

How do Teachers Effectively Collaborate in Co-Teaching Classrooms and Create Successful Relationships?

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ED632 Thesis

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March 19, 2022

Special education teachers have had to adapt their profession to the changes in special education legislation. Many teachers now find themselves out of their classroom and into a general education classroom with a mix of students with and without disabilities. They are finding themselves partnered with a general education teacher and expected to work with them in a collaborative co-teaching system. General education teachers have also had to adapt to this new system and figure out how to incorporate another professional to their classroom. Both teachers are expected to use their expertise collaboratively to serve all students.

Before the 1970s, students with disabilities were found in self-contained classrooms with a special education teacher (Rothstein & Johnson, 2021). Students were kept hidden away from the mainstream parts of schools, away from their general education peers (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021). The passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1997 required high expectations for students with disabilities and access to the general curriculum (Hossain, 2012; Rothstein & Johnson, 2021). The new law created a problem in the public school system because students with disabilities needed to be educated with their peers in the general education classroom. Co-teaching became the leading instructional model for implementation in the inclusive classroom (Brendle et al., 2017; Keeley, 2015).

Co-teaching in the classroom brings a general education and a special education teacher together to provide instruction to both students with and without disabilities in a general education setting (Friend, 2008). It allows students with disabilities access to the general curriculum through the general education teacher and specialized instruction and modifications from the special education teacher.

For co-teaching to work effectively, the general and special education teachers must create a partnership to work together collaboratively. Co-teaching requires thoughtful attention to

the creation, execution, and adoption of the collaborative relationship between the co-teachers. This effective relationship can create powerful learning experiences for all students (Lock et al., 2016). Many teachers compare the co-teaching partnership to a marriage between the general education and special education teacher (Friend & Cook, 2007; McCaw, 2020). To make the partnership work, both general and special education teachers need to know the co-teaching model, how to implement it in the classroom, and best practices for collaboration.

Even though students with disabilities are now primarily co-taught in inclusive classrooms, there are reports that both general and special education teachers are having difficulties with collaboration and implementing the co-teaching model (Keeley, 2015). While teachers grasp the concept of the models used for co-teaching, they report a lack of competence in implementing the models and strategies used in the co-teaching classroom (Brendle et al., 2017). Chitiyo & Brinda (2018) report that several problems may arise when teachers are unprepared to implement co-teaching with their students. The purpose of having two teachers in the same classroom can be diminished and ineffective. The “marriage” between the two professionals is also of great importance. The collaborative relationship between co-teachers is the most critical element in a successful partnership and determining if they would continue to co-teach (Keefe & Moore, 2004; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Co-teaching has become the instructional strategy to use in the inclusive classroom; however, there is little cohesive research on best practices for creating the most effective collaborative relationship. The overarching research question in this professional project is, “How do teachers effectively collaborate in co-teaching classrooms and create successful relationships?” By reviewing the research, I hope to solve challenges with collaboration in co-teaching partnerships.

Related questions for the project include:

1. What is needed to create a successful co-teaching relationship ?
2. What are the best practices for co-planning, communication, and reflection?

I propose to analyze the available research and literature on co-teaching. I anticipate many studies that report success depending on the relationship between the two teachers. I hypothesize that there is no perfect formula to create an effective co-teaching relationship. I propose to conduct evidence-based research on best practices of co-teaching and how to create an effective collaborative partnership.

What are the Models of Co-Teaching?

Co-teaching in an inclusive classroom can look different from room to room. The collaboration of the two teachers and how comfortable they feel with each other and the material they are teaching will determine what model they might choose for co-teaching. Friend & Cook (2013) state that there are six approaches that teachers can use with co-teaching: One teach, one observe; Station teaching; Parallel teaching; Alternative teaching; Teaming; One teach, one assist.

1. One teach, one observe: one teacher teaches, and the other teacher monitors
2. Station teaching: teachers divide the instructional content, and students transition between teachers
3. Parallel teaching: teachers divide the students but deliver the same instructional content
4. Alternative teaching: one teacher works with a small group of students, while the other teacher is teaching to the rest of the students
5. Teaming: both teachers plan and deliver instruction together
6. One Teach, one assist: one teacher teaches, and the other is support in the room

What is Successful Co-teaching?

For co-teaching to be an impactful instruction method for students, co-teaching partners need to develop many skills to help them work, navigate control, and collaborate to provide a cohesive plan to deliver instruction to their combined students with and without disabilities. The general and special education teacher must weave together their areas of expertise and use various instructional methods to reach their students (Delkammer & Leader-Janssen, 2014). For this to happen, the teachers must have effective collaboration. A review of research has shown that collaboration, communication, and co-planning contribute to a successful co-teaching partnership (Murawski & Lochner, 2010). Successful co-teaching also depends on several factors, including choosing the right partner, meeting before the school year, getting to know each other, and building a relationship based on trust and respect. Working together in the classroom requires more than just being put there by the principal (Friend, 2008). The research also showed that developing a co-teaching plan, identifying classroom roles, reflection, debriefing, identifying challenges, responding to disagreements, training together, pre-service training, professional development, and administration support successful co-teaching. For co-teaching to work, there needs to be shared accountability and require that both teachers share their skills and training, life experiences, and goals (Lock et al., 2016).

How to Nurture the Co-Teaching Relationship

It is risky to assume that teachers made to work together in a shared space will collaborate effectively (Sheppard, 2019). Beyond being proficient at using the co-teaching models, teachers need to create a partnership that allows them to work together efficiently and effectively to provide the necessary services to all students. Co-teaching partnerships have been described as similar to marriage partnerships. The relationship needs to depend on trust,

commitment, compromise, and flexibility (Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Friend, 2008; McCaw, 2020). Co-teaching partners will need to depend on each other in and out of the classroom, communicate every day, plan instruction, and share in the teaching and assessment of their students (Tzivinikou, 2015).

Developing good working relationships in the classroom is paramount for co-teachers to work effectively and efficiently. However, sometimes throwing two teachers together, who are used to working alone, creates issues. General education and special education teachers' partnerships can fail for many reasons: different personalities, control issues, or trust in the other person's expertise (Perry, 2017). Co-teaching partnerships require a plan to help foster collaboration and develop a good working relationship (Lock et al., 2016).

Getting to Know Each Other

Co-teachers need to get to know each other to work together effectively (Murawski & Dieker, 2004). It is crucial that co-teachers learn about each other, how they teach, and how they like to run their classroom. Conderman et al. (2009) expressed that talking and listening allow for common interests, reporting strengths and weaknesses, and building rapport.

One tool for co-teaching partners to use is collaborative style inventories. Inventories allow the teachers to explore the information they might not have typically asked in person and opens up communication lines (Conderman et al., 2009). Inventories are also an excellent way to determine how compatible the two teachers are. Successful collaborative partnerships can depend on the compatibility of the two teachers (Friend & Cook, 2013; Oh et al., 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Another suggestion would be to meet before the school year starts. A meeting allows teachers to get to know each other, discuss teaching philosophies, and examine the roles each

might want to take in the classroom. Friend (2008) stated that getting to know each other in and out of the classroom can lay the foundation for an effective partnership.

There are many methods to help develop a good working relationship. Having open communication, being supportive of each other, being consistent, and dependability are just a few examples of creating a positive relationship. When co-teaching partners can trust each other, they are more likely to divide the teaching roles fairly. Trust and respect allow the co-teaching teachers the freedom to use their expertise and experiences to bring effective instruction into the classroom (Lock et al., 2016; Mastropieri et al., 2005).

Creating the Co-Teaching Plan

Developing a co-teaching plan allows teachers to discuss classroom roles and expectations. Both teachers should develop the plan together before the school year starts (Dieker & Murawski 2003). It should be a written document that can be adjusted throughout the year (Conderman et al., 2009; Murawski & Dieker, 2004).

Many co-teachers believe that the general education teacher is the lead teacher and the special education teacher assists in the classroom (Friend et al., 2010; Friend & Cook, 2013). However, for co-teaching to work, both teachers must trust and respect each other's expertise in their field and distribute the work equitably (Mastropieri et al., 2005). The co-teachers must discuss their roles and responsibilities to ensure that these old ideas do not come true. The belief that the general education teacher is in charge and the special education teacher is class support does not encourage a co-teaching environment (Friend et al., 2010). Both teachers must be open about working together and receptive to changing the idea that only one teacher is in charge (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013).

Defining the Roles

Co-teaching in an inclusive classroom depends on the general and special education teachers taking on different roles depending on their co-teaching model or what the students need (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013). Unclear roles in the classroom can lead to confusion, frustration, and animosity between the two teachers. Some teachers consider their classrooms their “turf”, and having an additional teacher might be viewed as an invasion of their classroom (Chitiyo, 2017). Navigating these issues is not always easy and could lead to problems with providing effective instruction to students. Gurgur & Uzuner (2010) studied a co-teaching pair in a second-grade classroom. During the study, the general education teacher did not see the special education teacher as an authority, so they felt no obligation to plan to involve the special education teacher in the classroom.

When creating a plan, the co-teachers must talk about their roles in the classroom. Writing the expectations down will help facilitate discussion and allow a visual to see that duties have been given out equally. The working document will allow for roles to adjust as the co-teachers get to know each other better and figure out each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

Communication

Co-teaching partners need to be able to communicate with each other effectively. They need to be able to talk about their students, but they also need to talk about what they need to be effective teachers. It is vital that co-teachers trust each other enough to communicate what is working, what is not working, and how to fix it (Lock et al., 2016). Ongoing, open communication is necessary to develop the relationship and the day-to-day teaching practice. Teachers need to listen to constructive criticism and feedback and be open-minded about their teaching practices (Oh et al., 2017).

Communication can come in many forms, and partners need to work out what works best for their partnership. Different forms of communication like texting, email, Google Docs, Shared documents, virtual meetings, and phone calls exist to help exchange information (Perry, 2017; Willard 2019). Teachers need to find what combinations work best to communicate about students and the classroom. Addressing the communication needs of teachers is essential for co-teaching success.

Curricular concerns, IEP content needs, assessment, and behavioral needs should be addressed proactively (Dieker & Murawski, 2003). Having a plan for communicating about difficult situations ahead of time will be helpful to facilitate the discussion. Co-teachers also need to talk to each other in times of disagreement.

Co-Planning

Both teachers bring their expertise into the partnership. The general education teacher has in-depth knowledge of the core curriculum, and the special education teacher has the expertise in implementing accommodations and modifications. Together they need to plan lessons to ensure that both teachers' knowledge is used productively. Co-planning allows for collaboration on effectively running the classroom and allows the partners to become a team (Howard & Potts, 2009). It is advantageous if both teachers have the same planning time available.

Co-planning meetings need to happen frequently, so both teachers are adequately prepared for classroom lessons. Co-planning assures that the teachers will determine which instructional strategy best fits the curriculum and their students before getting into the classroom (Brendle et al., 2017).

Reflection and Disagreements

Self-Reflection and Debriefing

Co-teachers need to self-reflect about what is working well and what needs to be refined (Friend & Cook, 2013). Reflection helps bring to the surface any changes that need to be made (Howard & Potts, 2009). It also allows them to look at the bigger picture and see how their partnership works in the inclusive classroom (Lock et al., 2016). Co-teachers can do this by having debriefing sessions after class or at the end of the day. These can be short meetings or communication where teachers reflect on instruction and make corrective modifications for the next lesson.

Identifying Challenges and Response to Disagreements

Co-teaching will not be perfect, and challenges will arise between the co-teaching partners. It is crucial to have open communication to deal with the issues before they get unmanageable (Lock et al., 2016).

At times, challenges in the co-teaching classroom may cause disagreements with the teachers. Working out how to deal with the dispute before it happens will benefit the team's relationship (Friend, 2008). It is essential to establish a plan for resolution at the beginning of the partnership (Lock et al., 2016). The plan can be developed while creating the co-teaching plan and adjusted as needed. Co-teachers must continue to have open communication to maintain their partnership, even in times of disagreement (Lock et al., 2016).

Limitations

The definition of "inclusion" has been left vague and allows each state to define it as they see fit (Francisco et al., 2020). This vagueness allows interpretation and no uniformity among the states and districts. It means co-teaching in one school can look different from co-teaching in another (Rexroat-Frazier & Chamberlain, 2019).

There are few long-term studies on the effectiveness of inclusion (Francisco et al., 2020). Researchers are also hesitant to measure the effectiveness of co-teaching because it depends so much on the relationship between the two teachers (Dieker & Murawski, 2003).

Co-teachers need pre-service training, ongoing training, and professional development on co-teaching practices and implementation (Brendle et al., 2017; Chitiyo, 2017; Sinclair et al., 2019). Those who do not have this training will be forced to figure it out as they go, which will likely strain the teaching relationship.

Support at the administrative level can affect a co-teaching partnership. Administrators need to know best practices for collaboration and co-teaching, how to implement the strategies, and make the partnership successful. Administrators need to support their co-teachers by providing guidance, professional development, and assisting when required (Flom, 2016). Administrators need to give co-teachers sufficient planning time to create effective instructional plans. Without support and adequate planning time, co-teachers will not have what they need to create a successful partnership, adversely affecting their relationship and teaching outcomes.

Conclusion

Co-teaching requires a partnership based on trust, mutual respect, and collaboration. The two teachers from different backgrounds must combine their professional knowledge, expertise, and teaching philosophies to create an environment beneficial to students with and without disabilities. Like a marriage, the two teachers must commit to communicating with each other, collaborating, and doing everything they can to make the partnership work. From the research, I have found a tremendous amount of data on best practices but no magic formula to produce an effective co-teaching relationship that works every time.

I found many studies that can help a co-teaching partnership with their relationship. Learning the co-teaching strategies and principles will be important for the co-teaching partners. Implementing best practices for co-planning, communication, and reflection will help the team develop the structure needed to create a successful partnership. However, it will ultimately be up to the two teachers to genuinely get to know each other, work out their differences, and harmoniously come together to teach their students.

If co-teaching is the ultimate way to serve students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment, we must continue to study the best way to do it. I was unable to solve the challenges with collaboration in co-teaching partnerships, but I found best practices to help enable the co-teaching relationship. After reviewing 61 research studies, articles, and books spanning 27 years, I conclude that more studies need to be done on effectively pairing the right co-teaching partners for success. I also conclude that studies need to be conducted on giving teachers choice in their co-teaching pairings.

In my research, one suggestion stood out to me as the most effective way to help the co-teaching partnership. It creates a Co-teaching Instructional Coach position at the school and district level. The responsibilities of this position would be to help inform administrators about co-teaching practices, check-in on co-teaching classrooms, and giving support to the co-teaching relationships (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013; Friend & Barron, 2016). In a sense, it would be the equivalent of a marriage counselor.

In each class at Mary Baldwin, I have connected to my prior knowledge and expanded it to understand my profession as a teacher better. My classes have helped inform me of new developments in special education and guide me to develop my teaching philosophy and teaching expertise. During my coursework I delved into co-teaching and examined how the

strategy works in today's education system. The time and effort have been tremendous and completely worth it to become an effective teacher and co-teacher.

I am currently co-teaching in two classes at the high school level. While researching for this project, I have endeavored to implement the best practices I have learned and create a positive relationship with my co-teaching partners. Every day I am mindful of the decisions I make and how they might affect our relationship, which ultimately affect our students. I am finding that the co-teaching relationship can be tricky and that it takes dedication from both parties to make it work. I am looking forward to getting more experience with navigating co-teaching in the classroom and being able to give my students with and without disabilities what they need to succeed.

Co-teaching has incredible potential to be effective in the classroom. It gives students twice the opportunity to learn from teachers who want to see them succeed (Mastropieri et al., 2005). Co-teachers must be given the tools to learn how to collaborate effectively and the understanding that a harmonious partnership will be the foundation of their teaching in the inclusive classroom.

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