

LIFTING THE STATUS OF LEARNING SUPPORT



NFI@ISB

APRIL 20 – 22, 2016

Bill & Ochan Powell

SELF-ASSESSMENT: UNDERSTANDING LEARNING SUPPORT PROGRAMS

*Please rate your understanding of the learning support program at your school, with 5 = **Strongly Agree** and 1 = **Strongly Disagree**. 0 = 'Don't Know'.*

	5	4	3	2	1	0
1. All the learning support teachers in my school are certified in special education and are experienced in the field.						
2. My colleagues demonstrate an understanding of the importance of the learning support program.						
3. My colleagues understand the role of the learning support teacher.						
4. The general perception is that learning support teachers enjoy equal status with mainstream teachers, including IB Diploma teachers.						
5. Learning support teachers are perceived as experts in learning and regularly conduct PD sessions for other teachers.						
6. When students are pulled out from class for learning support, they are pulled out from classes/subjects that are perceived to be the less important ones in a student's schedule.						
7. In a coteaching situation, both teachers consider the class and the students to be their shared responsibility.						
8. Teachers use the second person possessive pronoun ("our") to refer to their students, as opposed to "my".						
9. The learning support teacher's main role is to support student learning.						
10. There is a leader of learning support who has administrator status.						
11. The Board of Directors is keenly interested in learning support.						
12. The Head of School demonstrates active interest in learning support.						

The Changing Face of Learning Support¹

Ochan Kusuma-Powell & William Powell

The equal status of coteachers within schools is key to fostering learning.

Status, the perception of relative standing in relation to others in a social group, has long been shown to influence learning. The negative effects of low status are well-documented (Cohen, 1998; Nisbett, 2010; Jensen, 2013). Students with low status speak less and are listened to less than their high-status peers. They have limited access to materials and consequently learn less (Cohen, 1998). Students who are low in the pecking order are easily spotted in whole-class and small-group settings. These are the kids often left out of learning exchanges among peers or between teachers and students.

Students with special needs often suffer from low status because of their apparent difficulties with learning or social skills. Thus, ironically, many students who don't find school learning easy might also find themselves in a daily environment unsupportive of their learning.

As educators who consult with schools around the world to help them become more inclusive for students with special needs, we perceive another related problem, one with implications for coteaching partnerships that aim to teach students with learning disabilities in an inclusive environment. At many schools, the special education programs (sometimes called learning support programs), as well as the teachers who serve students with special educational needs, have low status. No one intentionally maligns the program or its teachers, but special education programs are often marginalized through default. When a key component of inclusive education suffers from issues of low status, we have to consider what students might be missing out on.

This question is especially important now. As demographics and our understanding of what makes special education effective have evolved, service delivery models have shifted--as have the roles of special education teachers and regular classroom teachers, who now often coteach. It's crucial to probe the role that social and professional status, for both students and educators, plays in student learning. Consider a few instances we've observed--at schools in Indonesia, Malaysia, Tanzania, and other countries--of status issues getting in the way of a rich education

¹ This is an advance copy of an article that will appear in the December/January, 2015 issue of

for all.

Low Status and No Status

We recently observed a mainstream, 3rd grade class in a large American-style school in Asia. The class was in transition between lessons. Within minutes, it was clear which students enjoyed high social status, and which had low status. High-status students were consulted by others: they provided organizational advice to their peers, and spoke frequently, with confidence and authority. We quickly identified the student who suffered the lowest status in the class, a child who seemed out of sync with the others. In the space of four minutes, the teacher had called this student's name five times, each time issuing a corrective ("Jane, put your books away." "Jane! Get away from the window."). It was easy to guess why the other students avoided Jane in their interactions.

Throughout the lesson, Jane received similar corrections. And although she frequently raised her hand to respond to questions, she was rarely called upon. In one instance when the teacher did call on Jane, she ultimately rejected Jane's response, with words to the effect of "Well, that wasn't the answer I was looking for." When the task was to "turn to a neighbor," to process a question, no other student sought to partner with Jane. The learning support teacher came to her rescue and sat with her on the floor.

Although there may have been no intention to marginalize Jane, she became increasingly socially and academically isolated throughout the lesson. Research suggests that without a sense of belonging and membership, learning is greatly inhibited (Lieberman, 2013; Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2010).

Another student seemed to operate outside the framework of the class. He interacted only with one other adult, someone we easily identified as the class assistant. While the other students settled on the floor, he sat with the assistant at a table away from everyone else, working on something different. Our assumption, later confirmed, was that he was new to the English language. Well-meaning educators had decided he needed to work apart from the group ("He can't do this work yet, so we gave him something at his level that he does with the assistant.") While Jane had the lowest status, this child had none.

The Status of Teachers Matters, Too

For the most part, students are aware of teacher status and will seek out high-status educators to learn from. We've seen students miss out on the benefits of learning from two well-trained teachers when one teacher was less involved in instruction--and was likely perceived as "less significant" in the classroom.

A short while ago, we were invited to observe classes at an international school, and in the process saw several teaching partners made up of class teacher and special educator, working together in classrooms. Generally, the classroom teacher provided the instruction while the special education teacher sat by, waiting for that instruction to finish before helping the students on her caseload with their assignments. Although there were two adults in the room, in practice, there was only

one person teaching at a time.

Perceptions of teacher status are important. Like adults, children will choose who they learn from, partly on the basis of social status. It's likely that students will learn more--and more effectively--from a teacher they perceive as highly respected and authoritative than from one who is less so. Bateson (1995) observed how children from upper-middle class British families in the 1950s responded to the nannies who cared for them. The nannies often came from provinces with very different accents than those of their employers. None of the children picked up their nanny's accent, even though they often spent more time with the nanny than with their parents.

The implicit status of a school program influences whether leaders prioritize it; low status often leads special education programs to get shortchanged. A few years ago, while conducting a review of the learning support program in a large international school, we were surprised to discover that a similar review had been conducted five years earlier. Many of the conclusions and recommendations made by the first reviewing team were synonymous with ours. In effect, very little had changed in the school's practice since the first report was written.

"What happened?" we asked the head of school. "Not much seems to have changed since that first report."

Shaking his head, he replied, "There were other priorities, and we simply forgot."

These observations aren't unusual. They underscore the lesser status frequently accorded to students with learning issues and those who support them. One of the biggest challenges facing schools is providing high quality service to learners with special needs.² Schools must develop new practices, such as true co-equal coteaching that draws on each educator's expertise. But an invisible barrier to doing so may be the failure to ensure that programs have the social and political status necessary to safeguard opportunities for learning. As our colleague, Kevin Bartlett has noted, "Inclusion means being a part of, not *apart from*."

Raising Status

We've observed three areas of promise in elevating the status of special education support teachers and programs.

Leadership

Several years ago, we began working with Next Frontier: Inclusion (NFI) (www.nextfrontierinclusion.org), a collaborative group of schools committed to becoming increasingly inclusive of students with special educational needs. We noticed that schools with robust programs of learning support had heads of school or principals who were either directly involved in the programs or highly supportive. At

² This challenge especially exists in international schools, which have been seen as places of high-quality education for academically able students and have little experience teaching students with special needs.

the time, we weren't sure what it was about the involvement of a school leader in these programs for students with special needs that lent to their robustness. Now we think it might've been that the head's involvement lent status to the programs.

Our attempts to support international schools in becoming more inclusive were initially focused on developing the capacity of school leadership—but subsequently, our design team rethought this notion. Gathering five to 10 heads of school at each of our professional conversations, although effective for those heads of school, proved ineffective in changing the status quo. We realized it was better to encourage schools to convene in teams that included administrators, learning specialists, classroom teachers, and the school's board of directors.

Having all these stakeholders present allowed several things to happen: all teachers saw that the head of school was truly interested in inclusion; school administrators grasped the expertise of their staff members; and being present at such an event raised the profile of the learning support programs. As one administrator said to us after an NFI-convened conversation, “I never realized there was any expertise involved in learning support. I had thought of learning support teachers as kindly individuals who wanted to be helpful, but didn't think there was a body of knowledge connected to the help they gave.”

One of the roles of school leaders is to bring together the collective expertise surrounding efforts to teach children with special learning needs, both to create genuinely responsive programs and to foster respect for special education teachers and their students. Facilitating roundtable conversations among different stakeholders will allow everyone to develop respect and support for one another's expertise. Recruiting high-caliber learning support staff is also important. The Next Frontier: Inclusion has available a protocol for a self-review of a school's programs that includes reflection on where the school is in terms of developing community commitment, providing services, enhancing professional expertise, and evaluating programs.

Reciprocal Relationships and Equivalent Responsibilities

In the past, when learning support services were provided through a pull-out model (meaning students with learning needs received intervention services with a specialist outside the mainstream classroom), the various educators' roles and responsibilities seemed clearer than they do now. The class teacher had little to do with what went on in the pull-out situation, and the special education teacher was rarely answerable to others.

The move towards Response to Intervention (RTI) to serve special educational needs has required greater clarity on the question of what all students need to learn—and from whom. With the focus on all students accessing the same curriculum, the pull-out model has fallen into disfavor. In addition to the difficulty in sustaining high-quality instruction in one-to-one settings, the interventions provided in those settings were often disconnected from the regular class curriculum. Responsibility for the learning of special needs students sometimes fell through the cracks.

Providing in-class support has come with its own set of challenges as teachers

with different kinds of expertise struggle to establish their roles and responsibilities in a shared space. Because the classroom has traditionally been viewed as the mainstream teacher's domain, much of the struggle to carve out a valued professional role has fallen on special education teachers. Too often, the classroom teacher teaches the lesson while the other teacher sits through that instruction, then circulates and helps students. Classroom teachers have perceived their role as deliverers of content; teachers with expertise in special education have viewed their role as advocating for students on their caseload. At times, the special education teacher has felt like nothing more than a glorified teaching assistant, and the class teacher has felt that her territory has been invaded.

One way to mitigate this situation is to be sure teachers preparing to coteach have open and explicit conversations about how they'll work together, including who will take responsibility for what throughout the teaching cycle, including planning, instruction, assessment of student learning, and reflection on process. This requires that coteachers plan the unit of study together. To lift the status of the "support" teacher, it's important that the tasks ascribed to each coteacher be of equivalent value in the eyes of both teachers and students.

Establishing co-equal status in the classroom doesn't happen by accident, and requires deliberate planning and decision-making on the part of the class teacher and the special educator. In the first instance, both need to leave their egos at the door, and enter the room with positive pre-suppositions about the other: believing that each has something of value to contribute to the learning of young people, and that both will learn from one another. This may initially be a fearful time for both teachers: the loss of control and autonomy for each party, accompanied by the anxiety of being vulnerable to one another.

Decisions need to be made about who does what during each phase of the instructional cycle. Take, for example, the following dialogue between Sabinne (Grade 8 English teacher) and David (Learning Support teacher):

Sabinne: Following up on our last meeting, we agreed that we would have two objectives for the next unit. We want to engage the students in both literary analysis and constructing a really well-developed paragraph.

David: Those are our objectives and I think they're sound. I just wonder how some of the students who are still learning English and who may have learning issues are coping with Julius Caesar.

Sabinne: You're right. I've been concerned about that, too. I'm also concerned about the quality of the paragraph writing. It's really inconsistent at best. What we could do is give them a prompt from the play and then scaffold a paragraph . . .

David: Absolutely – we could use the writing protocol that I've been using with some of the struggling students. I think it would benefit everyone.

Sabinne: David, what role would you like to play as we design this lesson?

David: I'm really interested in making the play accessible for all of the students, but at the same time I'd really like to work with some of the high flyers

as well. Maybe we could do some different groupings and then you and I could rotate through them, depending on student needs.

Sabinne: That's fine. Why don't I take the lead on developing a writing prompt, perhaps something on Marc Anthony's speech, and maybe you could take the lead on developing a differentiated approach to writing paragraphs so that all of our readiness levels are appropriately challenged. I think your direct instructions to the whole class on paragraph writing should come first, because the literary analysis is really the application.

We've heard some leaders describe coteaching as an expensive model that "allows one teacher to have a coffee break while the other is involved with students." Nothing could be further from the truth. In true coteaching, each member of the team is actively involved in instruction, whether offering an alternative form of teaching, observing how learners respond, or noting what exactly happened—and why it was effective—when good pedagogy took place.

A Broader Identity

Coteaching can be a robust form of teacher professional learning that enhances classroom practice. For this to happen, special education teachers must be leaders of adult learning as well as teachers of children.

Identity, that image we hold of ourselves, influences behavior and decision making. In the context of work in schools, special education teachers have traditionally given voice to students who haven't been able to speak for themselves and have interpreted to learners on their caseloads key understandings that their classroom teacher has communicated as part of instruction.

Although being an advocate is important, if special education teachers only develop this particular part of their identity, they will limit their capacity to do other important work on behalf of students--to facilitate, encourage, and structure professional learning for colleagues. As leaders in a fast-changing field that remains relatively unfamiliar to many teachers, learning support teachers shouldn't miss any opportunity to support collegial learning and understanding about how to work with children with special learning needs.

Thus, these teachers need opportunities to develop strengths in group facilitation. They need to be up to date in their reading and understanding of current research. They must be able to speak with authority and credibility, and offer new understandings in ways that will be palatable to peers and colleagues. Training in coaching, can also be of great help.

What True Coteaching Looks Like

When steps like these create greater respect for special education teachers, and when such teachers begin to advocate for themselves, low status need no longer thwart great coteaching. We've seen this happen in schools. Recently, we observed an elementary classroom in an international school in a large Asian city. A reading specialist we'll call Martha had asked us to observe the interaction between herself and the class

teacher, as this was going to be the first time they would coteach a lesson. We agreed to focus our observations on the interactions between this specialist and the classroom teacher; specifically, we would script everything Martha said.

As the lesson began, Martha seated herself beside the classroom teacher. A note of surprise passed across the teacher's face. Still, she went ahead and presented the lesson with Martha sitting beside her. Much of the first part of the lesson was dominated by the teacher, but at one point, Martha broke in to connect what her coteacher was saying to a learning experience students had had in the days leading up to this particular lesson.

After that first instance, the presentation became more shared. The nature of the two teachers' contributions also changed. When we reviewed the script after the class, we realized that, whereas at first, Martha's contributions mainly involved offering logistical advice or requests to students ("Take a look at this part of your sheets") as she became more confident, her verbal contributions had more to do with the actual *teaching* of the lesson.

Martha later told us it was the first time she had sat in a chair in that class. She usually sat on the floor, working with "her students." She felt good about her growing confidence as a coteacher.

Enhancing Our Humanity

Raising the status of learning support programs within schools is key to developing effective programs. Sadly, when learning support efforts are ineffective, school communities lose the opportunities for reciprocal learning that such programs (and the teachers and students connected to them) offer--opportunities to enhance our humanity and value others. When everyone in a school understands the value learning support programs can offer teachers as well as students, everyone gains.

References

- Bateson, M. C. (1995). *Peripheral visions: Learning along the way*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Cohen, E. G. (1998). Making cooperative learning equitable, *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 18–21.
- Jensen, E. (2013). How poverty affects classroom engagement, *Educational Leadership*, 70(8), 24–30.
- Lieberman, M. D. (2013). *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*. New York: Crown Publishing.
- Nisbett, R. (2010). *Intelligence and how to get it: Why schools and cultures count*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Powell, W. & Kusuma-Powell, O. (2010). *Becoming an emotionally intelligent teacher*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

Ochan Kusuma-Powell (okpowell@yahoo.com) has developed inclusive special education programs in many countries. **William Powell** (Bpowell49@yahoo.com) has

served as an international school educator for the past 30 years. They are coauthors of *How to Teach Now: Five Keys to Personalized Learning in the Global Classroom* (ASCD, 2011). Both are members of the Design Team for the Next Frontier: Inclusion.