

Co-Teaching

A Guide for Special and General Education Teachers

Outline

I. Introduction

- A. Define co-teaching
- B. Purpose

II. Body

- A. Choosing a co-teaching partner
- B. Collaboration
 - 1. Planning/meeting time
 - 2. Instruction Delivery
 - a) Choosing co-teaching model
 - b) Assigning roles
 - c) Conflict resolution
 - d) Reflection
- C. Benefits for students
 - 1. General ed. students
 - 2. Special ed. students
- D. Benefits for teachers
 - 1. General ed. teacher
 - 2. Special ed. Teacher
 - 3. Professional learning communities (PLC)

III. Conclusion

- A. Restate main idea/points
- B. Take-away message

Historically, special and general education teachers have separately taught the same students in isolation of one another. Today, all teachers practice collaboration as a standard to prepare and deliver instruction to students with and without disabilities (Pratt, 2014). All teachers have the responsibility to provide each student his/her right to a quality education with positive and differentiated programs in both the primary and secondary level of education. Through identifying each student's strengths and challenges, researched-based lessons and strategies can be implemented to improve and build on each student's skill base. Every student deserves to feel successful and valuable. Teachers need to create an environment that is conducive for active learning. After all, students are indeed active and not passive learners. Teachers who produce such environments, present knowledge and content through a variety of formats, so as to include all students in the learning process (Schrum, 2005).

In the United States today, more than half of all students who qualify for special education services under IDEA, are receiving educational instruction in the general education classroom, for more than 80% of the academic school day (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013). Special and general education teachers are looking for new tools to better address the needs of the students with disabilities, in order to provide an effective and meaningful education. For many teachers, this comes in the form of co-teaching.

Co-teaching Defined

Co-teaching is an alternative approach to instructional delivery in which the general and special education teacher have shared teaching responsibilities by planning, delivering, and assessing instruction together in a single classroom. The purpose of using

the co-teaching model for special and general education teachers is to provide services to students with disabilities successfully in the general education classroom, with the proper structures in place. This includes the use of research-based instruction and tools (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013). The co-teaching instructional model allows students whom have academic or behavior issues to be provided with differentiated lesson content in the least restrictive environment of the general education setting (Walsh, 2012).

Even though the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) both support inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education classroom, this is not a mandated practice by either law. Regardless, co-teaching is quickly becoming a preferred delivery model for instruction and services of students with disabilities (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013).

The popularity of teaching inclusive classrooms using the co-teaching model has caused the function and structure to evolve over time. As the model evolves so do the perceptions among special and general education teachers regarding this method of instruction and service delivery. Using a co-teaching model does not fit the teaching philosophies of every individual teacher. Therefore, choosing a co-teaching partner who is a willing participant is vital. (Austin, 2001).

Choosing a Co-teaching Partner

The foundation to a successful co-teaching environment is the relationship between the special and general education teachers. As with any relationship, the key component is clear and honest communication between parties. Preparing to use this method of instruction and service delivery takes an extensive amount of collaboration,

planning, and a motivation by all involved. Districts that support the co-teaching model need to understand the importance of allowing participation in this style of teaching to be accepted on a voluntary level, rather than a mandatory practice (Austin, 2001).

Schools that promote collaborative teaching practices and support the co-teaching model need to do this openly and bring all educators together who are interested in using this method of teaching. This responsibility may fall on an individual teacher or a group of teachers to provide a list of educators willing to participate, from that educational community. This may be as simple as sending out an email to identify the teachers interested in co-teaching or have a sign-up form in the office or teacher's lounge. This allows other teachers interested in using the co-teaching model to identify potential partners.

Finding a teaching partner whom is a good match is important. Clear and honest communication is critical for the success of a collaborative partnership. A co-teaching team needs to purposefully communicate each individual's beliefs, philosophies, and feelings toward the academic achievement of students in the classroom. This may include what roles and responsibilities one feels comfortable performing.

One tool to accomplish this task is for each member fill out a *beliefs survey*. The results of each participant should be analyzed jointly to better understand each person's perspective and teaching styles. The *beliefs survey* should be completed at the beginning of each school year, before any planning of instruction takes place. This will help each member of the co-teaching team to better construct effective instruction based on the results. Teachers reflect on components that must be present in order to deliver high-quality instruction and classroom structure such as behavior management, lesson

planning instructional delivery, and student learning. Taking the survey allows each member to identify areas of unity in philosophy that will enhance their success as a team. This will also make apparent any areas of discrepancy that need to be addressed initially to prevent future conflicts, both in planning and delivery (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013). In addition, the survey should be taken mid-semester/year to reflect any progress of the co-teaching team. As members become more familiar and comfortable with one another, the co-teaching styles and responsibilities may change or evolve.

Co-teaching teams will vary in the time required to develop a symbiotic relationship that draw on the strengths of each member. Teachers that possess many similarities from the *beliefs survey* are more likely progress faster than individuals who need to give more attention and build on those components. Once a teaching harmony is established, any challenges encountered will be external to their relationship and related to student or administrative elements (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013). Members of a co-teaching team must always take time to reflect on aspects of the teaching relationship before the start of another instructional period to make sure that relationship components continue to be met.

Collaboration

Open communication is also the cornerstone of effective collaboration. Teachers attempting to co-teach must take time to learn about each other through honest and open communication that will strengthen the partnership. Each member should feel comfortable sharing information and ideas that will help drive successful lesson planning. Co-teaching cannot exist unless both parties are willing to collaborate. This means, as a

supporting team member, one must be willing to compromise and reach agreements on lesson and classroom components. Providing room for compromise during the planning and preparation stages helps to maintain a positive unity within the co-teaching team. Being mindful of this will ensure that each teacher will feel satisfied and valued as the team moves forward with instruction planning, choosing the appropriate co-teaching method, conflict resolution, and assigning roles. Effectively communicating during preparation and instruction delivery ensures co-teaching team members will take a shared responsibility for the classroom-learning environment.

The special and general education professional each possesses unique qualities and expertise that need to be applied in the interdependent relationship. Both teachers need to actively instruct, manage the classroom, and assess student learning. Success in student learning occurs when each teacher's role is distinguished based on his/her specific expertise in content knowledge and differentiation for learning (Pratt, 2014).

Planning and Preparation Time

Educators who have participated in co-teaching report that allocating common time for planning, where both members can actively participate, is a serious struggle. Co-teaching is a collaborative method and requires collaborative planning. Co-planning is an essential element of co-teaching. Teachers need to spend time getting to know one another, share teaching skills, philosophies, and perspectives. Co-planning must take place on a weekly basis (Hang, Rabren, 2009; 2008). In fact, many teachers participating in co-teaching agree the special and general education teachers should meet daily to plan lessons (Austin, 2001). This planning time is necessary to discuss instructional issues,

behavior management, teacher's roles and responsibilities, and student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals. Co-planning ensures that all students in a co-taught classroom receive appropriate instruction (Hang, Rabren, 2009; 2008).

Time is the most valuable element in education. Teachers need to maximize the time spent planning for instruction. As co-teachers develop a meeting schedule to plan future lessons, developing a meeting agenda is imperative. Setting an agenda to determine the type and purpose for the meeting will help focus the conversation and maximize time. Unrelated issues that arise during a set meeting can be tabled for future discussion with a separate meeting set to address each topic. At the conclusion of each meeting or planning session, identify an action plan, deadlines for achieving the goal, and the next meeting date. Both teachers need to commit to a schedule of collaborative planning, whether the meeting is face-to-face or through alternative means of communication. Teachers will use this time to not only plan future lessons but also reflect and adjust instructional elements to maintain an effective learning environment (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013).

Teachers that have reported difficulty allocating specific blocks of common planning time attributed this to inadequate administrative support and conflicting schedules (Pratt, 2014). High-quality instructional planning is critical for a teacher to achieve success with any lesson but is particularly necessary in a co-taught classroom. A quality lesson defines learning objectives and activities for the success of all students (Dieker, 2001).

Co-teachers who are unable to agree on common planning times are still able to practice effective collaboration. Tools such as email and Google Docs can allow teachers

to share ideas without being in the same room. Teachers who choose to communicate ideas and lesson components by alternative formats may find using a lesson plan template efficient. Using a template enables both parties to simultaneously collaborate on instruction planning without the burden of finding a common planning time. However, meeting face-to-face is still important to foster healthy discussions, conflict resolutions, assessing student progress, and even deciding which co-teaching model can be used to best deliver instruction (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013).

Choosing a Co-teaching Model

Once a schedule of planning sessions has been established, co-teachers can begin to examine instructional factors such as student ability, academic performance, disabilities, and content. This will allow the co-teaching team to determine lesson objectives and choose which co-teaching model will deliver the most effective instruction. Currently, six models for co-teaching have been established and are commonly used in educational settings. These models include: (1) one teach, one observe, (2) one teach, one assist, (3) station teaching, (4) parallel teaching, (5) alternative teaching, and (6) teaming/team teaching. Teams need to carefully consider their lesson plans and objectives as various models may provide a better structure for mastering specific goals. For example, differentiated objectives might be best met using station teaching and varied assessment outcomes with alternative teaching or parallel teaching. In addition, teachers should also consider the physical space of a classroom, as this may affect the implementation of a specific co-teaching model. For example, an environmental factor might include a small classroom size that can lead to overcrowding. This may impede certain co-teaching models such as parallel teaching or station teaching.

Understanding the diverse needs of each student will allow co-teachers to identify a model that will most effectively meet the needs of the entire group. Co-teaching teams need to also be mindful that with any given lesson plan, more than one co-teaching model may be used. The model chosen for group instruction may be different than the model used for guided practice, while independent practice might require a third. For example, when delivering new information, using the one teach, one assist model may be most beneficial, while station teaching may be most effective for independent practice to support varied levels of need. Co-teaching allows for flexibility in order to respond to each student's individual needs. Being flexible is essential to the impact of lesson delivery and can be acquired through practice and experience as the co-teaching team continues to build a relationship. No matter which co-teaching model is chosen, both teachers need to feel as if he/she is integral to the instruction delivery process (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013).

Assigning Roles

Once the co-teaching team has chosen a model and developed a plan for instruction, teachers should assign specific roles and responsibilities for each other. This will ensure accurate delivery of the lesson plan. Specific roles must be assigned in a collaborative manner. Since the special and general education teacher each possesses unique qualities and expertise, gaining an understanding of individual perceptions toward various teaching responsibilities should be realized. Assigning roles can be a cause of confusion over the responsibilities between the special and general educators. This confusion can be increased if the special education teacher does not assume roles equal to

his/her general education counterpart. This can be due to lack of knowledge of specific content information. Roles and responsibilities that are not clearly defined typically result with instruction dominated solely by the general education teacher (Dieker, 2001).

Identifying and understanding roles and responsibilities before classroom instruction is initiated fosters a healthier relationship between members of the co-teaching team and reflects a strong and unified bond that will be obvious to students.

To accomplish this, each teacher should complete a *responsibility survey*. This will include what roles and responsibilities one feels comfortable performing (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013). The results of this second survey will compliment each individual's beliefs, philosophies, and feelings toward academic achievement, established in the *beliefs survey*. Continuing with the concept of open and honest communication, each member should discuss the survey results to assign roles and responsibilities collaboratively. Both surveys should open up communication regarding individual expectations and responsibilities for each member's role in the classroom.

A final component to consider is the level of knowledge each teacher has of the content. The amount of content knowledge each individual possesses will determine his/her comfort and ability to undertake specific responsibilities. Familiarity and comfort with the content of a lesson is important for delivering clear and explicit instruction. As co-teaching teams begin working together initially, current practice recommends assigning special education teachers to one content area where he/she feels most fluent to develop co-teaching proficiency. This strategy is more effective than expecting high levels of knowledge in a variety of content areas and helps increase the amount of instruction the special education teacher will deliver by elevating his/her comfort level

(Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013). Typically, co-teaching between special and general education teachers does not occur across every content area and is normally limited to one or two classes/content area each school day.

Instructional Delivery

In an effort for both members of the co-teaching team to delivery substantive instruction, the co-teaching model must be introduced to the students within the first instructional session. This will establish how each teacher shares equality in the classroom related to instruction delivery. However, this should not imply that established responsibilities for each teacher would remain the same, as roles and responsibilities often shift as the classroom environment evolves.

As members of a specific co-teaching team continue to build a teaching relationship over multiple instructional sessions, individuals may feel more confident with specific content, which will enable increased teaching with new instruction while supporting student learning. In contrast, if a member of the team feels less confident in specific content areas, opportunities for that individual to deliver substantive instruction are still possible. In these situations, teachers can review the previously learner material during the introductory parts of a lesson, complete guided practice with students following the delivery of instruction, or oversee independent practice for small groups of students (Austin, 2001).

No matter how the co-teaching team decides to share the roles and responsibilities to allow for meaningful instruction, the process must be collaborative. Using the information from the *beliefs* and *responsibilities survey*, members of a co-teaching team have the means to establish a solid foundation for effective delivery of instruction. The

fostering of open and clear communication during each step of planning will ensure a collaborative relationship that is resistant to conflict. However, team members should expect to encounter instances of conflict from time to time. This is a natural element of co-teaching, and one that can be managed through healthy conflict resolution strategies (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013).

Proactive co-teaching teams can reduce the occurrence of conflicts through the initial discussions when the partnership is established. At that time, members discuss openly instructional-related issues and philosophies important to each individual. However, conflicts can still develop throughout the progression of instructional sessions, despite effective communication and planning. In an effort to reduce the impact these disagreements may have on the overall relationship of the co-teaching team, members need to develop a process for conflict resolution that both can agree to. A tool such as a conflict resolution plan-outline can aid in these situations.

To successfully resolve any conflict, each teacher needs to start by identifying the issue and then developing various courses of remediation. Maintaining honest and clear communication is vital for reaching a solution. Together, both teachers need to evaluate risks and benefits of each course of action. Once a course of action has been decided upon and implemented, the results should be examined to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Each of these steps is outline on the conflict resolution form. Taking ownership for consequences, correcting potentially negative consequences, or reengaging in the decision-making process in critical (Condermann, 2011). Co-teaching teams should often take opportunities to reflect on elements of instruction delivery as well as the co-teacher's relationship to evaluate effectiveness (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013).

Collaboration takes place at each step of the co-teaching process and teachers need to assess the progression not only of instructional practices, but also the relationship of the co-teaching team. This can best be accomplished through reflection of these various components. Reflection is one critical role that each member must share. One tool for teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of instruction is to use assessment data. Analyzing assessment information can guide future lesson planning and decision-making. Each member of the co-teaching team should be monitoring student progress. This monitoring is conducted at two points during the instructional period. A formative assessment is established during delivery and a summative evaluation is performed at the end of a unit. Teachers can perform these types of assessments through observation during instruction, independent work samples, quizzes, and unit tests. Regardless of the method chosen, the co-teaching team needs to be able to collect this student assessment information, track and analyze student progress, and make instructional decisions based on the data. Both teachers should reflect collaboratively on how well students achieve and how well the lesson was delivered. This will allow the team to make adjust delivery techniques for future lessons to ensure student growth (Dieker, 2001). Teachers may also find taking notes collaboratively in a co-teaching journal or log, helpful when reflecting from lesson to lesson and year to year. Members can use this culmination of records to influence future lesson planning by discriminating specific co-teaching models and instructional delivery methods from specific content areas and classroom environments (Brown, Howerter, Morgan, 2013).

Upon reflection, each member of the co-teaching team needs be mindful that both educators share a common goal for the success of every student. When co-teachers are

proactive and establish a solid plan for the delivery of content, conflict resolution, and reflection, both teachers are working to ensure high-quality academic success for each individual student receiving instruction in the co-taught classroom.

Co-teaching Benefits for Students

Collaboration in inclusive education has become an international expectation, ensuring that all teachers work together to provide a meaningful education to students with and without disabilities. Research indicates that using the co-teaching model benefits all students (Pratt, 2014). One way educators can measure the effectiveness of co-teaching is by student satisfaction (Dieker, 2001). Students have a vested interest in their education and are stakeholders in the success of the co-taught inclusive classroom structure. Students exposed to a co-taught classroom reported an overall approval of the instructional format. Reports indicate they received more academic assistance and had fewer behavior-related incidents. The increased monitoring of students by two teachers allowed early detection and correction of inappropriate behavior. This led to fewer office referrals and decreased strain on administration (Hang, Rabren, 2009; 2008). Teachers also reported an increased level of self-confidence, academic performance, and social skills in students with disabilities (Austin 2001). Similarly, students with disabilities also demonstrated an increased level of appropriate behavior in inclusive co-taught classrooms than was apparent in a resource classroom setting. Students with emotional/behavior disorders (EBD) benefited from peer modeling of appropriate classroom behavior from students without disabilities. Data indicates how students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) receiving instruction in a co-taught classroom showed

higher grades in core courses and an increase in attendance than students in pullout programs. Inclusive classrooms give students without disabilities the opportunity to gain an understanding of the learning difficulties those students with disabilities experience. This exposure promotes tolerance and acceptance for individual uniqueness.

Students with disabilities had greater access to the general curriculum through inclusive co-taught classrooms. Students without disabilities who receive instruction in a co-taught environment perform significantly better on state assessments than peers in a traditional general education classroom. Similarly, the greater access to the general curriculum allows students with disabilities to perform at a higher level on state math and reading assessments. Co-taught classrooms can be considered a high-leverage strategy that increase achievement and shrinks the achievement gap in reading and math for students with disabilities. As co-teaching models are increasingly applied across school districts, students with disabilities will continue to realize and be strengthened by these benefits while teachers continue growing in their professional development (Walsh, 2012).

Co-teaching Benefits for Teachers

A majority of teachers who participated in co-teaching agreed the experience contributed to improving his/her individual teaching practices, perspective, and professional development. As part of this collaborative process, both members of the co-teaching team are able to draw from one another's unique experiences and expertise to enhanced his/her own individual teaching practices. Specifically, special education teachers increased content knowledge, while general education teachers improved

classroom management and curriculum adaptation (Austin, 2001). Teachers gained a pronounced willingness to collaborate and proactively address challenges related to students, faculty, and seeking out new teaching strategies. Using the co-teaching model is also beneficial for new teachers in providing peer mentoring and collaboration (Pratt, 2014).

The popularity of co-teaching has led to a growing number of school districts providing professional development programs to support teachers interested in co-teaching. There is an increasing emphasis on the “power of two” teachers to develop instruction that takes full advantage of both teacher’s unique expertise and skills to address the individual needs of all students. These programs need to outline and demonstrate a variety of co-teaching models as they relate to differentiation of instruction to benefit diverse learners in the co-taught classroom. In addition, strategies for teachers to tier assignments and scaffold support for students also needs to be included. These strategies can be complimented with materials and activities to promote increased student engagement (Walsh, 2012). As districts work to develop and improve these professional development programs promoting co-teaching in schools, teachers and administration need to work collaboratively to develop programs that are comprehensive and ongoing. Professional development is truly an essential element to the continuous improvement of teaching strategies and professional growth.

Conclusion

When the special and general education teachers effectively establish a productive co-teaching environment, they not only development of a strong teaching partnership, but

also foster a positive learning environment where all students have an equal opportunity for success. Simply providing external supports is not predictive of co-teaching success. Instead, teachers need to establish and improve on challenges in constructing a compatible co-teaching relationship by learning and drawing from each teacher's unique qualities and expertise (Pratt, 2014). Students are highly receptive to co-teaching, evoking a high level of student participation, an increased tolerance of individual difference, and cooperation with teachers and peers. When administrators are receptive to the needs of successful co-teaching teams, teachers will be inspired to continue co-teaching and foster wide acceptance for all collaborative teaching models among colleagues (Austin, 2001).

Professional development opportunities are critical for the training of teachers willing to participate in the co-teaching model. Training needs to incorporate the necessary skills for implementing co-teaching effectively and also skills related to open and honest communication between team members. Programs need to promote collaboration in an inclusive setting for all teachers. This will train individuals to avoid or mediate interpersonal conflicts. Effective professional development will result in successful co-teaching experiences fostering a positive learning environment where students and teacher alike are excited participants. Using the co-teaching model effectively is capable of increasing student achievement.

There is a clear relationship between higher achievement on state standardized tests for students with and without disabilities. Students who receive special education services in a co-taught classroom benefit from strong academic and behavior growth,

through differentiated instruction and peer modeling of behavior by students without disabilities (Walsh, 2012).

Co-teaching should not be viewed only, as a way to allow students with disabilities to interact with peers without disabilities, for social benefits. Rather, co-teaching offers a wide range of benefits to both students with and without disabilities. The full potential of co-teaching is still being realized and the cumulative effects on the entire educational community are invaluable.

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