

One Secondary School's Subject-Area Teachers' Perspectives
on Co-Teaching Students with Special Needs

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Abstract

This study is an action research study conducted at one rural northeastern Pennsylvania junior/senior high school to gain secondary education subject-area teacher's perspectives on educating students with special needs in a co-teaching environment. A written open-ended questionnaire was issued to relevant faculty members which determined that co-teaching has many challenges but is a positive experience overall; co-teachers can be reduced to performing only the tasks of teacher aides; both co-teachers need to know the academic material and be comfortable with each other; and co-teachers must have time to plan lessons together.

Research Purpose and Background

The purpose of this paper intended to gain secondary education subject-area teachers' perspectives on educating students with special needs in a co-teaching environment secondary education at one junior/senior high school in rural northeastern Pennsylvania. According to its personnel directory, 68 secondary education teachers were employed by the school district utilized in this study, 55 of whom were subject-area teachers (and not special education teachers). Nine out of these 55 subject-area teachers responded to a survey e-mailed on February 18, 2015, which yielded a 16% response rate. Two of the respondents did not complete the entire survey, which accounts for the change in the response totals in the tables listed below. The specific subject-area breakdown of the respondents was five science teachers, one industrial arts teacher, one mathematics teacher, one business/computers teacher, and one librarian who also taught at least one course. Four of the subject-area teachers indicated that they never taught with a co-teacher in the special education department, but still responded to the questions in the survey. All respondents' replies were kept confidential in this report.

Design

The research design implemented in this study was action research, with data gathered through responses to an open-ended questionnaire completed by secondary education subject-area teachers.

Survey Questions

Question 1. What are your insights/perspectives on your experience working with your co-teacher(s)?

Special education co-teachers in secondary education:

<i>are aides in the classroom</i>	3
<i>are not always familiar with the material</i>	1
<i>do not plan or teach</i>	1
<i>are great for the classroom environment</i>	1

The insights and perspectives of subject-area teacher regarding their experience working with co-teachers indicated some challenges based upon their experiences with previous colleagues. One respondent elaborated that "(t)he large majority end up being more like glorified (aides) because they are not always as familiar with the material". A second respondent agreed that special education teacher are sometimes

"great to have in class, but sometimes they seem like a glorified aid (sic)."

There were positive responses found integrated with other comments. "It was positive for all students, many times the regular ed students would want to work with the special education teacher and the special education students would not want to" stated one respondent. "Struggling regular education students were also afforded some of the accommodations because of the presence of the co-teacher. The regular education teacher was also able to work in small groups with special and regular education students." A second teacher agreed that "(w)hen I do have a co-teacher that helps out with lessons and teaching, it is a great environment."

Question 2. What are your insights/perspectives on the effect of co-teaching on student achievement?

<i>Students perform better</i>	2
<i>Benefits the classroom culture</i>	1
<i>Student achievement depends upon who the co-teacher is</i>	1

The insights and perspectives of subject-area teachers on the effect of co-teaching on student achievement were primarily positive. One respondent noted that "(e)ven though I have never had a co-teacher, I would think that having another adult in the

room would benefit all students, not just those with IEPs... The regular education teacher is the expert in the content, and the special education teacher is the expert in reaching all students." Another respondent who has had experience with co-teaching noted, "I could see the academic difference in some students between the two classes. They are performing much better in the co-taught class. Obviously co-teaching is effective for these students."

Some responses indicated that there are other factors that must be accounted for regarding student achievement and having a co-teacher in the classroom that may reach beyond the control of both teachers. "It is hard to judge student achievement because many special ed students do poorly in my class" said one respondent. "I suppose without the adaptations and co-teacher they could be doing worse." Another teacher stated, "I have seen that student achievement is not always improved because students do not try or complete homework."

Question 3. What are your insights/perspectives on the overall co-teaching classroom environment?

<i>Helps most with discipline</i>	1
<i>Works well as long as co-teachers are familiar with each other</i>	1
<i>Valuable resource in helping reach students with special needs</i>	1
<i>Co-teaching is extremely beneficial to both students and teachers when it is done well</i>	1

Responses regarding the insights and perspectives of subject-area teachers on the overall co-teaching classroom environment were fairly rich, provided a certain degree of depth, and were varied. One respondent stated that many special education students have social issues and act out more than others. Another noted, "(co-teaching) is not productive when the co-teacher is not comfortable with the material and therefore not comfortable in helping the students due to lack of (subject area) knowledge. Co-teachers should only co-teach in subjects where they are qualified." Another responded pointed out that there must be a level of familiarity between the colleagues. "As long as the teachers are familiar with each other, I think it works well" the teacher stated. "If I am not familiar with the co-teacher, I am afraid to give them too much work that they aren't comfortable with".

Question 4. What are your insights/perspectives on the challenging aspects of co-teaching?

<i>The subject-area teacher must feel comfortable with his/her co-teacher</i>	1
<i>Both subject-area and special education teachers need time to plan together</i>	1
<i>Special education co-teacher is not involved in planning lesson at all or as much as he/she should be</i>	1
<i>Most co-teachers do not know enough subject area knowledge to be effective</i>	1

The insights and perspectives on the challenging aspects of co-teaching for subject-area teachers indicated frustration in many ways. One respondent was sympathetic in acknowledging the many different and varied tasks undertaken by special education teachers, noting that "I see many of our special education teachers running to a number of different classes throughout the day". One science teacher again expressed an issue with previous colleagues, stating that "(m)any co-teachers in science know enough science to get a certification but not enough to effectively teach and answer questions." Finally, planning is an area of concern for one subject-area teacher who noted that "(t)he major challenge I have encountered with co-teaching is that the (special education) teacher is not involved in the planning of the lesson at all or as much as they should be."

Recommendations/Conclusion

A larger, more diversified sample size that would include representatives from all subject-area disciplines would enrich the perspectives found in this report. However, the responses that were shared by each of the participants helped contribute to the results that improvements can be made in the co-teaching environment between subject-area and special education colleagues in the rural northeastern Pennsylvania junior/senior high school utilized in this study. It is recommended that time for planning and communication should be implemented for subject-area and special education co-teachers so that the needs of students are effectively served and met in the co-teaching environment.