A Process, Framework, and Set of Tools for Facilitating Co-Planning

Among Co-Teachers

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Abstract

Co-teaching has become a widely practiced collaborative model among special and general education teachers in U.S. schools (Chitiyo, & Brinda, 2018; Pancsofar, & Petroff, 2013). This practice emerged as a response to the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which call for quality teaching and encourage inclusive education. Quality co-teaching in inclusive classrooms is associated with effective co-planning and other partnerships between special and general education teachers to meet the diverse needs of students (Guise, Habib, Robbins, Hegg, Hoellwarth, & Stauch, 2016; Hang, & Rabren, 2009; Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2017). Many researchers have indicated that co-planning represents the common challenge that co-teachers face (Bettini et al., 2017; Biernacka, 2015; Hamdan, Anuar, & Khan, 2016). However, there are a limited number of studies that have addressed the challenge and provided practical solutions to the challenge of finding time for co-planning by co-teachers. The goal of this article is to provide an overview based on research to help teachers structure their co-planning and their partnerships in inclusive educational settings. This article targets special and general elementary and secondary teachers to share the responsibility for developing the content, adapting the instruction, and reflecting on student progress by combining their strengths. The proposed process and tools promote the sustainability of co-planning and differentiation of instruction in inclusive classrooms. Some applicable ideas and considerations are highlighted to help special and general educators to organize their efforts as partners in promoting student success.

Keywords: co-teaching, co-planning, co-teachers, inclusive classroom

Introduction

The author was very interested in the comments she received from the audience of her online workshop about co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. Most of the comments were about the importance of co-teaching, whereby special and general education teachers share the responsibility for delivering content and management of the inclusive classroom, but there was reported difficulty in finding the time to plan together effectively. One of the comments that encouraged the author to propose a co-planning framework for creating successful co-teaching was from Mrs. Hylton (pseudonym), an elementary special education teacher:

> In my school building, there are many great general education teachers who are willing to work with me to teach and differentiate the general curriculum to meet the various needs of students, but none of my colleagues or I have time to meet and plan together, so how can we make co-teaching work? Because we know it works! (S. J. Hylton, personal communication, February 27, 2018)

Mrs. Hylton's comment reflects that she perceives co-teaching to be a valuable practice in inclusive classrooms, and that co-planning is an essential component of co-teaching, but is also a challenge at the same time. In fact, Mrs. Hylton's perspective is consistent with what has been found in many studies (Pratt, Imbody, Wolf, & Patterson, 2017; Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2017; & Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). Special and general education teachers usually show positive attitudes and perceptions toward co-teaching and perceive it to be a favorable collaborative model of delivering instruction to meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive educational settings (Hamdan, Anuar, & Khan, 2016; Pettit, 2017; Shin, Lee, & McKenna, 2016). However, these teachers' positive perceptions and attitudes are complicated because they overlap with many factors that can hinder or enforce co-teaching. Co-planning represents one of the most prominent threats to

the co-teaching practice (Brown, Howerter, & Morgan, 2013). The lack of time is one of the obstacles to co-planning, and as Bettini et al. (2017) explain, the lack of time could be the result of the workload of special and general education teachers, especially the new teachers. The workload makes it difficult for teachers to meet and plan together. Thus, the lack of opportunities for meeting and planning as a team leads to random teaching without the use of differentiation strategies to meet the diverse needs of students in the inclusive classroom (Murawski, 2012).

Co-planning is required to create a co-taught classroom that combines equity and excellence. Co-planning helps to create learning space for all students to work in groups or individually as needed, to empower decision-making among special and general education teachers, and to enable all students to learn in the same educational setting with considering their unique needs. Thus, co-planning helps to serve diverse students and to build a community and provides mutual support within the co-taught inclusive classrooms. Effective co-planning leads the co-teachers to link the local resources of school and to have a better understanding of the students' needs. When the special education teacher and the general education teacher plan together, they will can to work as partners to design instruction for all students to engage them in relevant and active learning opportunities by using adaptations and providing scaffolds as needed. Co-planning goes far beyond designing the content. Rather assessment is used to identify the strengths and areas for improvement in which the co-teachers can reflect on their instruction and the learning outcomes to move on to the next level of performance or reteach the targeted skill.

Why Co-planning Requires Partnership?

The special educator and the general classroom teacher must plan together so they can successfully carry out effective instruction in a co-taught inclusive classroom (Scruggs &

Mastropieri, 2017). For more than 20 years, there has been legislative pressure on both special and general education teachers across the United States in terms of partnering to increase equity in learning, improve the quality of teaching, and increase learning outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) had a crucial role in redefining the roles of special and general education teachers in inclusive classrooms (i.e., shared responsibility to serve all students) (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017; Strieker, Gillis, & Zong, 2013). This shift in teachers' roles aligns with the co-planning philosophy as it is based on shared expertise and the exchange of ideas brought about by the collaboration between special and general education teachers; thus, teachers differentiate the instruction as partners in constructing students' knowledge (Murawski, 2012; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

During the co-planning process, the co-teachers must clarify their roles and responsibilities in terms of delivering the content and identifying different strategies with consideration for the needs of students (Hamdan et al., 2016; McKenna, Flower, & Ciullo, 2014). The major roles of both general and special education teachers in inclusive classrooms, for whichever co-teaching model is used, must primarily rely on their strengths. The general education teachers must utilize their expertise in understanding the academic content and pace of instruction. On the other hand, the special education teachers must use their abilities in identifying the students' needs, responding to interventions, adapting the content, and evaluating the accommodations with the importance of educating themselves in the content (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

Along with the highlighted differences in the major roles of special and general education teachers based on their strengths, they are complementary to each other, and they have to play active and equal roles (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). According to Hamdan et

al. (2016) and McKenna et al. (2014), it is critical for teachers to plan their lessons as a team, and they should share their opinions about the model in the classroom, especially if they have different levels of experience. Creating a successful co-teaching relationship is an important component of co-teaching. Consequently, considering the major roles and their length and type of co-teaching experience, they must be on the same page by answering the following questions: a) What are the learning objectives of the unit or lesson; b) what is the instructional mode(s) and activities; c) who will teach which parts; d) what co-teaching model will be used; e) what accommodations are required for certain students; and f) what are the differentiation techniques for a group of students with similar needs? These questions must be addressed equally in the co-planning stage.

The solutions to the problems associated with co-planning were discussed in the literature and categorized by Murawski (2012) into three main themes. These themes are: a) planning with the co-teacher by using online resources outside the working hours; b) planning based on the individual experience of each teacher; and c) planning based on dividing the tasks between the co-teachers. These themes represent positive attempts to overcome the difficulties in finding an adequate time to meet and plan as partners in the teaching process. However, the reality of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms requires combining these solutions so that the co-planning process becomes more productive, flexible, and sustainable.

The aim of this article is to provide a holistic process of co-planning for long- and short-term goals by providing practical ideas for co-teachers. The information in this article is provided to the teachers who are working in elementary and secondary schools, where the vision of these schools focuses on inclusive education and providing support for all students to access the general curriculum with considering the diverse needs of these students. This article highlights essential steps and considerations before, during, and after co-planning.

Simple templates and useful resources are also suggested to share equal authority and responsibility in teaching all students in the inclusive classroom. The most prominent feature of the proposed templates is that co-teachers do not need extensive time to fill them out, especially if these templates are shared via interactive platforms.

Setting the Stage for Shared Planning Time for Co-Teaching

Finding time for planning is one of the most significant challenges for co-teachers-teachers, particularly special education teachers, who work with more than one general education teacher across different grade levels (Bettini et al., 2017). Thus, the first step for co-planning is to lay the foundation for long-term planning to ensure sustainability and the readiness to find alternatives. Causton and Kluth (2016) recommended that co-teachers-teachers start the process of co-planning with self-assessment questions to address the time dilemma and to use their time efficiently until the partnership is successful. Co-teachers-teachers must ask themselves the following questions: a) How much time do we have to work together; b) do we think we need extra time; c) what do we need to discuss face-to-face; d) what can we handle via online interactive tools or e-mails; e) how can we ask for more time; and f) how can we receive support from the school administration? Depending on the answers to these questions and other similar questions, the co-teachers-teachers recognize the potential issues and the corresponding solutions or, in some cases, they realize they already have the needed time and are ready to develop the meeting schedules.

Seek Administrative Support in Advance

It is essential for co-teachers-teachers to garner and have administrative support at the school and district level for co-planning to enable co-teachers-teachers to work together and ensure the success of students within the cotaught classroom (Ruben, Rigelman, & McParker,

2016; Solis et al., 2012). Many teachers suffer from a demanding workload, which is an influential factor that eliminates the opportunity for co-planning (Bettini et al., 2017). The basic duties of the profession cannot be ignored or eliminated, but the additional duties that hinder planning for co-teaching can be negotiated. The school administration must provide both special and general education teachers with sufficient time to plan lessons and discuss ways to improve the co-teaching model (Biernacka, 2015). If the teachers show their commitment to co-teaching, they need to rearrange their professional priorities and inform the school administration in advance. Ideally, the school administration will try supporting the co-teachers by finding substitute teachers and less costly alternatives. An initiative such as this, in turn, confirms the seriousness of the teacher's position in front of the administration regarding the importance of time for planning.

Schedule Appointments

The main strategy for finding time for co-planning requires doing everything necessary to manage time efficiently. It is also important to avoid unplanned work, which is reflected in the increase in planning time. Failure to schedule appointments in advance may lead the teachers to accomplish minor tasks that do not relate to co-planning. The teachers should plan to schedule their work, and meetings with students and parents should be planned as much as possible so as to commit to the time necessary to co-plan. For example, it is important for teachers to specify office hours of their school day. During these hours the teachers will be able to schedule appointments to provide support for their students and to meet and communicate with the students' families as needed professionally. This example indicates that scheduling appointments may help to minimize unplanned work hours and maximize co-planning opportunities.

To-Do List

Clarifying and prioritizing tasks and putting them in the form of weekly and monthly updates will may increase time and productivity. Incorporating the planning within a to-do list helps to increase teachers' commitment. Causton and Kluth (2016) pointed out that the core of a successful partnership in co-teaching is setting a specific time for reflecting and planning by considering this practice as one of the priorities of the to-do list.

Create a Shared Vision

To avoid professional conflicts that could affect the success of co-teaching, after receiving administrative support and prior planning for the details of co-teaching (e.g., selecting the co-teaching model, adapting the content, and delivering the instruction), it is necessary for the co-teachers to create a common vision. This vision must focus on working as equal partners to maximize the learning opportunities for all students, including students with disabilities. This vision also must focus on helping all students to be successful in the co-taught inclusive classroom (Pratt et al., 2017). The co-teachers must develop explicit goals to put the vision into practice. The shared vision and the relevant goals should be embodied within the following framework. Thus, the co-teachers must reflect the commitment of the general and special education educators to regularly collaborate and have mutual and shared accountability and ownership for planning, delivering instruction, and assessing the success of all students in the general education curriculum, thus fulfilling a systemic change that is sustainable (Maryland State Department of Education, 2011).

A Framework and Set of Tools for Long-Term and Daily Planning for Co-Teaching

An effective co-planning framework focuses on long-term and daily goals and allocates time to share reflections on student progress (Pratt et al., 2017). Within the

framework of co-planning, there should be simple, targeted, and focused conversations that serve the purpose of increasing the level of productivity. Murawski and Spencer (2011) recommended using the who, what, where, and how approach, which depends on asking direct and purposeful questions to lead conversations among co-teachers-teachers. This approach includes the following: a) What parts do we have to teach; b) what worked; c) what did not work; d) how can we adapt or differentiate the content; e) and who will prepare the lesson materials? Despite the simplicity of this approach, it helps to determine the course of planning within a specific time frame, perform the required task, and prevent random and time-consuming conversations (Murawski, 2012).

Monthly Calendar

Co-teachers-teachers are recommended to start planning the curriculum before the start of the school year. For this planning sage, it would be better for the co-teachers-teachers to meet face-to-face to set the main expectations of their instruction. The state academic standards, state standardized tests, and school calendars should be part of the planning conversation to develop common and reasonable goals. After setting the expectations, the approved outlines should be placed in an accessible calendar for both teachers. The developed calendar represents the basis for teachers to plan and teach the lesson and to monitor students' progress toward specific goals.

Unit Planning

After developing the monthly calendar, the co-teachers should begin the weekly or unit plan (see Table 1). Unit planning will allow the co-teachers to have a better insight toward the lesson instruction and realize their roles for the next few days. During this stage of planning, the general and special education teachers must perceive their roles as partners and

facilitators for students' learning based on the concept of zone proximal development (ZPD), which provided by Vygotsky (1934/1962). ZPD concept refers to the use of a mediator (teacher) based on students' individual ability levels; in ZPD, students broaden their learning by completing tasks that challenge them but do not discourage them. Thus, the co-teachers need to brainstorm how to differentiate the content, process, or products for the students based on their learning styles, interests, and abilities.

Table 1

Template of Unit Planning

Unit	Description	Date / / 20
Learning Objectives for All Students		Standards
Lesson (1) Learning Objectives		
Lesson (1) Learning Objectives		
Learning Objectives for Students with Exceptionalities		For Whom?
Lesson (1) Adapted Learning Objectives		
Lesson (2) Adapted Learning Objectives		
Ideas for Differentiation	What, Who, and How?	
Reminder	Dates of Upcoming Meetings:	

Note. This template can be used as an asynchronous planning tool.

The teacher of general education must work with the special education teacher to determine the general purpose of the content and its compatibility with learning objectives for all students, including students with exceptionalities, as well as the relevant standards and teaching date. During this stage of planning, the co-teachers can use the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to enable the students to reach their optimal levels of achievement. The UDL principles can be embodied in co-planning step by identifying the modes of presentation, processing, and evaluation of the academic content as well as determining the patterns of participation of students who have similar learning styles, interests, strengths, and needs (Stein, 2016). In the next stage of co-planning, special and general education teachers must make the decision regarding selecting the appropriate accommodations, adapting the content, and identifying the evaluation strategies used to meet the unique needs of students with exceptionalities (Murawski & Spencer, 2011). For novice co-teachers, determining the co-teaching model as part of the unit plan template and reflection questions can help them clarify and evaluate their daily roles and responsibilities by considering the students' needs in inclusive classrooms (see Table 2).

During planning time, the roles of special education teacher and the roles of general education teacher will become complement each other. Additionally, co-planning will enhance the ability of the general education teacher to adapt the content for students with exceptionalities while the special education teacher will be able to teach of the academic material for all students efficiently (Murphy, Scantlebury, & Milne, 2015). In this stage, the co-teachers need to understand how and why co-teaching works (or does not work) and how instructional activities in an inclusive classroom should be differentiated. The co-teachers will learn from each other's struggles and exchange experiences when they perceive themselves as facilitators and reflective partners during planning.

Table 2

Template of Unit Planning and Reflective Questions

Part 1		Part 2	
Date		**Teacher 1 Reflections**	**Notes**
Unit		☐ Did we cover the main idea of the lesson?	
Description		☐ Did we manage our time effectively?	
		☐ Did we motive the student to continue learning?	
Lesson)1(Learning Objectives		☐ Did we relate the lesson to the students' knowledge and interests?	
Lesson)1(Learning Objectives		☐ Did we use accommodations to meet the needs of the students?	
		☐ Did we use appropriate differentiation techniques?	
		☐ Did we manage the classroom effectively?	
Lesson)1(Adapted Learning Objectives		Reminder:	
Lesson (2) Adapted Learning Objectives		Teacher **2 Reflection**	**Notes**
Differentiation Techniques		☐ Did we cover the main idea of the lesson?	
		☐ Did we manage our time effectively?	
Co-teaching Model	☐ One Teacher, One Observer	☐ Did we motive the student to continue learning?	

☐   Station Teaching
☐   Parallel Teaching
☐   Alternative Teaching
☐   Teaming
☐   One Teacher, One Assistant

☐   Did we relate the lesson to the students' knowledge and interests?
☐   Did we use accommodations to meet the needs of the students?
☐   Did we manage the classroom effectively?

Reminder:

Note. This template can be used as an asynchronous planning tool for novice co-teachers-teachers.

The plan should be interspersed with several meaningful conversations that highlight student strengths and learning preferences as well as concerns about students' performance and the proposed methods of addressing them by identifying appropriate areas of differentiation. These informal conversations can occur during lunch time, via phone or e-mail, by walk and talks, and should not be intensive to the extent of hindering the actual planning. After those conversations, each teacher should look at the available data about student performance, including previous assessments, test scores, and work sample profiles.

Daily Planning

After the course and unit outlines have been clarified, the use of a simplified and direct co-planning template based on the who, what, where, and how approach will allow co-teachers to easily articulate the learning objective aligned in the subject area and develop the daily lesson plan (see Table 3). Additionally, the template should lend itself to establish to-do lists, determine individual task assignments, evaluate students' learning, and write out how the instruction will be implemented and write out what works and what does not work. This template directs co- teachers' thoughts, so they become systematic and purposeful for students as they develop learning materials. The longer that co-teachers work together, the

more interchangeable the roles will become (Brown et al., 2013), and this is where the co-teachers share the responsibility for determining the reflection section and co-teaching model parts.

Table 3

Template of Daily Planning

Unit Description								Date		
Lesson (1) Learning Objectives										
Lesson (1) Learning Objectives										
Lesson Plan Components	Description							Who will be responsible?		
								Special Educator	General Educator	Both
What instructional mode?	Lecture □	Groups □	Stations □	Discussion □	Simulation □	Peer Tutoring	Other □	□	□	□
What instructional activity?								□	□	□
What instructional materials?	Technology (Computer Soft-wears, iPads)	nted materials (handout, textbook, worksheet)	PowerPoint Presentation, Projector	Visuals (photographs, posters, graphs)	Audio Martials	Boards (chalkboard, whiteboard, flannel board)	Other	□	□	□
What assessment?	Homework	Worksheet	Project	Test		Others		□	□	□
What data?	Quantitative□ (scores, progress monitoring)				Qualitative□ (observations, reports)					

Accommodations	Students

Differentiation	Students
□Yes □No	

Note. This template clarifies the details of the lesson plan components with identifying the roles of coaches.

Using Technology to Facilitate Co-Planning

Asynchronous and synchronous technologies are useful platforms that offer flexibility to busy teachers encountering difficulty in meeting face-to -face (Pratt et al., 2017). Google Docs and Folk can be used to review the monthly calendar and create or fill out the unit or daily plan that will be used in class with students. Once an idea has been decided on for a lesson, one of the co-teacher-teachers can create and share a new Google Doc to write out the specific assignment and instructions for the students. As this is all done via online interactive systems, either one of the co-teachers-can help the other, adjust formatting, and edit. Additionally, using these interactive sharing systems allows both teachers to know what the other is thinking without having to be together or to work at the same time. For example, the Co-Teaching Solutions System (n.d.) website helps teachers e-mail their lesson plans to one another, suggest differentiation strategies, and lay out the lessons based on the state standards.

Document and Save Unit and Lesson Plans

One of the major problems of co-planning is recognizing the strengths or areas of improvement of the lesson plans because the teachers did not save copies of their lesson plans (McKenna et al., 2014). The Co-Teaching Solutions System (n.d.) provides tools for teachers to plan effectively and enables them to manage their files. A lot of circumstances arise as the teachers transfer to another school or supervise new teachers. Often, the continuous saving of files will save time and effort. As Wilson (2016) mentioned, there is no need to create the wheel again. When co-teachers-teachers use any online systems for co-planning, they consider privacy issues related to using any digital data source, which can include any student's information that may be subject to regulations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

Considerations

Co-teaching sometimes requires daily discussions, either to address unexpected situations and concerns or to reflect on students' learning processes. This time is usually planned for the period between classes or at the end of the school day. Formal and informal communication experiences make the team members, including co-teachers, more comfortable with one another and build a strong relationship that reflects positively toward achieving the common goal (Natale & Lubniewski, 2018). Thus, it is important to overcome any possible barriers of communication to address issues that may affect students' learning. For instance, it is important to know the preferred communication mode personality for each co-teacher to avoid any professional conflicts in co-taught inclusive classrooms regarding classroom management or delivering the academic content. Hurjui (2014) makes the point that teachers should hold discussions so that the practice of inclusive education can be continued, even if the content of a subject are adapted. There are some aspects regarding communication in co-planning that should be considered. For example, co-teachers need to ask about and be considerate regarding spending time in planning outside of the school hours. However, teachers must also understand the co-teachers-teachers are not burdened with additional tasks that may negatively affect their primary tasks and responsibilities outside the school. Respect, commitment, and moderate flexibility are the keys to successful co-planning and partnership.

Final Thought

Co-teaching is a model of instructional delivery that requires the special education teacher and classroom teacher to share classroom responsibilities. Despite the positive attitudes toward the use of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, teachers are still struggling to put co-teaching into practice due to the lack of sufficient time for them to meet and co-plan.

This article conformed that the effective co-planning is the key for successful co-teaching to meet the needs of a heterogeneous group of students in inclusive classrooms. This article highlighted the stages for shared planning time for co-teaching. According to the information provided in this article, co- planning step requires creating a common vision. To achieve this vision, planning should be at the level of the month, week, and day with clarification of all aspects related to the roles and responsibilities of both teachers for each component of the lesson plan. There are set of tools help co-teacher to overcome challenges regarding co-planning. The use of synchronous and asynchronous technology provides teachers the flexibility they need for daily planning for addressing some of the concerns through meaningful and practical conversations. Teachers do not need to be veterans for co-teaching to be successful, but they need organized work, commitment, and suitable time for them to best utilize their strengths, skills, and roles inside and outside the school.

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