

How do Teachers Effectively Collaborate in Co-teaching Classrooms: A Review of the Literature

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Special education continues to evolve with federally mandated laws enacted to help best meet the needs of all students with disabilities. With the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1997, high expectations were placed on students with disabilities along with access to the general curriculum (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. The co-teaching model became the instructional delivery system to provide instruction to diverse students in an inclusive general education setting (Brendle et al., 2017).

Co-teaching has become the fundamental way to teach students with disabilities in the general education classroom. However, the general and special education teachers are often unprepared for these situations. They have to take a “learn as you go” approach to serve their students effectively. The two teachers must find an effective practice to teach the students with disabilities and coexist as professionals in the same classroom. The primary purpose of this review is to compile documented literature to identify best practices for collaboration among co-teaching teachers. It fills a research gap that teachers and administrators can consult to implement co-teaching in their classrooms. Chitiyo & Brinda (2008) state that if teachers are underprepared in co-teaching, they may be forced to use practices or instructional delivery models that do not meet the needs of all students in inclusive settings. The hope is that effective strategies can be found and implemented to strengthen the co-teachers partnership and get the main focus back on the students.

Many questions surround best practices for teachers on how to make co-teaching work well for their partnership and the students in the classroom. In order to answer these questions, an extensive search of the literature was conducted. The Education Resources Information

Center Database (ERIC) and EBSCO Informational Services Database (EBSCO ALLSEARCH) were used to search for related literature. Searches were conducted with keywords or phrases related to co-teaching models and best practices, special education and general education teachers, and collaboration and co-planning. The keywords or phrases used to search for co-teaching models and best practices included: co-teaching, co-teaching models, effective co-teaching models, co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, best practices for co-teaching, effective co-teaching, how to make co-teaching work, synthesis of research on co-teaching, developing co-teaching skills in heterogeneous classes, inclusion, inclusive classrooms, and inclusive education. The terms used to search for special education and general education teachers included: special education and No Child Left Behind, special education and co-teaching, general education and special education teachers, perceptions of co-teaching, and teacher perceptions of co-teaching. The descriptive words used to search for collaboration and co-planning included: collaboration in SPED, collaboration models in SPED, collaboration between general and special education teachers, collaboration between general and special education teachers in inclusive co-teaching classrooms, how to make collaboration work, and co-teaching and co-planning.

### **How many students with disabilities are there in special education?**

Students with disabilities are accessing special education services in more significant numbers. In 2019-2020, the number of students ages 3-21 who received special education services under IDEA was 7.3 million, or 14 percent of all public school students. In ten years, 2009- 2019, the number of students who received special education services increased from 6.5 million to 7.3 million (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021).

With the rise of students with disabilities in special education, schools have had to adapt to the growing numbers. The new IDEA regulations meant that more students with disabilities were served in general education classrooms. Among all students ages 6-21 served under IDEA, the percentage who spent most of the school day (i.e., 80% or more of their time) in general education classes in regular schools increased from 59% in fall 2009 to 65% in fall 2019 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021).

### **What is co-teaching?**

Friend (2008) defines Co-teaching as the partnering of a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students, including those with disabilities or other special needs, in a general education setting and in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs. Students with disabilities are combined into the general education classroom, where they will benefit from two teachers and support to access the general education curriculum. Traditionally, co-teaching is done with a general education and special education teacher, bringing both their expertise and different perspectives to teaching into the classroom. Co-teaching enhances the fostering of multiple perspectives, encouraging various ways of knowing, as well as nurturing different approaches to teaching (Lock et al., 2016).

For co-teaching to work effectively in general education classrooms, both the general and special education teachers must be educated in the co-teaching models, professional planning, and delivery of instruction. Friend & Cook (2010) state that there are six approaches that teachers can use with co-teaching.

1. *One teach, one observe*, in which one teacher leads large-group instruction while the other gathers academic, behavioral, or social data on specific students of the class group;

2. *Station teaching*, in which instruction is divided into three non-sequential parts and students, likewise divided into three groups, rotate from station to station, being taught by the teachers at two stations and working independently at the third;
3. *Parallel teaching*, in which the two teachers, each with half the class group, present the same material for the primary purpose of fostering instructional differentiation and increasing student participation;
4. *Alternative teaching*, in which one teacher works with most students while the other works with a small group for remediation, enrichment, assessment, pre-teaching, or another purpose;
5. *Teaming*, in which both teachers lead large-group instruction by both lecturing, representing opposing views in a debate, illustrating two ways to solve a problem, and so on; and
6. *One teach, one assist*, in which one teacher leads instruction while the other circulates among the students offering individual assistance.

Beyond being proficient at using the co-training 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 compared to being married. Co-teaching relationships are often likened to marital relationships in that they depend on commitment, negotiation, and flexibility (Friend, 2008). Co-teaching partners will need to depend on each other, communicate regularly, plan consistently, and share the work. Co-teaching presumes that both educators actively participate in the delivery of instruction, share responsibility for all their students, assume accountability for student learning, and acquire instructional resources and space (Friend, 2008).

### **What are the benefits of co-teaching?**

Brendle et al. (2017) write that co-teaching embraces student individuality allowing students with different learning styles and needs to receive instruction in a general education classroom. Both students with and without disabilities benefit from having two teachers who have expertise in their fields. All students can have more individualized help and modifications through the collaboration between the special education and general education teachers (Keefe & Moore, 2004).

With all students in one classroom and not in a separate setting, the stigma of being different is lessened. Co-teaching promotes the inclusion of students with disabilities, thereby reducing the stigma of such students and creating a heterogeneous classroom community (Keefe & Moore, 2004; Boyle et al., 2011).

### **What are the barriers to co-teaching?**

#### **Developing a good relationship**

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; some examples could be different personalities, control issues, or trust in the other person's expertise. Co-teaching requires careful attention in the development and the fostering of the collaborative relationship and a commitment on the part of the co-teachers to design and facilitate robust learning experiences for students (Lock et al., 2016).

### **Lack of Training**

Keefe & Moore (2004) reported in their study of co-teaching teachers that the special and general education teachers did not feel prepared for the demands that co-teaching placed upon them with regard to collaboration skills, content knowledge, and knowledge of special education. Schools have been implementing co-teaching models and practices to serve students with disabilities. However, little has been done to help teachers gain the knowledge needed to implement these strategies effectively in the classroom. While teachers report an awareness of research-based models for co-teaching, they lack expertise in implementing them (Brendle et al., 2017).

### **Roles are not Clearly Defined**

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. Negotiating roles and a willingness to re-explore one's professional identity are at the root of a successful co-teaching team (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 considered an invasion of their professional space (Chitiyo, 2017). Navigating these issues is not always easy and could lead to issues in the inclusive classroom and, subsequently, all students' education. Gurgur & Uzuner (2010) studied a co-teaching pair of teachers in a second-grade classroom. At the end of the study, the general education teacher did not see the special education teacher as an authority, so they did not feel any obligation to make a plan to have them be implemented in the classroom.

## **Lack of Time**

Finding adequate time to co-plan is considered by teachers to be the biggest challenge and the most effective solution to co-teaching (Beninghof, 2020). School schedules are already full, and adding extra commitments for co-teaching is a big sacrifice for co-teaching teachers. With current demands placed on teachers to raise student achievement, attend staff development meetings, and committee work, if co-teaching is perceived as time-consuming, teachers may opt for instructional delivery models that are less demanding (Chitiyo, 2017).

### **What is needed for successful co-teaching?**

For co-teaching to be an impactful practice for students, co-teaching partners need to develop many skills to help them work together, navigate control, and come together to provide a cohesive plan to deliver instruction to their combined students with and without disabilities. A review of research has shown that collaboration, communication, and co-planning contribute to a successful co-teaching partnership. 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. Co-teaching partnerships require more than a casual agreement to work together in the classroom (Friend, 2008). The research also shows that developing a co-teaching plan, identifying classroom roles, learning-in-the-moment, reflection and debriefing, identifying challenges, response to disagreements, training together, pre-service training, professional development, and administration support successful co-teaching. There is a need for shared accountability to each other, the students, and the program. This relationship requires both teachers to share their ideas, experiences, and expertise to achieve mutual outcomes in teaching and student learning (Lock et al., 2016).

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration has been consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors for implementing and sustainability of different school-based practices such as co-teaching (Pinkelman et al., 2015). The general and special education teachers must work together to ensure that all students in their inclusive classroom get the support they need to be successful.

## **Communication**

Co-teaching partners need to be able to communicate with each other effectively. Not only do they need to be able to talk about their students, but they also need to be able to talk about what they need to be effective teachers. Ongoing, open communication is necessary both in terms of developing the relationship and the day-to-day teaching practice. There is a need to develop trust to allow for rich dialogue, as well as to accommodate discussions about what is working, but also to address what is not working and why (Lock et al., 2016).

Communication can come in many forms, and partners need to work out what works best for their partnership. Different forms of communication like email, zoom meetings, instant messenger, and phone calls exist to help exchange information. Teachers need to find what combination works best to communicate about their students and classroom. Addressing the communication needs of teachers is essential for co-teaching success. Co-teachers need to know what their partner is thinking, feeling, doing, and bringing into the school environment to provide effective instruction for all students (Conderman et al., 2009).

## **Co-Planning Meetings**

Both co-teaching 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. Effective co-planning time can encourage general education and special education teachers to become a "united" team: able to work through day-to-day obstacles and experience harmony in the co-teaching relationship (Howard & Potts, 2009).

Co-planning meetings need to happen frequently, so both teachers are adequately prepared for classroom lessons. It also allows teachers to discuss what is going well, what processes are not working and helps define the roles in the classroom. Co-planning assures both teachers understand their roles and responsibilities regarding each lesson prior to co-instructing in the classroom (Brendle et al., 2017).

### **Selecting a Co-teaching Partner**

It might be rare for a school to allow teachers to select their co-partner, but studies on teachers' experience say that it could be helpful to making the co-teacher partnership successful. Allowing teacher choice increases the chance of creating a compatible and successful relationship (Keefe & Moore, 2004). The compatibility of teaching partners is a good measure of whether a co-teaching partnership will be vital. Schools need to be thoughtful about how they pair up teachers or teams of teachers to work with one another and how they will support these teams over time (Keefe & Moore, 2004).

### **Meeting Prior to School**

One tip for successful collaboration between the general and special education teachers is to have them meet prior to the start of the school year. Having a meeting allows the teachers to get to know each other, discuss their teaching philosophies, and examine the roles each might want to take in the classroom. Friend (2008) states that conversations about the teacher's

expectations, teaching styles, understanding of students, and preferred classroom practices can lay the groundwork for a successful partnership.

### **Getting to Know Each Other**

Co-teachers need to get to know each other to work together effectively. It is crucial that co-teachers learn about each other. Conderman et al. (2009) express that gathering information about your co-teaching partner, listening, and conveying a sincere interest in understanding their point of view builds rapport and establishes an important foundation for further relationship development.

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. Results from collaborative style inventories provide a vehicle for discussing ways to use each teacher's strengths within an environment that fosters respect (Conderman et al., 2009).

### **Trust, Respect, Relationship**

There are many methods to help develop a good working relationship. It is having open communication, being supportive of each other, consistent, and dependable are just a few examples of how to create a positive relationship. Cultivating mutual trust and respect enables instructors to be authentic and navigate fluidly through the complex uncertainty of working in the moment with each other, with the students, with the curriculum, and with the co-created knowledge (Lock et al., 2016).

Daily communication allows for co-teaching partners to check in with each other and adjust to issues that might arise. Lock et al. (2016) state that ongoing, open communication is necessary to develop the relationship and the day-to-day teaching practice. There is a need to develop trust to allow for rich dialogue, as well as to accommodate discussions about what is

working, but also to address what is not working and why. When co-teaching partners can trust each other, they will divide the teaching roles fairly between them. Understanding and respecting each other's preferred mode and method of communication fosters mutual respect, reduces the likelihood of being misunderstood, and maximizes collaboration (Conderman et al., 2009).

### **Developing a Co-teaching Plan and Identifying Classroom Roles**

Developing a co-teaching plan allows the teachers to discuss classroom roles and expectations. The plan should be developed before class starts and should be a written working document that can be changed as the year progresses. Completing an inventory provides an initial communication and planning tool. Putting thoughts in writing helps teams articulate their views and provides a product that teachers can frequently revisit and revise (Conderman et al., 2009).

Many co-teaching teachers still believe that the general education teacher is the lead teacher and the special education teacher assists in the classroom. It is essential that the co-teaching teachers talk about their roles and responsibilities to ensure that these old ideas do not come true. The traditional belief that the general education teacher holds the majority of the responsibility for the classroom instruction while the sped teacher functions in a support role indicate a lack of a true cohesive partnership as defined by the co-teach research for effective implementation (Friend et al., 2010). Negotiating roles and a willingness to re-explore one's professional identity are at the root of a successful co-teaching team (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013).

### **Learning in the Moment**

Co-teaching does require a substantial amount of planning, but teachers also must be able to navigate in the moment and still work as a team. Co-instructors need to be in tune with the

students' day-to-day in-class experiences and contributions. This awareness helps facilitate how the instructor responds in an informed manner to the diversity of student voice, learning needs, and learning styles (Lock et al., 2016).

### **Reflection and De-Briefing**

Co-teachers need to self-reflect upon how the co-teaching relationship is working and evaluate how specific strategies work. The reflection allows for any needed changes in classroom routines, unit planning, or classroom management (Howard & Potts, 2009). Co-teachers can do this by having de-briefing sessions after class or at the end of the day. This can be a short meeting or communication where the teachers can reflect on instruction and make corrective modifications for the next lesson. It also allows them to look at the bigger picture and see how their partnership works in the inclusive classroom. Lock et al. (2016) reported that it was through reflective practice that co-instructors began to deconstruct what was required to be successful collaborators when working in a co-teaching relationship.

### **Identifying Challenges**

Co-teaching will not be perfect, and challenges will arise between the co-teaching partners. It is important to have open communication with each other to deal with the issues before they get out of hand. Identifying and addressing challenges were critical components of a successful co-teaching relationship (Lock et al., 2016).

### **Response to Disagreements**

At times the challenges in the inclusive classroom may cause disagreements with the co-teaching teachers. Whether the topic concerns student discipline, teaching strategies, or neatness of a classroom, negotiating an acceptable compromise to both partners is much easier if accomplished before either person is annoyed or frustrated (Friend, 2008). It is essential to

establish a plan for resolution at the beginning of the partnership. Lock et al. (2016) suggest to develop a mutually agreed-upon process for resolution. This process can be written to ensure fairness and equity when identifying issues and developing solutions. The plan can be developed while creating the co-teaching plan and adjusted as needed. Co-teachers must continue to have open communication, even in times of disagreement. The ability and confidence to openly discuss and negotiate these tensions result in a stronger and healthy partnership (Lock et al., 2016).

### **Training Together**

(Need to find more information. I have left this in so I do not forget it.)

### **Professional Development**

Today there are many students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms with a general education and a special education teacher. Co-teaching ensures that students with disabilities receive their individual specialized instruction while having access to the general curriculum. However, teachers are not always adequately trained on how to co-teach effectively. Chitiyo (2017) surveyed 77 current or past co-teachers about barriers that hinder the use of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. The results showed that 62% of the co-teachers reported they lacked the skills required for implementing co-teaching.

The research shows that teachers want more professional development to increase their knowledge of implementing co-teaching strategies more effectively in the classroom (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013; Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015; Chitiyo, 2017). Co-teaching professional development can provide educators with a multiplicity of opportunities to improve on how they meet the academic and behavioral needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015).

### **Pre-teaching Training**

There is a current push to get pre-service teachers co-teaching training before teaching in the classroom. Chitiyo & Brinda (2018) express that for pre-service teachers, there is an urgent need for teacher education programs to develop and offer mandatory courses that focus on teaching their students about co-teaching. Preparing teachers to co-teach, selecting strategies based on the content to be taught, and providing teachers opportunities to continue building their co-teaching skills are essential (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013).

### **Administration Support**

Conderman et al. (2009) report that co-teachers may need direction at the beginning of their professional relationship to guide their initial efforts. It will be up to the administration to help guide the teachers or find support for them in the classroom.

Ongoing implementation of co-teaching requires much backing from the school administration. Teachers need extra time for co-planning to discuss their co-instruction and co-assessment. Teachers implementing a co-teaching approach must have time to allocate for co-planning and reflection meetings (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010). Co-teachers will also need ongoing professional development on co-teaching models, strategies, implementation, and effective partner collaboration.

Schools and districts that want teachers to follow through with adopting co-teaching as an effective strategy for positively changing student outcomes in inclusive classrooms will need to build follow-up support into co-teaching professional development for teachers and administrators (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013). This follow-up support should be knowledgeable about co-teaching practices and can offer insight. Partnership was a theme echoed by each of the

teachers, and the need for accountability through a mentor, coach, administrator, or other invested party is clear (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013).

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this literature review is the scope of research studies that were reported. At times, there were only a few participants who were studied. The small sample size of participants does not speak for the entirety of all co-teaching teachers.

### **Conclusion**

There is little data about creating an effective partnership between the general education and special education teacher published in the last ten years. Co-teaching has filled a vacuum created by special education law so that students with disabilities can be educated in the least restrictive environment possible. Both general and special education teachers are being thrown into a situation where they are uneducated and untrained. More research is needed to create a comprehensive database of best practices for co-teaching partners.

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