

CO-TEACHING TO BENEFIT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION  
STUDENTS OF ALL AGES

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CO-TEACHING TO BENEFIT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION  
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## ABSTRACT

### CO-TEACHING TO BENEFIT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENTS OF ALL AGES

The purpose of this research was to introduce the best practices in co-teaching in which a special education teacher joins a general education content specialist to deliver content to special education and general education students in a single environment. Co-teaching has become increasingly popular in public schools as pressure from state and federal mandates have increased over the last decade. As the push for co-teaching continues, practitioners seek professional development and administration guidance to create a partnership that flourishes and a student experience that increases content knowledge. Educators asked to co-teach often are left without the foundational knowledge of the common structures of co-teaching and the time to research and implement a design that fits the needs to the staff and students. Though the research shows a definite increase in the positive experiences for teachers and learners alike, the behind the scenes co-planning is often done without the knowledge of best practices, which are desperately needed.

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# **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

## **Background**

“Approaches to team teaching were described in the 1960s (Beggs, 1964), and co-teaching formally emerged about 40 years later in response to federal laws.” (Making Inclusion Work with Co-Teaching, in Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). Co-teaching has been present in education for decades, yet educators continue to report a persistent struggle in implementation and long-term adherence to the program. This study will highlight the common models of co-teaching, the triumphs and struggles that educators go through while co-teaching, and the benefits to school districts, educators, and most importantly, student outcomes.

## **Statement of the Problem**

As co-teaching gains momentum as a best practice in placement for students with disabilities, there is a general feeling of uneasiness among school administrators and content area specialists. The low level of buy in from these two groups is often cited in reasons why the co-teaching program was unsuccessful. Outdated, inaccurate assumptions have shaped the minds of many in education who do not identify themselves as working with students with disabilities. Some of the most common reasons co-teaching doesn't work include disruption in focused time for general education students, time “wasted” on fundamental concepts for students who are academically behind, and an inability to teach high level concepts to students with identified disabilities.

Though more recent research indicates that the reasons listed above are all incorrect, this new information has not reached many veteran staff in public schools. Content area specialists are faced with initiatives to close the gap on standardized test scores between high achieving students and lower performing students, who often face additional personal challenges as well.

Coupled with the increased demands at a state and federal level for special education teachers to ensure their students are learning in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), co-teaching seems to be a natural answer to many of the issues public schools are facing today.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Co-teaching:* Friend (2000) described co-teaching as instruction provided by a special educator and a general educator in the general education classroom designed to accommodate the needs of students with and without disabilities (Wexler, 2018).

*Inclusion:* The act of including students with identified disabilities into the general education educational experience.

*Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA):* A federal mandate that ensure all children in the United States get a free and appropriate education (FAPE) and access to special education services if needed.

*Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):* To the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate students with disabilities in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports, referred to as “supplementary aids and services,” along with their nondisabled peers in the school they would attend if not disabled (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011).

*Individualized Education Plane (IEP):* A federally mandated, one-year plan created by a student with an identified disability, parents, special education staff, therapists, general education staff, and other identified team members. The IEP outlines current data (academical and functional),

goals for improvement, personalized accommodations and modifications to the educational experience to ensure success, and progress updates throughout the year.

*General Education Teacher:* A content specialist in one discipline of academics and delivers instruction to students with and without disabilities.

*Special Education Teacher:* A teacher who specializes in differentiation, intervention, accommodations and modifications for students with identified disabilities.

*Professional Development:* Opportunities for educators to increase knowledge in their specialty, be exposed to relevant best practice, and increase their student outcomes with new skills.

*Incidental Benefits:* The idea that students who are in close proximity or sharing an environment with students with special needs and their special education teachers will receive re-teaching, extra assistance, and deeper understanding by having more exposure to the content.

*Differentiation:* Adapting lessons to all student ability levels.

### **Purpose of the Study**

“...more time spent in a general education classroom was positively correlated with few absences from school, few referrals for disruptive behavior, and better outcomes after high school in areas of employment and independent living” (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006) (Bui, Quirk, Alamanan, Valenti, 2010). This exciting and promising information has been

available for over a decade, and yet educational practitioners still hold on to misinformation based on personal experiences as ways to avoid participation in co-teaching. General education and special education students alike are missing out on valuable experiences that would enhance their academic and personal lives. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the practice of co-teaching and its effects on stakeholders. This evaluation will then be shared with those stakeholders to change minds and open classrooms to students of all abilities.

### **Significance of the Study**

Co-teaching practices are being implemented across the nation in increasing numbers. Blurring the lines between general education and special education is a practice that most in special education believe in and desire to implement. The hesitation lies mostly in the population of teachers in general education. By solely focusing on student outcome, general education teachers will be more open to co-teaching with a special education teacher when equipped with the information and knowledge of the power co-teaching holds for all students.

In alignment with my personal experiences in co-teaching across grade levels (ages 3-19), I believe that co-teaching is an educational practice in which all students can benefit. This research outlines methods and outcomes for stakeholders that highlight that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

### **Methodology**

Research for this study was done using EBSCO host and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education's database ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) to generate my primary and secondary sources. The following words were used while searching best practices in co-teaching: "coteach(ing)", "co-teach(ing)", and

“inclusion.” Additionally, many sources were found in books and online while gathering knowledge for my own experiences in co-teaching.

## **CHAPTER II REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Commonly Used Co-Teaching Models**

There are six identified models of co-teaching. Though all are accepted and researched, some are more utilized than others. As a co-teaching team becomes more comfortable as a pair and trust is built, many partnerships begin to branch out more and experiment with different models of delivery. Co-teaching models should be selected based on student need and desired student outcomes (Willard, 2019).

The most commonly used model is the One Teach, One Assist model. This model is often used in a whole group setting. In secondary education, this lends naturally to the content area specialist teaching the concepts and the special education teacher assisting struggling students (general education and special education) and in accessing the knowledge and comprehending the concepts. As the special education teacher learns the content knowledge more soundly and the content area specialist learns how to adapt and modify lessons for all learners, the lines become more blurred and the co-teachers may start switching roles (Willard, 2019).

Another whole group instruction model is Team Teaching. This happens when both co-teachers stand in front of the class and deliver the content together. They may alternate who speaks, fill in for each other naturally, or a combination of the two (Willard, 2019).

Parallel Teaching is done when the class is broken into two groups, though ability levels could be combined or separated. This is best used when there is hands-on learning expected. One teacher would take one group, while the other instructs the second group at the same time. Both teachers would be responsible for the delivery of content for their group (Willard, 2019).

Station Teaching is another small group model. Students are separated into small groups and rotate through the different stations the co-teachers have designed. Some stations may be independent, while others are teacher-led (Willard, 2019).

Alternative Teaching is a more traditionally thought model. One teacher is teaching the majority of the class, while the second teacher instructs a small group of students. This can be used for re-teaching, intervention, extension, or individual skill reinforcement (Willard, 2019).

One Teach-One Observe is used for a variety of reasons. As one teacher is delivering content, the other is observing and note-taking. This may be to gather data on student behavior, teaching practices, troubleshooting issues in the classroom, or investigating situations that have disrupted the classroom learning (Willard, 2019).

As co-teaching partnerships develop, the delivery models will be discovered and experienced. Some of the factors most often considered when selecting a model are the purpose of the learning task, the students' needs, and the expectations for all students (Willard, 2019). Co-teachers must also consider the strengths and weaknesses of their partnership. Some models rely heavily on one teacher, while others rely equally on both teachers. These models are decided upon during co-planning time, but with the expectation of natural shifts based on student feedback and outcomes (Cook & McDuffie-Landrum, 2020).

### **The Benefits of Professional Development and Administration Support**

“The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms necessitates collaboration between administrators, general educators, special educators, parents, and the related service providers in order to deliver quality services to all students” (Bui, Quirk, Alamanan, Valenti, 2010). Administrators are often the igniting point when making systemic changes to the delivery model of content in a school. Without approval and support from

administrators, teacher buy-in remains low, options to overcome struggle are slim, and longevity of a program is cut short. “Implementing that support access to general education contexts such as moving from a continuum of placements model to a continuum of services model, where services are provided to students with disabilities in the general education contexts as much as possible before considering a separate placements represents a critical step in increasing opportunities for students with disabilities to learn with peers without disabilities” (Frattura, & Capper, 2007)” (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013). It is critical to have administration support to use a backwards model of placement for special education students start with the idea of placing the student in general education and layer supports. Common practice in many schools is to place students in special education setting and “work their way out” but that day never comes (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013).

One of the foundational attributes of a successful co-teaching team is strong, open communication. Concurrent preparation periods can be scheduled to ensure a sustained amount of uninterrupted time to adapt the co-serving model. During this time, the co-teaching pair focus on co-planning. Co-planning encompasses the time in which not only the lesson is planned, but the model of co-teaching is discussed, the anticipated student misconceptions are navigated, and the differentiated expectations of student outcome are decided. Throughout the day, co-teaching pairs can practice quick check ins to touch base, make changes in response to student need, and provide immediate feedback (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

### **The Triumph and Struggles of Teachers Engaged in Co-Serving**

Putting two independent professionals together to serve a common group of students sounds easy and flawless on paper, so why are there so many issues when it comes to

implementation? “General education and special education teachers are trained through pedagogical perspectives and this can create challenges when they are assigned to teach in an inclusion classroom and provide educational opportunities for children with disabilities and children without disabilities” (Howard, 2019). General education teachers become experts in their content, hence the name content specialists. These teachers craft their lessons to deliver the information that they themselves know by heart. Often these teachers excelled in their own school experience and do not identify with students who struggle academically. Special education teachers on the other hand have spent their teacher preparation years learning how to adapt lessons and deliver information to students in ways that are often thought of as outside the box. Some of these teachers excelled in school, but not all. Many special education teachers’ unique personal experiences are what drive them to the profession. When general education and special education teachers come together, it can be a war of wills as they discover how to approach their now-shared classroom experience (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

In the beginning of this partnership, often referred to as a ‘dance’ or a ‘marriage,’ it is imperative that the co-teachers spend ample time getting to know one another (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). This is often done outside of the traditional school year, during summer in-service, before/after school time, and can even be done electronically. In the book *30 Days to the Co-Taught Classroom* by Dr. Paula Kluth and Dr. Julie Causton, it is encouraged that teambuilding is the main focus from the first meeting. In their first activity, the co-teaching partnership spend time getting to know each other’s hobbies, preferences, and attitudes about how they perceive the co-teaching experience to build. By getting to know personalities, classroom and behavior management preferences, and beliefs about education in general, co-teachers can start to build a framework of trust. “Teacher preparation does not typically include

developing skills to work effectively with colleagues (Friend & Cook, 1990) (Fennick and Liddy, 2001). This also aids rebuilding and recovering in the event of a breakdown of patience, time, and expectation when the school year is in full swing and the co-teaching team experiences high volumes of expectation and stress (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

Another important aspect for the co-teaching team to consider is how to navigate uncomfortable situations and conversations. Many times, the co-teaching sections of a particular class will be larger than other sections to accommodate the number of general education students and the special education students who create this co-teaching experience. When the unexpected happens, how does the team respond? This answer will be different in year one than it is in year three or year ten. The co-teaching model is built on trust, which takes time to build and develop. (Kluth & Causton, 2016).

One of the strongest and most effective ways to succeed in the co-teaching experience is to focus on the common ground, which is student outcome. A model of co-service is typically used, which includes co-planning, co-instructing, co-assessing, and co-managing both the classroom and student behaviors (Cook & Landrum, 2019). It is imperative that co-teachers discuss their roles in the classroom and define each teacher's responsibilities. To further provide clarity, these agreed-upon roles should be written down and revisited frequently. The roles should be clear for not only the co-teachers, but also the students in the co-taught classroom. (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). "The coteaching partnership brings together teachers with different backgrounds and perspectives to problem solve authentic concerns within their shared classroom. While different perspectives at times may cause tension, successful co-teachers remain open-minded and solution oriented" (Willard, 2019). Students who understand the co-teaching roles show more respect to the pair as a whole, whereas students who do not understand

the roles often treat the special education teacher as lesser than the general education teacher, causing confusion and tension in the classroom environment (Orellana & Chaitanya, 2020).

### **The Benefits on Fulfilling Federal and State Mandates and Initiatives**

Special education teachers schedule their days around the federally mandate plans written for each student called Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Quite often the intricate web in which special education teachers spend their day cut into preparation time, which is needed to adapt lessons, progress monitor students, and communicate with stakeholders. As new policies and initiatives have been placed upon special education teachers by the state and federal government, the time in which the special education teacher's craft is created has dwindled. Looking for answers on how to maximize their time, co-teaching is often seen as a light at the end of a very dark tunnel (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012). "Specific policies and legislation (e.g. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) have included mandates—such as serving students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment in which their needs can be met and providing access to the general curriculum and highly qualified teachers—that set the conditions for which the logic of co-teaching was a perfect match" (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). Each Individualized Education Plan is written with the individual student's strengths and weaknesses in mind. The IEP encompasses all that the student has accomplished and the goals for what the IEP team, consisting of parents, special education teachers, parents, administrators, therapists, and any other individuals the team deems appropriate, would like to see accomplished next. The IEP spells out the exact number of minutes of additional services each student requires. The setting is determined ahead of time as well, so the minutes are delivered in a consistent manner (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013).

General education teachers are feeling the heat of the federal and state policies and initiatives as well. Standardized testing has become the barometer of teacher success, as more and more school districts turn up the heat on closing the achievement gap between high achieving and low achieving students. Administrators are feeling the pressure to find new ways to play an old game—graduation requirements. While the requirements to walk across the stage and receive a high school diploma remain the same, the path in which students get there is often varied and unique based on student situations. Not all students learn the same way. Co-teaching lends its hand to the idea that differentiation benefits all students, possibly leading to less credit recovery situations and more demand for alternative modalities of education (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013).

### **The Benefits on Educator Outcomes and Satisfaction**

During a successful co-teaching experience, the positivity is palpable. Teachers who are part of a healthy co-teaching partnership feel more connected to the staff, as they share a purpose and commitment to all student outcomes. As the general education teacher and the special education teacher work together toward a common goal, they also share the success of the students with and without Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Staff who participate in co-teaching experiences report a renewed commitment to the profession and express less burn-out feelings. “Villa, Thousand, and Nevin report that co-teachers have a greater sense of belonging, feel less isolated in their teaching position, and are energized by the stimulating dialogue and social interactions associated with co-teaching. These factors related to job satisfaction fulfill basic needs and help to sustain educators in a challenging profession” (Willard, 2019).

General education teachers who are part of the co-teaching experience also carry their experiences into their other classes that are not co-taught. As the special education teacher shares knowledge of how to provide access to the curriculum for all students, the general education teacher often begins to use those practices throughout the day. The co-taught experiences are very much like an ongoing, daily professional development for both teachers involved as they continue to learn and grow together (Willard, 2019).

### **The Benefits on Student Outcomes and Engagement**

At the center of this entire idea are students with identified disabilities. It is this population that research shows benefit the most from co-teaching practices. By taking them out of self-contained classrooms and instead teaching them among their general education peers, students with identified disabilities retain more knowledge and perform higher than they would if kept in the self-contained classrooms. When looking at reading achievement, "...for each hour spent in general education, students score half a point high on the reading assessment," and the trend continues in mathematics as well, "Each hour participants spend in general education was associated with a .37 increase in standard scores on the mathematics achievement test" (Cosier, Cautston-Theoharis, Theoharis, 2013). It was also noted that student with identified disabilities made more overall academic progress when learning in a co-taught environment versus a self-contained classroom. "41.7% of students with learning disabilities made progress in math in general education classes compared to 34% in traditional special education settings" (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010).

Not only do scores increase for special education students, but their participation does as well. "General education classrooms delivered more instruction, provided a comparable amount

of 1:1 instruction time, addressed content more, and use non-disabled peers more and adults less (Helmstetter, Curry, Brennan, & Sampson-Saul, 1998)” (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010).

One of the most reported fears of general education teachers, administrators, and parents is that students without an identified disability will become distracted, underperform, and not get the help they need when there are students with identified disabilities in the same classroom.

“Results indicate no differences across the three domains when comparing classrooms that included students with severe disabilities and classrooms without students with severe disabilities” (Hollowood, Salisbury, Rainforth, & Palombaro, 1995)” (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010). It has also been observed that students without identified disabilities report that they learn more and understand concepts more deeply due to the accommodations provided for all students by the co-teaching partnership. They also report that they benefit from the relationships and experiences with students with disabilities (Willard, 2019).

All students benefit from the authentic relationships built due to the inclusive co-teaching classroom. All students have new, unique learning opportunities that they would not have experienced otherwise. All students are exposed to new ways of learning, studying, and comprehending concepts due to the dual expertise of the special education teacher and general education teacher at the same time. All students benefit from the tiered delivery model that is used to encompass all learning needs. There are general education students who sometimes need more assistance and there are special education students who master a concept more quickly than expected and can learn concepts even deeper. “...increases in social interaction with typical peers were noted with greater generalization of skills” (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010).

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Co-teaching is not a new idea, yet implementation of successful partnerships that endure the test of time seem to be few and far between. After extensive research and years of personal experience spanning from co-teaching students three years old to legal adults, it is evident that delivering content to students in an environment with a special education teacher and a content specialist/general education teacher benefits all involved.

Co-teaching benefits general education teachers and students. The co-teaching partnership allows general education teachers to expand their knowledge of differentiation and apply that to their current content delivery models, not only in the co-taught experience, but for all classes they teach. Students of all abilities excel when proper educational supports are introduced and these supports are celebrated instead of looked down upon. The relationships made are invaluable: Teachers working together to support one another with a common goal of increasing student outcomes, students of differing abilities working together to scaffold knowledge and learn deeply, and trust being built all around, creating more meaningful lessons and richer learning experiences for all.

Co-teaching benefits special education teachers and students. “S.C. Cook et al. (2017) found one study (Fontana, 2005) that reported that students with disabilities in the co-taught classroom had improved grades compared to students with disabilities in a resource room” (Cook & McDuffie-Landrum, 2019). Students with identified disabilities benefit from being with their same aged peers. They are more engaged when in a general education setting, need less staff support, and naturally strive for loftier goals than when they are in a self-contained special education setting.

In conclusion, co-teaching is best practice for all teachers and all students, regardless of age or ability. Co-teaching shifts the thinking of all educators and students from, “I wonder what they will understand,” to a “Let’s try the same goal as other students and support where we need” attitude. Co-teaching opens the door to the overarching assumption that all students can and will succeed.

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