

# Purposeful Presence: Supporting Preservice Teachers' Co-Teaching to Meet Student Needs

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Journal of Special Education Preparation  
3(3), 48-54

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DOI: 10.33043/JOSEP.3.3.48-54  
[openjournals.bsu.edu/JOSEP](https://openjournals.bsu.edu/JOSEP)

## ABSTRACT

Co-teaching continues to be a common method of instruction, allowing students with disabilities to engage in the general education curriculum. While there are numerous exemplars of excellent co-teaching, there is more that can be done to assist preservice teachers as they learn to bridge the gap between the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), the co-teaching setting, and the specially designed instruction students with disabilities need to make progress on their IEP goals in co-taught settings. This article provides a reflective matrix which faculty can use to scaffold novice teachers through co-assessment, co-planning, co-instructing, and co-reflecting by linking IEP goals to specially designed instruction (i.e., evidence-based and high leverage practices) and co-teaching models.

## KEYWORDS

**co-teaching, collaboration, evidence-based practices, IEP goals, high leverage practices**

Special education is ever changing as students with special needs are integrated to a greater extent into general education classrooms (Friend, 2016). All children should have opportunities to engage with and experience success in the general curriculum (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [2004], Every Student Succeeds Act [2015]). Co-teaching helps support these inclusive practices and is found in many school districts across the nation. In their survey of state education agencies, Muller et al. (2009) identified 11 states that include co-teaching as a formal service delivery option. Making the most of the time available in a co-taught setting is of utmost importance to all special educators. However, addressing every student's learning needs and meeting Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals during co-teaching can be overwhelming to preservice teachers.

## What is Co-teaching?

Co-teaching is defined as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space" (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 2). The purpose of co-teaching is clear: meet student needs in their least restrictive environment. To co-teach effectively, preservice teachers apply four components: co-assessment, co-planning, co-instructing, and co-reflecting. Co-assessment occurs throughout the co-teaching process, from the moment the team forms to planning, during, and following instruction (Conderman & Hedin, 2012). Co-planning allows the team to capitalize on the general education teacher's content knowledge and the special education teacher's pedagogical knowledge (Murawski, 2012). Co-instructing can take the form of one of six models defined by Friend (2016; see Table 1): (a) one teach, one observe; (b) station teaching; (c) parallel teaching; (d) alternative teaching; (d) teaming; and (e) one teach, one assist. Co-reflecting occurs throughout the entire process and can assist in developing a shared vision of the co-taught classroom (Fluijt et al., 2016).

**TABLE 1:** Co-Teaching Models and Descriptions (Friend, 2016)

Co-teaching Model	Description
One teach, one observe	One teacher presents content while the second gathers data.
Station teaching	Instruction is divided into three parts, one teacher directed activity at each of two stations, and one independent activity, three groups of students rotate through the three stations.
Parallel teaching	The same content is presented by both teachers simultaneously, but the instructional strategies used are differentiated for the students' needs.
Alternative teaching	One teacher works with the majority of the students while the second provides remediation, pre-teaching, enrichment, etc. with a small group.
Teaming	Both teachers teach together in whole group, presenting simultaneously.
One teach, one assist	One teacher provides content, the other offers individual assistance as needed for the students.

**TABLE 2:** High Leverage Practices that Align to Co-Teaching

Co-teaching Component	High Leverage Practice
Co-assessment	HLP 4: Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student's strengths and needs.
	HLP 5: Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaborative design and implement educational programs.
Co-assessment and Co-reflecting	HLP 6: Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.
Co-planning	HLP 12: Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.
	HLP 13: Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.
Co-instructing	HLP 15: Provide scaffolded supports.
	HLP 17: Use flexible grouping.

### Special Educators' Expertise: The Reason for the Presence

Friend et al. (2010) listed two unique characteristics of co-teaching that distinguish it from other collaborative models of teaching, (a) a lower teacher-student ratio and (b) the expertise of the individuals involved in the co-teaching. Special educators are trained to provide specially designed instruction and utilize evidence-based

practices to meet students' needs. In fact, as Friend (2016) emphasizes, the purpose of special education is to provide specially designed instruction which can be implemented in the co-taught setting. Yet these specialists, and their expertise in cognitive strategies and pedagogical knowledge, are not always utilized to the extent that they could be in the co-taught classroom (Harbort et al., 2007; Johnson et al.,

2022; Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Murawski, 2006; Scruggs et al., 2007). This is perhaps due to the lack of clarity in co-teaching roles (Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005) or because co-teachers do not view themselves as equal partners with shared responsibilities (Berry, 2021). Faculty can train and mentor preservice teachers so that they can develop these skills and mindsets.

**FIGURE 1:** Blank Needs-based Co-teaching Matrix

Student Needs (IEP Goals)	Dates And Units of Instruction	Evidence-Based Practice; High Leverage Practice	Co-Teaching Model	Evaluation
Student:  Goal:	Date:  Unit:	EBP:  HLP:	Model: <input type="checkbox"/> one teach, one observe <input type="checkbox"/> station teaching <input type="checkbox"/> parallel teaching <input type="checkbox"/> alternative teaching <input type="checkbox"/> teaming <input type="checkbox"/> one teach, one assist	Student data:  Teacher Perception: 1 2 3 4 <i>1= least effective</i>  Notes:

Collaboration is so significant to the success of learners that the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Collaborative for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) have identified it as one of the four domains of high leverage practices necessary for preservice special educators to master (HLPs; McLeskey et al., 2017). The HLPs under the collaboration domain that relate directly to co-teaching include HLP 1: Collaborate with professionals to increase student success, and HLP 2: Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families. Co-teaching as a special education service delivery model should flow from these, and other HLPs. Table 2 lists key HLPs and their associated components of co-teaching. Through these practices, preservice teachers will learn to use specially designed instruction that is evidence-based (Hedin et al., 2021) and document a consistent trend toward student academic achievement through data collection of IEP goals. To change practice and implement best practices, preservice teachers need scaffolds, supports, and the opportunity to reflect while they apply learning from the college classroom to clinical field placements.

### Co-teaching Matrix

The matrix in Figure 1 provides a quick and easy framework for aligning students' learning needs, IEP goals, evidence-based practices, high leverage practices, and co-teaching models. Teacher education faculty can mentor preservice teachers who are actively synthesizing and applying content from college coursework in co-teaching settings through this matrix. The matrix is best completed as a team (i.e., preservice teacher and co-teacher) under the guidance of the teacher education faculty supervisor. This structure can be used to nurture the developmental nature of co-teaching because, after instruction, the preservice teacher and their co-teachers can use this tool to reflect on the instructional goals, lesson, and student learning outcomes, providing significant information for identifying next steps and possible modifications for instruction and co-teaching roles. This 6-step process will help to sustain the evidence-based practices (EBP) and accommodations in the co-taught classrooms because all stakeholders will see the impact they have made on all students' learning in the classroom, not just the students with disabilities (McKenzie, 2009).

### Step 1: Identify the Goals (co-assessment)

Identifying the students and the IEP goals to be addressed is the first step in completing the matrix. Teacher education faculty should model the process for identifying the goals for instruction from the student's IEP. After identifying the IEP goal, the preservice teacher should review the current progress monitoring data and analyze the additional assessment data available to them. Conderman & Hedin (2012) outline several types of assessment data to review: standardized test scores, curriculum-based measures, and pre-assessment data. Using the data from these sources, the preservice teacher will complete a copy of the matrix in Figure 1 for each co-taught clinical field placement identifying students' learning needs and IEP goals to be addressed in each co-taught class. This is the first step in the broad planning and sets the stage for the remaining steps. Using the IEP during planning is necessary because only 86% of special educators reported using the students' IEP while planning co-taught instruction (King-Sears & Bowman-Kruhm, 2011) and few lesson plans include accommodations and modifications (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012). The example in Figure 2 shows how a preservice teacher completed this

**FIGURE 2:** Sample Completed Needs-based Co-teaching Matrix

Student Needs (IEP Goals)	Dates And Units of Instruction	Evidence-Based Practice; High Leverage Practice	Co-Teaching Model	Evaluation
Student: Joe  Goal: Determine main idea and supporting details of an expository text (Common Core RI.6.2)	Date: November 4-15  Unit: Novel Study (Holm, Jennifer L. <i>The Trouble with May Amelia</i> . Atheneum, 2011)	EBP: Graphic organizers  HLP: 14; 15	Model: station teaching (general education teacher teaches content in small group, Ms. Smith teaches use of the graphic organizer in small group)	Student data: summative assessment: Joe- 82% Class average- 95%  Teacher Perception: 1 2 ③ 4 <i>1= least effective</i>  Notes: Try alternative teaching to pre-teach graphic organizers
Student Needs (IEP Goals)	Dates And Units of Instruction	Evidence-Based Practice; High Leverage Practice	Co-Teaching Model	Evaluation
Student: Rashia  Goal: Fluently divide multi-digit numbers using the standard algorithm (Common Core 6.NS.2)	Date: November 4-8  Unit: Division	EBP: Direct instruction  HLP: 16	Model: alternative teaching (general education teacher teaches larger group, Ms. Smith pulls a few students to the side of the room to use direct instruction)	Student data: summative assessment: Rashia- 88% Class average- 92%  Teacher Perception: 1 2 3 ④ <i>1= least effective</i>  Notes: Very effective!

step for two of their students using their standards-based IEP goals for math and English/language arts.

### **Step 2: Identify the Unit (co-planning)**

Stefanidis et al. (2018) found that higher levels of co-planning lead to more positive perceptions of co-teaching. To this end, various planning models have been introduced (e.g., Murawski, 2012; Pratt, 2017; Weiss & Rodgers,

2019). However, preservice teachers need frameworks that provide opportunities to synthesize these components into an effective co-taught lesson plan. Therefore, the second step in completing the matrix is the responsibility of the co-teaching team in the collaborative setting. Working collaboratively with their co-teacher, the preservice teacher will identify the units of study and dates. They could also indicate the Common Core or state standards for those units.

Some co-teachers may choose to do this step together during a planning meeting, while others may choose to do it through email, or by way of an asynchronous lesson planning document (e.g., Google Doc). Most schools follow a curriculum map that may be used to copy and paste timelines into the matrix.

### **Step 3: Select the Strategy (co-planning)**

As preservice teachers are forming

their skill set, it is the perfect time to establish clear practices for co-planning because “effective co-planning leads to effective instruction,” (Hedin et al., 2020, p. 303). Further, co-planning leads to more positive perceptions of co-teaching (Stefanidis et al., 2018) and more successful co-teaching experiences (Scruggs et al., 2007). Berry (2021) suggests that teacher preparation programs should focus on preparing “teachers with the skills and dispositions necessary to plan, assess, and teach together” (p. 104). Wexler et al. (2021) encourage co-teacher partners to plan for evidence-based practices and to consider how these practices will be implemented to fidelity.

Therefore, after the students’ needs and instructional content have been addressed, the preservice teacher should focus their attention on identifying EBP that align with the students’ specially designed instruction indicated on their IEP. EBP are those that have been proven effective through research with a particular population of students. Faculty can guide the preservice teacher to select the appropriate strategies needed to address the content and meet the needs of the students in the classroom. Torres (2012) provided guidance on where to find EBP. Some websites included: (a) Best Evidence Encyclopedia [www.bestevidence.org](http://www.bestevidence.org), (b) National Autism Center [www.nationalautismcenter.org](http://www.nationalautismcenter.org), (c) National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center [www.nsttac.org](http://www.nsttac.org), and (d) What Works Clearinghouse [www.ies.ed.gov](http://www.ies.ed.gov) (p. 67). Other resources can be found at (a) IDEAs that Work <https://osepideasthatwork.org/federal-resources-stakeholders/tool-kits>, (b) the IRIS Center <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>, and (c) the National Center on Intensive Intervention <https://intensiveintervention.org/>.

In addition to identifying an EBP, preservice teachers would benefit from

identifying the HLP that coordinates with the EBP (McCray et al., 2017). The HLP can be EBP or they can be practices that provide improved outcomes for all students across a variety of placements and content areas. The 22 HLPs are clearly explained in McLeskey et al. (2017). Selecting both the EBP and HLP to use during co-teaching allows the preservice teacher and their collaborators time to review the critical components for instruction to make the most of the time they have with the students.

#### **Step 4: Identify the Co-teaching Model (co-planning)**

Next the preservice teacher should select the co-teaching model(s) that would be the most effective given the classroom situation, students’ needs and IEP goals, and the instructional strategies. The nuances of each model will lend themselves to specific classroom settings and instructional content and arrangements. For example, in higher-level content areas, such as advanced sciences and math, from time to time, there may be students who struggle with a particular concept. In this situation, the preservice teacher may choose the alternative teaching model. This would allow the co-teacher to present the content the preservice teacher to provide re-teaching and remediation of a particular skill to those students who need it. In this situation, the team may choose the alternative teaching model, with the co-teacher presenting content and the preservice teacher providing re-teaching and remediation of a particular skill to those students who need it. In an elementary level classroom, co-teachers may find the content best suited to the teaming model where both teachers are presenting content simultaneously, or parallel teaching where both teachers are presenting the same content simultaneously but have broken the students into two groups to implement differentiated instruction.

#### **Step 5: Implement the Instruction (co-instructing)**

Once the first four steps have been completed, it is time to implement the instruction. Because the preservice teacher and co-teacher have preplanned roles and EBP, when instruction is implemented, each will know what to expect from the other, and what strategies and co-teaching model will be used. They will have had an opportunity to think about the implementation ahead of time and plan for fidelity in the implementation. They will be prepared to collect formative and summative student learning data (co-assessment) to be reflected on later (co-reflecting). The benefit of co-assessment is inherent in the collaborative process. The preservice teacher and co-teacher work together to provide assessment data through formative or summative assessments (Conderman & Hedin, 2021).

#### **Step 6: Evaluate the Effectiveness (co-assessment and co-reflecting)**

A shared vision leads to a practice that is ever changing as data are collected on the student learning outcomes and the preservice teacher becomes more comfortable in their role and co-reflect on their practice with their co-teachers (Fluijt et. al., 2016). Student academic outcomes should be the criterion for determining the IEP and service delivery model’s effectiveness (see U.S. Department of Education 2017 clarification of *Endrew F. vs. Douglas County*). For preservice teachers, learning to co-assess and gather student data related to the IEP and co-reflect on the instructional changes needed to influence positive student outcomes can be a powerful professional development tool as learning to reflect is a process which needs support to be mastered (deBettencourt & Nagro, 2019).

Following the implementation of the unit of instruction, the matrix can be used on two levels for evaluation (the

co-assessment and co-reflecting aspects of co-teaching): student data and teacher perception. Preservice teachers should be encouraged to record student data and analyze the effectiveness of instruction using the data. Teacher perception through co-reflecting is equally as important in the data collection, though. Because time was spent setting a goal and planning to implement a co-teaching model and evidence-based strategy prior to the instruction, the co-teachers can evaluate the effectiveness of their participation and the fidelity of their implementation. Reflecting on this will help lay the groundwork for future connections between the team.

As preservice teachers practice co-reflecting, they will deepen their ability to collaborate. A successful collaborative partnership must include “a vision that will sustain you through the difficult times” (Keefe et al., 2004, p. 38), be based on a compatible perspective (Brownell et al., 2006), and be developmental in nature (Salend, 2008). With supports, preservice teachers and their co-teachers can co-reflect on their practice and co-assess to identify their expertise for each unit of instruction and make the most of their instructional time with the students, in turn enhancing their self-efficacy. Teachers’ beliefs about their knowledge and skills plays a key role in their developing sense of self-efficacy and their ability to adapt to the co-teaching demands (Silverman, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

This article provides a matrix that can be used to increase co-teachers (e.g., in-service, preservice, student teacher) engagement in planning for co-teaching and emphasizes the purpose of co-teaching: to meet students’ learning needs in the least restrictive setting. The majority of students with high incidence disabilities spend most of their time in the general education classroom (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2023), often supported by special educators serving as co-teachers. Van Gardenren et al. (2012) reviewed literature on co-teaching, subsequently finding 19 studies that included results of student learning outcomes which indicated favorable outcomes. More recently, Jones and Winter (2023) found positive academic outcomes for students with and without disabilities across a decade of statewide test scores. By beginning planning sessions with students’ IEP goals, teachers are ensuring that students’ learning needs drive planning, and ultimately instruction. Including discussion regarding EBP and HLP during the planning stages will encourage a more active co-teacher role in the classroom. Following implementation, preservice teachers can use this tool as one component of a more robust reflection on their practice in the clinical field setting.

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