, 2001). Her expertise extended beyond the discrete knowledge of students’ individual attributes to the application of skill learning that reproduced multilevel cooperative elements between teachers and students (Beckett, 2009; Scruggs et al., 2007). All students learned through instruction that addressed their skills and targeted goals (Block & Zeman, 1996). In turn, these fostered positive relations between students with and without disabilities. Building community and sharing common values were key aspects of this process (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997).

It can be argued that how teachers, both GPE and APE, perceive and interact with each other is critical for successful inclusion (Lytle & Collier, 2002). While the practices the three displayed reflected their commitment providing a broad-based curriculum to the students, equally important was the trust and respect that permeated their relationship (Chen et al., 2007). Kate offered Judy and Nick teaching strategies that enabled them to better understand their students, while Judy and
Nick supported student learning by engaging all students in the classroom activities (Wallace et al., 2002). This collaborative relationship bridged the knowledge gap with curricular innovations and individualization in GPE that often frustrates teachers (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; LaMaster et al., 1998).

It can be further argued that these relationships not only impacted students with disabilities but also the way in which the teachers challenged the prejudices that may prevent nondisabled students from interacting with their disabled peers (Beckett, 2009). Tolerance is fostered by building community and developing a value system, key aspects of a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education.

**Implications**

Several implications can be drawn from the results of this study. First and foremost is the recognition that the social model can be used as a tool for APE and PE teachers to operationalize collaborative practices. Identifying support structures requires teachers to engage in communication practices that do not limit notions of competence, particularly for students with disabilities (Fitzgerald, 2005). Seeing students with disabilities in ways that transcend their identified characteristics can provide insight beyond the medical profile of the student. In turn, this enables teachers from general and special education to work together offering students positive, engaging experiences.

In the interest of preservice teachers, professional preparation programs must begin shifting orientations within their adapted curricula to account for the social model of disability (Slee, 2001). Faculty within teacher education programs may need to challenge beliefs about “ability and disability as immune to learning” (Jordan et al., 2009, p. 541). This will allow preservice teachers to critically assess and process information relative to their own beliefs while learning valuable lessons on collaborative practices that promote inclusion. In addition, PETE programs should promote contextually rich and diverse experiences working with an athlete with a disability, and/or recreational sport programs that enable individuals with disabilities to achieve success in ways that reinforce the social model (Barnes & Mercer, 2004). Furthermore, graduate programs in APE should instill the efficacy of collaborative practices that foster alliances that can better serve the learning needs of the student across a multitude of settings. This dimension is critically important to the development of partnerships that realize the professional significance of collaboration.

For practicing teachers, differing orientations should not preclude APE and GPE teachers from working together (Lytle & Collier, 2002). While both groups can complement each other, certain conditions must be in place. First, GPE teachers must see the students with disabilities as contributing members of their programs and be able to give up aspects of the curriculum and instruction to others who can offer insight into the learning needs of students with disabilities (Grenier, 2007). Alternatively, the APE teacher should consider attending to the potential social supports that enable meaningful participation. A key feature of this transition requires prioritizing skills between GPE content knowledge and APE needs, specific knowledge in the production of strategies that result in positive physical education experiences for students with disabilities. In short, practitioners must reflect on the relevance of their curriculum and their ability to dialogue with other personnel who can support meaningful inclusion.
Future research could examine the gains that are made when PE teachers are able to develop truly collaborative partnerships with APE teachers and related service providers. Employing qualitative methodologies would enable researchers to capture teacher voices on what counts as effective practice for students with disabilities. In addition, student experiences, both disabled and nondisabled, should be solicited that encourages use of social support systems within GPE.

Limitations

The teachers and the program in this investigation were not representative of a random sample, and therefore the relationship between the present observations and the general population is unknown. Furthermore, many high school programs have sports dominated curriculums that foster competition, rather than cooperation between students. Future research should focus on the nature of interactions between GPE and APE teachers across various age groups, curricula, and programs. Within these settings, qualitative research could bring to light student and teacher voice that contribute to optimum learning environments.

References


