

Improving Instruction in Co-Taught Classrooms to Support Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This unique special issue features five articles that provide guidance for middle school special education and general education content-area co-teachers on how to implement enhanced co-teaching models including specialized literacy instruction and best practices for co-teachers (e.g., co-planning; using station teaching to differentiate instruction). The authors of each article were part of a research team that conducted a 2015–2018 development and innovation professional development project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Project CALI (Content Area Literacy Instruction). Project CALI resulted in the development of the CALI professional development designed to provide co-teachers guidance on how to implement a set of evidence-based literacy practices (i.e., the CALI instructional framework) to improve outcomes for students with learning disabilities (LD) in co-taught classes. Authors in this special issue use examples from the CALI professional development to illustrate each practice.

Keywords

intervention, academic, and co-teaching, collaboration, literacy

Many middle school students with learning disabilities (LD) struggle with reading and comprehending text, impeding their ability to learn essential content. As measured by the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 89% of students with disabilities performed at or below a basic reading level (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Regardless of these reading difficulties, students with LD spend a majority of their day in general education content-area classes such as math and science (McFarland et al., 2017) where the expectation is that they learn content by comprehending upper-level text. This poses significant challenges for many middle school students with LD who have yet to develop fundamental literacy skills.

Thus, to support middle school students with LD so that they can meet the expectations of the general education content-area setting, it is imperative that teachers provide content-area literacy instruction (e.g., main idea instruction; Faggella-Luby et al., 2012). In 2008, experts summarized recommendations for adolescent literacy instruction in a practice guide, presenting strategies for teachers to use to improve the reading ability of all adolescents, including students with LD (Kamil et al., 2008). Recommendations

included (a) encouraging teachers to integrate direct and explicit vocabulary and comprehension strategy instruction, (b) providing opportunities for extended discussion of text, and (c) using strategies to improve student motivation. Considering many students with LD continue to struggle at a more fundamental level, the guide also includes recommendations for teachers to provide some students with specialized instruction that is intensive and individualized.

Despite these recommendations, recent observation study research reveals that it is common for content-area teachers to provide either limited or no content-area literacy instruction (Swanson et al., 2015). When asked to explain reasons for their lack of content-area literacy instruction, content-area teachers cite a variety of reasons (e.g., a lack of training, time, and resources; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Indeed, providing content-area literacy instruction is challenging;

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however, it remains critical to meet the content learning and literacy needs of middle school students with LD (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Co-Teaching

In response to the challenges that content-area teachers face regarding content-area literacy instruction as noted, the push for inclusion (Arguelles et al., 2000) and the need to provide specialized instruction to middle school students who struggle with the content and literacy demands of the content-area setting, many middle school leaders elect to adopt co-teaching as a service delivery model (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008). Co-teaching occurs when a content-area teacher and a special education teacher work together (e.g., planning, managing behavior) in a general education classroom to provide instruction to students with and without disabilities (L. Cook & Friend, 1995).

There are several models of co-teaching (e.g., one teach-one assist; Sinclair et al., 2018), and in an ideal collaboration, co-teachers rotate the use of these models depending on the objectives of a given lesson (Friend et al., 2010). For example, if student data reveal that some students are struggling to learn a particular concept, teachers might choose to homogeneously group students and use station teaching (i.e., rotating small groups between a content-area and special education teacher) to target students' needs. Therefore, in theory, including a special education teacher (i.e., a teacher with expertise in providing specialized instruction to students with LD) with a content-area teacher in a content-area class provides a way to target the needs of all students.

Co-Teaching: The Red Flags

While this commonly implemented practice makes sense in theory, there are red flags that we should not ignore. First, data from observation study research converge and reveal that co-teachers do not typically implement co-teaching in its intended form (e.g., Rice & Zigmond, 2000). Most recently, Wexler et al. (2018) conducted a systematic observation study of 16 co-teaching pairs in middle school English language arts classrooms. Results from the study revealed that co-teachers provided minimal opportunities for students to read text and engage in co-occurring content-area literacy instruction. Furthermore, teachers primarily used whole-class instruction or had students working independently with little teacher interaction. Finally, most of the time included the content-area teacher leading whole-class instruction while the special education teacher served in a subordinate role (e.g., passing out papers). This observation research confirms the fact that, while co-teaching may be a well-intentioned model that in theory has promise, without improvements to the way co-teachers are enacting

co-teaching, it is unlikely to positively impact student outcomes (B. G. Cook et al., 2017).

A second, less publicized red flag about this resource-intensive instructional service delivery model is the lack of rigorously conducted research on this topic. The limited empirical data that does exist on the efficacy of co-teaching lends minimal support for it as a model that can enhance teacher and student outcomes. For example, only six studies were available for inclusion in a seminal meta-analysis of co-teaching studies published between 1989 and 1999, and the studies that were included were not rigorously conducted (e.g., lack of random assignment; Murawski & Swanson, 2001).

Project Overview

Despite limited evidence of effectiveness, school leaders have turned to co-teaching for decades (National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1994). Thus, the Project Content Area Literacy Instruction (CALI) research team set out to support the implementation of co-teaching through the development of the CALI professional development (PD). We posited that the idea of co-teaching may not be flawed, but rather the ingredient that is currently missing to improve teacher and student outcomes in co-taught classes is targeted PD to help co-teachers integrate evidence-based content-area literacy instruction and other best practices for co-teaching. In fact, B. G. Cook et al. (2017) reminded us that effective co-teaching “requires teachers to step out of traditional teaching roles and reconsider their responsibilities, and may therefore require significant preparation, training, and support” (p. 243). Thus, it seems logical that PD for co-teachers is essential. After all, if teachers are not able to implement co-teaching in its intended form, how can we expect this service delivery model to result in improved student outcomes?

As noted previously, Project CALI was a multi-year PD project funded by Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The research team's approach was neutral and based on the following perspective: historically co-teachers were not implementing co-taught instruction in its intended form (Zigmond, 2006), co-teaching continues to be a common instructional service delivery model, and because it does not seem to be “going away any time soon,” there is a need to develop PD to support co-teachers. Therefore, after confirming the need to improve co-teachers' collaboration and specialized literacy instruction in co-taught classes through our systematic observation study of co-teaching during the first year of the project (Wexler et al., 2018), we iteratively developed the CALI instructional framework and accompanying PD with school partners (i.e., practicing co-teachers) during year 2. In year 3, we conducted a pilot study to determine if the PD was effective in improving teacher and student outcomes.

Given the lack of rigorously conducted co-teaching studies (Murawski & Swanson, 2001), the difficulty of improving student achievement at the middle school level (Solis et al., 2014) and in other PD studies (Yoon et al., 2007), we consider it promising that the pilot study resulted in positive teacher and student outcomes (Wexler et al., under review). In addition, as social validity is critical for sustainability (e.g., Klingner et al., 1999), it is encouraging that teachers reported positively on CALI implementation and related student outcomes. For example, one participating content-area teacher said, “I’ve always been afraid to do station teaching . . . but to see that we had multiple groups working independently or with support, engaged, and able to move on to the next step . . . it just made me think that we can do it.” A participating special education teacher said, “CALI gave us a strategy and a system for co-teaching.”

The Instructional Framework

The CALI PD provides guidance to help co-teachers learn how to implement the CALI instructional framework, a set of practices that co-teachers can use to help students improve comprehension of content-area text. The first step in the CALI PD is to help co-teachers learn how to select text for a literacy-focused lesson (i.e., text selection). Then, they learn how to provide background knowledge (i.e., world knowledge), vocabulary knowledge (i.e., word knowledge), and comprehension strategy instruction (i.e., setting the purpose, get the gist, associate gist, and text summarization) to help students read and understand the text. The CALI instructional framework also includes practices that teachers can use to differentiate instruction in a station-teaching lesson (i.e., student support).

To design the CALI instructional framework, the research team drew from the RAND Reading Study Group’s (2002) model of reading comprehension. The model suggests that reading comprehension is influenced by the relationship among the reader, the content of the text read, and the reader’s activity or purpose for reading, which all interact in a sociocultural context (e.g., the middle school co-taught classroom). Figure 1 shows the intersection of the RAND Reading Study Group’s components and the CALI instructional framework.

The CALI instructional framework aligns with recommendations in the IES adolescent literacy practice guide and draws from previously existing practices that have evidence of effectiveness (e.g., get the gist; Vaughn et al., 2001). Thus, the CALI research team “packaged” the practices included in the CALI instructional framework and designed PD to support the systematic implementation of each practice (e.g., a specific routine for providing vocabulary instruction) within a co-taught classroom. The CALI PD also includes strategies co-teachers can use to collaboratively plan and implement each of the CALI instructional framework practices.

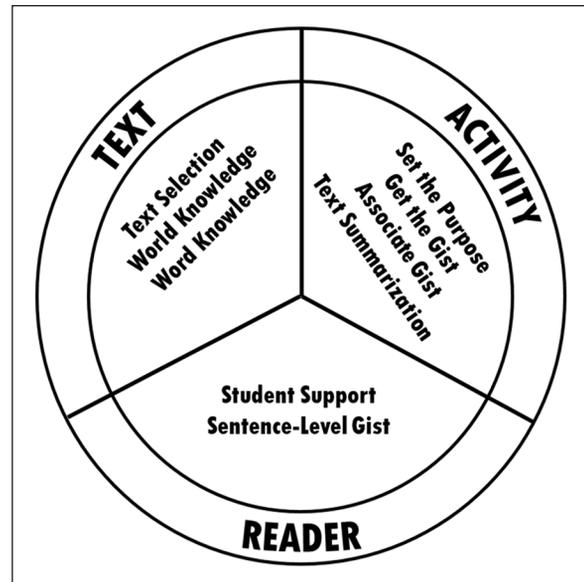


Figure 1. The CALI instructional framework.
Note. CALI = Content Area Literacy Instruction.

The Special Issue

As previously mentioned, the five articles in this special issue provide readers with guidance on how middle school co-teachers can implement a set of evidence-based literacy practices in their content-area classes. The practices included are evidence-based literacy practices. Authors use detailed examples from the CALI instructional framework to illustrate ideas.

In the first article, Wexler, Kearns, Hogan, Clancy, and Shelton describe some of the critical considerations for effectively planning for and implementing evidence-based literacy practices in the middle school co-taught classroom. The authors use the acronym FIRST (Fidelity, Integration, Roles, and Selecting Text) to organize four planning tips. First, the authors provide guidance for implementing a plan to monitor Fidelity of implementation (i.e., implementing practices as intended and with quality) of co-teachers’ adopted evidence-based literacy practices. Second, the authors present issues related to the Integration of the practices into daily content-area instruction and across a year. Historically, instruction in the co-taught classroom has been dominated by the content-area teacher, with the special education teacher taking on more subordinate roles (e.g., acting as an aide; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Therefore, with a goal of parity in instruction, the third tip from the authors focuses on considerations regarding co-teachers’ Roles when they plan and implement evidence-based literacy instruction. Finally, literacy-focused lessons require co-teachers to use a carefully selected text that aligns with their curriculum and other instructional objectives as they provide co-occurring literacy instruction. Thus, the final tip provides criteria for Selecting Text for each literacy-focused lesson.

Co-teachers can improve students' comprehension of a selected text by providing explicit instruction in essential knowledge that can enhance students' understanding of that text. In the second article, Kearns, Lyon, and Pollack provide readers guidance for implementing instruction in background knowledge (i.e., world knowledge) and vocabulary knowledge (i.e., word knowledge) needed to understand the text. Specifically, the authors provide information about how co-teachers can implement a relatively quick world knowledge-word knowledge instructional routine prior to students reading text as an investment in improving students' comprehension of an assigned text. Using CALI instructional framework guidelines, they provide guidance on how to select essential concepts and words to teach (i.e., what to teach), and they present a systematic routine for teachers to use to provide this instruction (i.e., how to teach).

Being able to identify main ideas in a multi-paragraph text is necessary for students to learn essential content. In the third article, Shelton, Lemons, and Wexler describe how co-teachers can facilitate a routine for students to use to identify the main idea of a section of text (i.e., *get the gist*; Vaughn et al., 2001) used in a literacy-focused lesson. The authors also provide guidance on how to enhance the routine with peer-mediated practice (i.e., *associate gist*) so that students receive frequent feedback from a partner to help them improve their main idea identification. Finally, the authors explain how teachers can provide explicit instruction on using the student-identified main ideas to summarize the text.

Considering the heterogeneity of the student make-up in a co-taught class (i.e., typically achieving students and students with LD), it is likely that some students will make progress with typical content-area and literacy-focused instruction, while other students will need more support. Therefore, it is critical that co-teachers become skilled at frequently using data to identify which students need supplemental, targeted, individualized instruction, as well as which students are ready for instruction that can extend their learning. One way co-teachers can integrate customized literacy-focused lessons for all learners in their classroom is through the use of station teaching (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend, 2015). Therefore, in the fourth article, Lyon, Hogan, and Kearns introduce the student support model, an essential component of the CALI instructional framework. Teachers can use a station-teaching student support lesson to support the overall learning of essential content and application of strategies we expect students to be facile in as part of the CALI instructional framework (e.g., *get the gist*). The authors provide guidance for co-teachers on how they can use data from students' gist statements to determine which students are in need of more intensive instruction (i.e., review group), more practice (i.e., practice group), or extension activities (i.e., extend group). The

authors provide suggestions on how co-teachers can provide appropriate support for students in each group.

In the final article, Pollack, Shelton, Clancy, and Lemons illustrate one of the strategies included in the CALI instructional framework student support lesson that targets students in the review group. In the review group, a special education teacher provides more intensive instruction to students who are in need of additional comprehension support. Specifically, the authors explain how to intensify the *get the gist* strategy instruction explained in the third article in this special issue with instruction in the sentence-level gist strategy. The authors explain to teachers how, using a sentence-level gist log, they can teach students to identify who or what each sentence is about and the most important information about the who/what in each sentence to generate a gist statement about an entire section. This includes an emphasis on pronoun instruction to help students identify the who/what in each sentence.

The five articles in this issue provide co-teachers with guidance on how to implement the CALI instructional framework, which includes practices that co-teachers can use to integrate more evidence-based literacy instruction into their typical content-area instruction. It also includes suggestions for intensifying and extending instruction through a station-teaching support model, designed to target the instructional needs of all students in the middle school co-taught classroom.

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