

**A Tale of Two Teachers: An Analytical Look at the Co-Teaching Theory Using a Case
Study Model**

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Abstract

Co-teaching involves a highly collaborative, mutually accountable relationship between a regular education and special education teacher in an inclusive environment. Effective co-teaching involves both teachers working together in the regular classroom setting in an effort to make learning accessible for all students regardless of ability or disabilities. Most of the analysis of co-teaching has determined that both special education students and regular education students benefit from the provision of differentiated instruction and the presence of two teachers in the classroom. This study seeks to gain an accurate analysis of co-teaching from the perspectives of regular education and special education teachers.

Introduction

Co-teaching is a growing trend in the 21st Century classroom as educators try to find ways to address the needs of all students served in the regular education setting. The concept of co-teaching, though seemingly simple, can be wrought with challenges as two individuals with a common goal try to find ways to insert their individual style into one classroom. If done effectively, co-teaching infuses the strengths of both teachers and maximizes instruction in so many ways. If done poorly, co-teaching can become a power-struggle that creates tension and resentment and serving no benefit to the children who should be served. It can become a source of contention when one teacher is considered the primary while the other teacher is considered to be a classroom assistant (Bingham, 2011). That is why, as Sharpe & Hawes (2003) pointed out, the staunch support of school administrators is necessary in order to make collaborative teaching work.

One of the most daunting tasks for teachers is to implement the highest of academic standards while at the same time meeting the needs of every single student in the classroom (Sharpe & Howe, 2003). According to NJEA (2012), “Successful co-teaching or collaborative teaching takes place when two or more professionals jointly deliver sustentative instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single physical space.” In its research report exploring the theory behind co-teaching, Hanover Research (2012) did not agree with the idea of co-teaching necessary indicating collaboration but instead defined it as “a mode of instruction in which two or more educators or certified staff members share responsibility for a group of students in a single classroom or workspace (p. 2).” Both definitions, though strikingly different in some respects, may actually allude to the overall philosophy associated with co-teaching.

Without a clear definitive statement, schools and districts are left up to their own devices when who, when and how co-teaching exists in the classroom.

Purpose Statement

There are generally two student populations that warrant a co-teaching situation: students with disabilities and students who are served within English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Both groups have individual plans that outline a course of action that is dedicated to the success of the student. This study will focus only on the co-teaching model as it relates to the regular education and special education teachers interactions with each other and their students. It is the regular education and special education teacher's responsibility jointly to make sure that all components of the plan are followed judiciously, although it is usually the latter who bears most of the load when it comes to insuring compliance (Howard & Potts, 2009).

Review of the Literature

Inclusion generally involves the teaching of students with and without disabilities in the general education classroom (Austin, 2001). The main principle behind co-teaching, collaborative teaching, teacher partnering, or whatever you choose to call it is that all students be afforded the right to participate in the general education curriculum to the greatest extent possible. (Sharpe & Hawes, 2003). This means that students who may be a little different are not placed in basements or detached trailers to receive their education. Instead, these students are included in the classroom alongside their peers as mandated by law. The co-taught classroom makes this all possible, as co-teaching is highly recommended as a best-practice when implementing an inclusion model (Noonan, McCormick & Heck, 2003), benefiting students with and without disabilities (Keefe & Moore, 2004).

Analyzing the tenets of inclusion and IDEA's language of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), co-teaching can be described as an extension of both systems (Pappamihiel, 2012). In fact, inclusion, co-teaching, cooperative and collaborative teaching are often terms that are used interchangeably or in alignment with one another. Based on a review of the literature, there are seven fundamental principles of effective inclusion that aligns with collaborative models: collaborative culture, shared leadership, coherent vision, comprehensive planning, adequate resources, sustained implementation and continuous evaluation and improvement (York County Schools, 2014).

Effective co-teaching blends the learning environment without regard to special circumstances of individual students. By law, teachers are obligated to follow the accommodations and modifications designated for a child. However, their responsibilities do not stop there. In a true collaborative classroom, both teachers share equal responsibility when it comes to accountability for student success in the inclusive classroom. That means that the special education teacher is not just a teacher for children with disabilities but she is also a teacher for the other students as well. Collaborative teaching allows educators to identify individual and group strengths while managing the requirements of curriculum overload, frequent assessments, and accountability structures under state and federal mandates (Wilds, Mayeaux & Edmonds, 2008). In some districts, each co-teacher in the classroom is assigned fifty percent responsibility for all student achievement in the inclusive classroom. There is no more "these are mine and those are yours" in collaborative classrooms. While it may be tempting for a teacher to want to have certain students removed for instruction, particularly those students who have exhibited problematic behaviors or severe learning deficits, the overarching theme in modern classrooms is that all students deserve an opportunity to learn in the environment that best supports their needs.

Building a Co-Teaching Relationship

Teachers will transition into the co-teacher partnership at varying stages and at equally varying rates (Gately & Gately, 2005) depending on their ability to connect professionally and develop a rapport with each other inside the classroom. If a co-teaching relationship is strained, students will pick up on it rather quickly and use the situation as an opportunity to disrupt the learning environment by pitting one teacher against the other while disrupting the learning environment. It is much the same when children have one parent that says yes and another parent who says no; they use the divide to get what they want. It is no different with two teachers on the opposite end of the spectrum. In the best interest of everyone involved, teachers should reach a consensus early on and remain committed to the partnership at all costs. If concerns arise, both teachers should feel free to address them at an appropriate time without engaging in tense power-plays in front of the students. Conversations between the two teachers should be respectful, without giving the impression of being on the attack.

Marriage Analogy

Co-teaching is often described as a marriage (Rice & Zigmond, 2000), albeit an arranged one. There are several reasons why co-teaching is compared to the ideology of marriage, most notably the overall idea that two people are working together to make their union work while at the same time facing challenges and a series of emotions that have to be taken into account throughout the process, where communication and the ability to be flexible are also common dominators for the success of both unions (Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie, 2007).

Co-teaching requires that teachers work together as a team in order to collaborate and communicate about the needs of all learners in the classroom environment.. How co-teachers co-

exist with each other can be highly influential on the entire classroom environment (Noonan, McCormick & Heck, 2003), very much like a marriage in some respects (Pappamihiel, 2012). Two teachers working together in a classroom have a partnership, as both are responsible for creating lesson plans, implementing those lesson plans and making informed decisions about the success of the lessons (Friend & Cook, 1992). There are times when co-teachers do not work together in the classroom as competently as they should (Bingham, 2011). Before anything can be accomplished inside the classroom, it is important for the two teachers to build a working relationship. Pay close attention to the words “working relationship.” Co-teachers do not have to be friends in order to be effective together when it comes to the students, although it probably makes things a lot easier when a friendship does exist. However, there does need to be a mutual level of respect and trust that allows both individuals to be involved in the what, when, where and how’s of the class environment. It is not fair for one teacher to dominate the other and make all the decisions without getting fair input. Of course, there are various reasons why this may be easier than done.

It is recommended that co-teachers assess the strengths and weaknesses of their instructional relationship (Hanover Research, 2012). Using the Co-Teaching Rating Scale (CRS) can be beneficial in dissecting the relationship between two teachers and give some indication as to the areas that need to be addressed in order for the relationship to work (See Appendices A & B). Finding what works for two individuals with different viewpoints, personalities and proficiencies is important if an instructional team or partnership is to function properly (Center for Teaching, 2014). The days of being autonomous as a classroom teacher are fading into a distant memory as research and experience has indicated that teaching is evolving into a multifaceted infrastructure in order to meet the needs of every student being served in the

classroom. We teach our students that working together to solve problems is a healthy resource for learning, so shouldn't be practice what we are preaching> Should we not embrace the idea of having another point of view or way of teaching that gives a fresh perspective to the classroom?

Shared Accountability

Co-teaching is not two teachers who teach in isolation of one another (Villa, 2014). Both teachers in the classroom should have equal shares in meeting the needs of all students (NJEA, 2012) without exception. Often times, this is where the point of contention comes in and threatens to ruin the partnership that exists whether the two teachers like it or not. In a classroom where there are two teachers of record (i.e. co-teachers), both individuals are responsible for all aspects of the learning environment from planning to class management (Gately & Gately, 2001).

When it comes to the word accountability, there seems to be a negative reaction in the education field. When people—especially educators think of accountability, they think of test scores and how the numbers will impact their reputation as a teacher. This can cause somewhat of a panic, particularly if a teacher is concerned that the other educator in the classroom doesn't do things quite the same way, therefore they would rather not have the other person become too involved in instruction lest student scores suffer. There are still those in the field of education who struggle with the concepts of co-teaching, collaboration and inclusion, viewing them as little more than a nuisance rather than a potentially useful resource that can create new opportunities for learning and student achievement that never existed before.

The collaborative effort of regular education teachers and special education teachers increases the quality of instruction (NICHCY, 2011). Individual accountability requires each

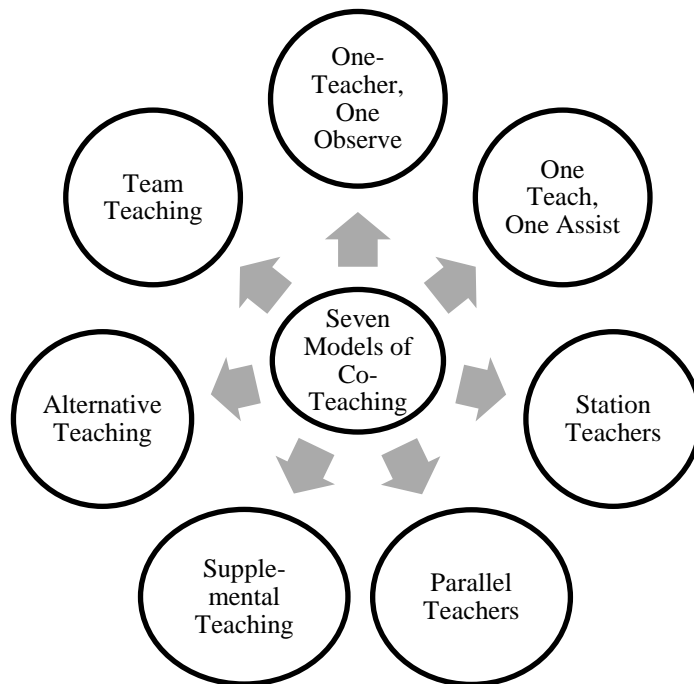
teacher to assess her own performance in terms of recognizing personal contributions to the learning environment and determining whether her role should change or remain the same within the context of the co-taught setting (Villa, Thousand & Nevin, 2008). Accountability has to be viewed as something more than a score on an end-of-the-year test. Accountability should become a catalyst for diversifying instruction and being a partner in the learning process.

While co-teaching is has been lauded as a viable option for enhancing student learning, especially those students with disabilities, there are no strong empirical studies dedicated to the theory of co-teaching although there have been more than a few case studies and general reports produced about implementation of co-teaching models with mixed results (Hanover Research, 2012). The benefits of co-teaching are founded more so on logic-based conclusions rather than actual data (Cook & Friend, 1995; Noonan, McCormick & Heck, 2003). In order to truly understand the implications for any co-teaching model and inform the field for the purposes of best practice, in-depth studies are warranted if students are to benefit to the maximum extent possible. Educators are in need of a reliable model of how successful co-teaching looks (Noonan, McCormick & Heck, 2003).

Of the seven models of co-teaching (See Figure 1 Seven Models of Co-Teaching), the most commonly used is the one teach, one assist (Harbot, Gunter, Hull, Brown, Venn, Wiley & Wiley, 2007; Magiera et al., 2005), which may be due to a number of factors. Teachers can be very territorial when it comes to their classrooms much like one would be when it comes to their own homes or children. There is a lot more at stake these days with assessments and accountability on the line, causing many educators to be less willing to budge when it comes to another teacher occupying their space. Furthermore, many teachers continue to hold fast to the notion that the co-teacher is only responsible for those students identified as being disabled or

language learners. In order for any concept to be effectively executed, there must be a general understanding of its purpose and commitment of everyone involved to making it work.

Figure 1. Seven Models of Co-Teaching



Administrators are the key to establishing the mood for creating and implementing successful classroom relationships without exception. While teachers should be allowed creative freedom within their domain, there should still be some level of oversight to make sure things are being done as they should. Many efforts fail because administrators adopt a hands-off approach for fear of agitating a certain teacher simply being overloaded with other tasks. Without a system of checks and balances it is almost impossible to determine what works well and what could be working better if implemented with more rigor or if more collaboration was devoted. Co-teaching is one of those ideas that have the potential to work well but require more oversight in order to allow it to reach its highest potential. .

Methods for Instructional Delivery

In today's classroom, teachers must find less traditional approaches to instruction that will lead to more successful outcomes for the students, moving further away from lecture-styled teacher-centered approaches (Patterson, Connolly & Ritter, 2009). When implementing the more restrictive teaching models (i.e. one teach/one assist or one teach/one observe), teachers should consider alternating the roles so that one person is not dominating instructional time while the other remains stagnant in the background (Cook & Friend, 1995). In regards to delivery of instruction, it is important for the teachers to not only plan how what they will teach, but how it will be taught as well. It is important for the teacher-partners to discuss which strategies will be used and how content will be delivered (Howard & Potts, 2009). Students benefit more when teachers use a variety of co-teaching models and research-based teaching strategies (Sileo & Garderen, 2010).

Strategy: Small Group

When looking at best practices for helping students in the learning process, small group activities have been identified as a great resource for driving home lesson objectives. This is where co-teaching can be used optimally, with both teachers responsible for small pockets of students with a concentration on weaknesses that students may be experiencing in the classroom. With both teachers engaged in this process, each can concentrate on separate concepts (i.e. Teacher 1: Main Idea, Teacher 2: Vocabulary) and rotate groups at 20-minute intervals.

Strategy: One-On-One

Having the luxury of giving individualized attention to students who are most at need is something few teachers can afford. Even in a co-teaching situation, it may not be possible to

accomplish one-on-one time on a regular basis, depending on the composite of the classroom, but both teachers can agree to specific times in which students can be pulled for one-on-one time either within the classroom or outside the classroom. A couple of cautions should be addressed under these circumstances. First, each teacher should be involved in one-on-one activities. It should not be the special education or ESL teacher's responsibility to do one-on-one every time. The co-teachers may agree to a schedule with one teacher doing some individualized activities on Monday and the other teacher doing them on Wednesdays. Second, any child needing extra help should be assigned one-on-one time so that the focus does not fall only on children with disabilities or children experiencing language barriers. While these children often need the interventions, it is often a mistaken assumption that they are the only ones in the classroom that are not "getting it."

Mini-Lessons

Depending on which co-teaching model the two classroom teachers decide to use, there should be opportunities for both licensed professionals to be actively involved in the education of the students. Even if one teacher assumes the primary role of instructional deliverer, the other teacher needs to be able to get the students comfortable with his style of instruction as well. Mini-lessons are a great way to have the two teachers engage the classroom and still maintain the goals and objectives of the curriculum. Mini-lessons can either be new content that needs to be covered or content from a previous lesson that needs to be revisited, especially for students who may still be struggling with some of the ideas associated with a particular concept.

Strategy: Guided Practice

Guided practices gives teachers a chance to present material and work along with the students to make sure ideas are being delivered and received accordingly. When a teacher guides practice, she is basically offering guidance to her students as to how certain conclusions can be draw or the steps that need to be taken to reach an outcome. With two teachers in the classroom, one teacher can facilitate the lesson while the other checks for student understanding (one teacher/one observe) or help those students who are having difficulty grasping the lesson (one teacher/one assist). Guided practice also allowed teachers to present the same idea but demonstrate different ways to come up with the answer (alternative teaching).

Administrative Support

One of the research-based factors Freytag (2003) identified in relation to effective co-teaching is administrative support. Administrative support is important from the onset of any change process and remains equally important throughout (Bauwens, Hourcade & Friend, 1989). This level of support is a critical component cited by many teachers who have engaged in co-teaching (Chris & Carlson, 1996). Co-teaching partnerships that work are usually those in which the principal has made the practice a priority. It may not be enough to say how important it is for teachers to work together, but there has to be some sort of monitoring and follow up conducted to make sure that everyone is doing what they are supposed to do along the way.

This is not suggest that principals or assistant principals or curriculum coordinators need to micromanage what goes on in the classroom, but expectations should be made clear from the very beginning and periodically re-affirmed through the school year. Most administrators conduct teacher observations for individual performance but rarely are their observations conducting for co-teachers to determine how effectively they work together. Being able to assess

the dynamics of the co-taught classroom (See Figure 3 Co-Teaching Observation Form) will allow administrators to provide feedback and support for teachers to improve their practices, which will benefit students in the long run.

According to Nierengarten and Hughes (2010), administrators are more likely to view co-teaching as the mere pairing of two teachers within a classroom. Administrators often do not have formal training or an understanding of what is required to make co-teaching a successful relationship (Nierengarten and Hughes, 2010). When administrators are knowledgeable about the framework of the programs and practices that take place in their schools, the more dialogue they can facilitate about what works and what doesn't.

Research Methods

The format for the current study was qualitative in nature because of its use of cases and its focus on the perspectives of the participants. Instrumentation used for the research included interviews, a rating scale and review of the existing literature to support all findings. Perspectives from both the regular education and special education teacher was considered important so as not to appear biased when reporting the findings. However, because only two participants were used, the results of the study could not be reported as a representative sample of either group (regular or special education). Findings can be used to add to the existing literature regarding this phenomenon and to encourage further discussion as to how to enhance the co-teaching relationship so that all students can receive the maximum benefit of such instruction in the classroom. Please note that pseudonyms were assigned to participants and locations to ensure anonymity and to encourage participants to be candid about their experiences.

Participant 1

Robert Flynn is a new teacher in the special education department at Williamston Middle School. He has been assigned to co-teach with veteran teacher Patricia Maynard, who has a reputation for being quite assertive and she has a particularly close relationship with the school's principal as well as many other administrators in the school and school district. Robert is extremely excited about teaching eighth grade this year and has spent the summer attending various professional development workshops dealing with content, special education process and classroom management. Prior to becoming a certified special education teacher, Robert spent a year as an assistant in a self-contained classroom working with children who primarily had emotional and behavioral disabilities. He felt confident that he would be able to survive his first teaching assignment and even began developing some fun, creative ideas to share with his new teaching partner during their planning time together.

“We arranged to meet at 1:00,” Robert explained. “She was very cordial towards me but it was obvious that she wasn't really interested in my suggestions. I got the feeling that she wanted me to just work with the kids on my case load and she would handle the rest of the class.”

According to Robert, his new teaching partner stated that she used the same lesson plans every year. “She told me that the way it's usually done is that she was the teacher of record and so she would do all the teaching. She wanted to make sure that my students are learning what they are supposed to learn. I was insulted.”

Feeling somewhat unnerved by the exchange, Robert immediately went to his case manager, with his concerns. The case manager listened intently while Robert recounted the entire episode with the regular education teacher. “When I was done talking, I realized that I was not

sure if I could last an entire school year in the same classroom with someone who was clearly authoritarian.”

The case manager advised Robert not to take it personally and that every co-teacher who had been in the classroom has said the same thing that he was saying. Her advice was to “just have to grin and bear it.”

Robert described feeling enraged at the case manager’s advice. “Grin and bear it? I am equally responsible for the children in the classroom! I felt like why is she allowed to control what goes on if administration knows she’s behaving this way?” He asked in retrospect. “The way she’s acting, I was going to be nothing more than a glorified classroom assistant.”

Patricia had been at the school for a long time and she had extensive relationships with administrators at central office. He knew from the models of co-teaching discussed in workshops that his role was supposed to be a little more involved but he wasn’t sure how to get Patricia Maynard to give him the opportunity to engage in the classroom without igniting an all-out war and making the school year even more unbearable.

Robert admits that he is considering leaving his current position and becoming a physical education teacher. Although he thinks co-teaching can work, if used appropriately, his experience has left him unsettled.

Participant 2

Sheila Towson (a pseudonym) works as a regular education teacher at West James High School, with experience working with co-teachers in the ninth grade mathematics classrooms. Sheila describes herself as a very passionate educator, having been nominated teacher of the year for three of the six years she has taught math and two of the eight years she taught the same

subject at another high school in the district prior to transferring to West James. Even with a co-teacher in the classroom, Sheila admits that she prefers to take on the primary role in the delivery of instruction because of her self-described Type A personality. The co-teachers usually just assist students who need help when it is time for them to work independently.

“I feel that the co-teacher is a partner in the classroom, but not an equal partner,” Sheila stated during her interview. “A lot of times the students did not give the other teacher the same respect as they give me because they don’t understand the co-teaching concept...and you can’t exactly say the other teacher is a special education teacher because then it violates the students’ privacy. “

Part of the problem was that many of the kids did not view the co-teacher as being a teacher because Sheila provided the majority of the direct instruction; but, as Sheila sees it, the co-teacher does little to help the situation. In the past, whenever Sheila would address an issue with a student in the classroom, the co-teacher would insert himself unnecessarily. Once when the co-teacher was reprimanding a student for chewing gum, Sheila told her that she was spending too much time going back and forth and should just write the student up. Other times when Sheila would give the students directions in order to transition to the next assignment or to the next class, the co-teacher would either talk over her or repeat the directions as if Sheila had not already given them.

“I will admit that there may be a power struggle,” Sheila concedes. “But if I’m going to be held accountable and if my evaluations are going to depend on my students’ performance, then I am going to take the reign. I try, try, try to make this thing work but in the end I have a

goal to meet and I'm not too concerned about making another adult in the room comfortable.” She admitted.

Findings and Conclusions

Both participants were asked to complete the Co-Teaching Rating Scale applicable to their position in the classroom. It was important to get the perspective of a regular education teacher as well as a special education in order to fully understand the intricacies of the co-teaching relationships, identify any weaknesses that need to be addressed and encourage those activities and strategies that work to strengthen the relationship.

Participant 1, Robert Flynn, agreed that there was sufficient training and support offered to special education teachers by the administration but felt that the role of the special education teacher was overwhelmed by paperwork and meetings that impeded his ability to function as a full partner in the inclusion classroom. Robert maintains that he felt that he shared responsibility for the students in the class but conceded that the regular education teacher was responsible for more than half of the delivery of instruction in the classroom. Responsibility for the students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) was not shared equally, as he was viewed as the person who was most responsible for meeting the needs of students with disabilities within the inclusive environment.

Results from both the interview and survey revealed that Participant 1 did not take part in planning with his co-teacher and he assumed the role of assistant during instructional delivery. Rules and routines were established and maintained by the classroom teacher, although he was often asked to handle discipline when it came to the students with disabilities in the classroom. I

Participant 2, Sheila Towson, sees co-teaching as a partnership, albeit an unequal one. She relates the co-teaching relationship with a silent partnership, where one person was responsible for the most of the work required while the other remained in the background. Results of the interview and survey demonstrate that Sheila does not plan with her co-teachers on a regular basis and makes all of the rules for the classroom without conferring with her partner. However, she feels that she does well with meeting the needs of the students with disabilities in her classroom. She stated that she was actively involved in creating goals for her students' IEPs and modified instruction as required. However, Sheila also conceded that the special education teacher was the person she felt was primarily responsible for the creation and implementation of the students' IEPs.

Although the participants served in different capacities in the classroom (regular education and special education), they shared similar beliefs about co-teaching based on their personal philosophies as well as their experiences with inclusion. For example, both participants supported the idea that the special education teacher took the lead role in issues related to the students with disabilities. However, the regular education teacher assumed the lead role when it came to instructional delivery in the classroom.

In the case of the participants in this study, it can be concluded that the regular teacher was more adamant about taking the lead in the classroom because she felt that she had more accountability for student success in the classroom and she felt that the special education teacher's focus should be on those students who had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). More research and discussion may be needed in order to determine if this is a common theme among co-teachers. If so, educators and administrators may need to have more dialogue about ways in which the co-teaching relationship should be developed and monitored for efficiency in

order for all students to benefit from inclusion. The question then arises that if co-teaching is not used effectively, what is the overall impact on students in the classroom with and without disabilities?

Further study is needed as to include perspectives of elementary school teachers about co-teaching if recommendations for practice are to be comprehensive. Participants in this study represented middle and high school levels, but the case sample did not include a regular education and special education teacher from the two settings. While the information provided by the two study participants was compelling, it is advisable to seek a more extensive collection of data perhaps using a phenomenological study, survey using a larger sampling of regular education and special education teachers or a longitudinal study to examine the overall benefit of co-teaching as related to student achievement.

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