

Co-teaching and Campus Collaboration in an Emergent Literacy Course

Mary L. Konrad, Ed.D.
University of Mary Hardin-Baylor

Abstract

To cultivate the acceptance of the co-teaching model among preservice teachers, two of the education faculty at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, have incorporated co-teaching in several field-based literacy courses. Alongside experiencing co-teaching from their professors, preservice teachers are also provided with the opportunity to practice co-teaching through a partnership with a local early childhood campus in an Emergent Literacy course. This approach promotes student proficiency in an inclusive early childhood setting and provides a model for preservice teachers to implement when they later encounter opportunities for co-teaching in an inclusive classroom environment. By learning the skills to engage in co-teaching through various field-based literacy courses, preservice teachers are equipped to enter their future classrooms as collaborative professionals capable of delivering high-quality education to both general education and special education students.

Keywords: *emergent literacy, Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), co-teaching, inclusion*

The integration of special education students into general education classrooms is a longstanding practice that yields a multitude of favorable academic and social outcomes (Mansouri et al., 2022). However, in many cases, general education teachers and special education teachers tend to work independently with special education students (Kart & Kart, 2021). As each of these teaching specialties brings a unique perspective on how to teach and integrate special education students, collaborative efforts between the two professionals through co-teaching can create an enhanced and inclusive classroom environment. To cultivate the acceptance of the co-teaching model among preservice teachers, the education faculty at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor have incorporated team teaching in a field-based

literacy course. Alongside experiencing co-teaching from their professors, preservice teachers are also provided with the opportunity to practice co-teaching through a partnership with a local early childhood campus. This approach fosters collaboration between university instructors and promotes student proficiency in an inclusive early childhood setting. It is widely recognized that collaboration promotes professional growth, and through these field-based courses, university students can develop their co-teaching skills to serve early childhood learners (Jang, 2006; Ricci et al., 2017). The purpose of this article is to illustrate how two professors at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor have implemented a collaborative co-teaching approach in a field-based Emergent Literacy course.

Traditional Inclusion

Benefits for Students in Traditional Inclusion

Traditional inclusion involves the integration of a special education student into a general education classroom under the direction of the classroom teacher. Katz and Mirenda (2002) note numerous benefits of this educational approach for the special education student, including improved social interactions, greater academic gains than in segregated classrooms, increased instructional time, increased sense of belonging, and higher self-esteem. Students without disabilities who learn in inclusive classrooms also benefit from the presence of students with disabilities. Regular classroom instruction time is not decreased, and students have the opportunity to learn empathy and cooperation (Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Mansouri et al. (2022) continue to find social and academic benefits to students in inclusive classrooms.

Challenges for Teachers of Traditional Inclusion

Despite the high number of students being identified as having special needs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), LeDoux et al. (2012) note that many general education teachers are not prepared to instruct special education students in an inclusion classroom. General education teachers often experience a lack of communication regarding the placement of special needs students and of the students' goals and objectives as defined by their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A lack of collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers was also noted as a major challenge of traditional inclusion (LeDoux et al., 2012).

Inclusion with a Co-Teaching Approach

General education classrooms include a diverse population of students. General education and special education teachers benefit from having additional tools and strategies when collaborating in order to serve all students. According to the Open Society Foundation (2019, para. 5), "Inclusive systems provide a better-quality education for all children and are instrumental in changing discriminatory attitudes." Since we began providing the co-teaching version of the Emergent Literacy course in the spring of 2020, we have seen how the co-teaching approach better prepares university students for the reality of today's inclusive classroom environments. We value the additional knowledge and skills our preservice teachers gain from this experience. These students also develop positive attitudes towards working with elementary special education students.

Emergent Literacy Course at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor

The Emergent Literacy course, geared toward junior-level students, is the first of three required field-based literacy courses and focuses on all aspects of early literacy. The course modules closely align with the Science of Teaching Reading and include: best practices, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, phonics, language development, written expression (using the Language Experience approach), book reading, and social-emotional development (utilizing the Conscious Discipline approach).

Both a literacy professor and a special education professor collaborate to co-teach the Emergent Literacy course. Our co-teaching model adds a unique benefit to the course material and allows students to experience quality co-teaching. By receiving simultaneous instruction from professors with different specialties, students are able to understand differing points of view regarding how to teach course concepts. While one professor may lead the lesson, we are both actively engaged in the conversation with the students and with each other. This approach

provides a model for preservice teachers to implement when they later encounter opportunities for co-teaching in an inclusive classroom environment.

The course meets weekly for four hours, with students spending the first two hours on an early childhood campus and the remaining two hours in the university classroom. During the first week of a course module, both the literacy professor and the special education professor help the students learn how to apply the material in various classroom settings, including a general education classroom, an early childhood classroom, and an inclusive classroom. In between class days, the students prepare a small group lesson based on the topic that aligns with the campus year-at-a-glance.

On the following class day, the preservice teachers teach their prepared lesson to a group of students while recording the lesson. After their time on the ISD campus, students return to the university classroom to reflect with the professors on their teaching performance. We identify strengths, areas of needed growth, and areas that have shown improvement from previous sessions. The students gain knowledge and expertise by co-teaching the literacy content and implementing strategies needed in an inclusive classroom (Cook et al., 2021).

Challenges

While the collaborative co-teaching model has many advantages, it also presents some challenges. One of the most prominent challenges identified by both general education and special education teachers is a lack of time to plan lessons, address challenging behaviors, and collaborate with co-teachers (Larios & Zetlin, 2023). Communication between teachers can also be a challenging experience. Being able to find agreement on the instructional activities is mentioned as a potential obstacle to successful co-teaching (Ricci et al., 2017).

From the perspective of the professors involved, we encountered few challenges in implementing a co-teaching model due to the mutual respect and appreciation we hold for each other's experiences. To ensure the success of this collaborative approach, we meticulously selected which lessons would benefit the most from a co-teaching model and determined which professor, the special education or the literacy specialist, would serve as the lead instructor for each particular lesson.

Student Perspectives

One student commented, "As an Interdisciplinary EC-6 major, having a class that offered both general education and special education strategies was exactly what I was looking for when I chose my major. The strategies that were taught in this class by my teachers helped me to see both sides of general and special education. I love that this class was taught by co-teachers, it gave me the opportunity to explore and practice general education and special education tactics all in one class."

Another student commented from her emergent literacy field experience classroom, "Having a co-teaching classroom has so many benefits. The teachers are able to be more efficient when helping individual students. There are more professional hands and eyes available to the children." This student's experience echoes findings by Kirkpatrick et al. (2020), who note the benefits of additional resources and shared responsibilities that are present in a co-teaching classroom.

A student teacher shared while in her intern placement, which includes both general education and special education, "I've seen firsthand how crucial it is for general education teachers and special education teachers to work together. From their different perspectives and

experiences, they come together as a team to best serve their students. Co-teaching is something my professors demonstrated well and I am thankful for the example they showed me in my classes at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.”

Conclusion

General education and special education are commonly viewed as distinct classroom methodologies. However, we suggest that a blended, inclusive classroom environment presents an optimal learning setting for all students. Cooperative co-teaching is an integral aspect of ensuring the success of an inclusive classroom. By imparting the skills to engage in

co-teaching through various field-based literacy courses, we equip preservice teachers to enter their future classrooms as collaborative professionals capable of delivering high-quality education to both general education and special education students.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mary Konrad is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor where she works primarily with undergraduate pre-service teachers in literacy and curriculum design. She has extensive experience in K-12 education as a teacher, classroom coach, and early childhood administrator.

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