

An Overview of Co-Teaching

What Is Co-Teaching?

Co-teaching (or collaborative teaching) is a coordinated instructional practice in which two or more educators simultaneously work with a heterogeneous group of students in a general education classroom.

Several key terms in this definition emphasize essential elements for success. First, co-teaching is **coordinated**. Co-teaching partners spend time planning together, smoothly share instructional responsibilities, and collaboratively reflect on their practices. Effective co-teaching can be compared to synchronized swimming—teammates must carefully coordinate, not only to win but to avoid drowning!

Effective co-teaching can be compared to synchronized swimming—teammates must carefully coordinate, not only to win but to avoid drowning!

Many different **educators** can be involved in co-teaching relationships. Historically, special education teachers have been the most common to partner with classroom teachers, but this is rapidly changing. Successful partnerships have developed with ELL teachers, speech therapists, librarians, literacy specialists, occupational and physical therapists, gifted specialists, technology specialists, social workers, and school psychologists. Inclusive schools seek innovative ways to use all staff to directly support student learning. In addition, powerful examples exist of co-teaching with paraeducators or instructional aides. Of course, how these individuals co-teach will depend on the expertise they bring to the classroom and the time they have available.

Co-teaching differs from collaborative consultation because both educators are **simultaneously** engaged in the instructional process. Rather than a specialist suggesting a few instructional ideas to a teacher and then retreating, the partners are implementing the planned instruction together. As future chapters will detail, co-teaching can look many different ways to the casual observer. Within one period, we may see both teachers take a lead in lecturing, giving directions, monitoring student behavior, or taking responsibility for a small group. We may see one teacher quietly collecting observational data while the other facilitates whole-group instruction, or one teacher problem solving with an individual student while the other continues the lesson. No matter what it looks like, effective co-teaching always requires the active engagement of both educators for the entire period.

Other definitions of co-teaching exist (Basso and McCoy, 2007; Murawski, 2009; Villa, Thousand, and Nevin, 2004; Fattig and Taylor, 2008.) In a 2009 survey of state education agencies, researchers found quite a number of different definitions.

- Virginia: "Co-teaching means a service delivery option with two or more professionals sharing responsibility for a group of students for some or all of the school day in order to combine their expertise to meet student needs."
- Iowa: "Co-teaching is defined as two teachers physically present in a heterogeneous classroom with joint and equal responsibility for classroom instruction."
- Oklahoma: "Co-teaching implies a partnership in the classroom of a teacher with general education credentials and a special education teacher with special education and/or content credentials. This partnership creates a qualitatively different classroom than one with only a single teacher. A change of instructional intensity is also often noted in the descriptions of this type of classroom that is operated by two teachers and meets the instructional needs of all students in the classroom."
- New York: "Integrated co-teaching services means the provision of specially designed instruction and academic instruction provided to a group of students with disabilities and nondisabled students."

What Does the Research Say?

In fact, so many different definitions and interpretations exist that it has been difficult to gather data on the effectiveness of co-teaching. In somewhat of an understatement, one educator concluded “Co-teaching is not a phenomenon that lends itself to precise investigation” (DLDECEC, 2001).

A small amount of research on co-teaching shows the following results:

- In a study of vocabulary acquisition in primary grades, researchers found that children with speech-language impairments made stronger gains in a co-taught setting (between a classroom teacher and an SLP) than in pull-out or in-class support (Throneburg, 2000).
- A study centered on the infusion of language skills (vocabulary, phonemic awareness) in urban kindergarten settings found that ELL students and native English speakers in a co-taught classroom (classroom teacher and an SLP) showed significantly greater language gains than those in a traditional classroom (Hadley, Simmerman, Long, and Luna, 2000).
- A New York elementary school found literacy achievement increased for students with disabilities, from 20 percent at or above grade level to 42 percent in just two years as a result of co-teaching intervention (Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis, 2010).
- A Georgia middle school found that students with and without disabilities showed significant increases on standardized tests in mathematics and language arts after two years of co-teaching. In addition, there was a significant decrease in the numbers of students with chronic attendance problems (Burns, 2010).
- Meta-analyses of the research on co-teaching with special educators found only a handful of well-designed studies to include in the review. The results of these studies indicated that co-teaching may be moderately effective in language arts and mathematics (Murawski and Swanson, 2001; Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffe, 2007).

While the available research shows positive results associated with co-teaching, the current database is extremely limited. As co-teaching

becomes a growing response to student needs and federal mandates, educators hope that the research base will also continue to grow.

What Are the Benefits?

The good news is that many practicing educators report positive outcomes from co-teaching. Observed benefits include:

- **Professional Growth:** Undergraduate programs can only pack so much into a four-year plan. Classroom teachers and specialists begin their jobs, understandably, with a limited knowledge and experience base. If they work in isolation, that knowledge and experience base will continue to have limits. In contrast, educators who co-teach have the opportunity to learn from daily interaction and observation of a colleague with a very different background. For specialists, on the one hand, this usually means deepening and broadening their content knowledge. Classroom teachers, on the other hand, gain skills in working with students who learn in unique ways. The enhanced knowledge and skills of both partners benefit all the students these professionals serve, in and outside of the co-taught classroom.

“The enhanced knowledge and skills of both partners benefit all the students these professionals serve, in and outside of the co-taught classroom.”

- **Improved Instruction:** Good instruction is served by connecting ideas. Innovation is usually the result of an idea that is germinated through a process of reflection, sharing, testing, and redesigning with collaborators. As Steven

Johnson, author of *Where Good Ideas Come From*, writes “Good ideas want to connect, fuse, recombine. They want to reinvent themselves by crossing conceptual borders” (2010, 282). Research on professional learning communities, small groups of collaborative educators, shows the power of being able to tap into the collective creativity and wisdom of colleagues. Teachers who collaborate with colleagues develop instructional ideas that are more effective for students.

- **Differentiation:** Differentiated instruction is based on the premise that teachers should adapt instruction to meet students' varying readiness levels, learning preferences, and interests. Although most educators agree with this premise, they also agree that practical application is a challenge. Co-teaching makes differentiated instruction so much easier. Two heads and four hands make planning and implementing differentiation possible on a daily basis. Co-teachers bring different perspectives to lesson design, creating plans that include higher and lower levels of complexity and more hands-on applications. During instruction, partners flexibly group students as needed to ensure that all are learning at their highest levels. In addition, shared classroom management allows teachers to feel more comfortable with multiple learning activities taking place simultaneously in the room.
- **Teacher Access:** Students consistently report a preference for a co-taught classroom. Specifically, students comment, "If one teacher was busy, the other could help me" (Pittsford Central School District, 2006). Access to brief, individual assistance in the classroom allows students to get help immediately, rather than waiting for a tutorial or study hall later in the day. This means that students are able to continue learning with the class, rather than mentally dropping out due to poor comprehension and frustration.
- **Behavior Management:** One student made a complaint about his co-taught classroom, saying "When one's not watching you, the other is!" Behavior management is a natural outcome of a co-taught class because there are two sets of eyes for monitoring students, two bodies for proximity control, and two teachers to mix things up and make learning more interesting. When the occasional behavioral issue arises, one of the two teachers can intervene, removing the student if necessary, while the other can continue instruction for the rest of the class.
- **Student Engagement:** Several factors are related to high engagement. Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering, noted authors and researchers, identified the four major components of engagement as emotion, student interest, an understanding of importance, and a sense of efficacy (2010). A master teacher infuses one or more of these attributes in every lesson. But

co-teachers can do this even more readily. Two adults can engage in a heated debate about a topic. Two adults can quickly generate connections to show the importance of the content to real life. Two adults can share multiple perspectives and multiple voices about a topic. Most importantly, two adults can easily create ways for students to do all of these things!

- **Support for Unidentified Students:** Many a teacher has lost sleep over the students who fall through the cracks—those students who are not identified for special services or extra help but are struggling. When specialists co-teach, they can use their expertise to have an impact on learning for all students in a class, not just those with labels. At a New York high school known for its high expectations, 86 percent of teachers surveyed felt that co-teaching gave them the opportunity to reach students who might otherwise be at risk of failure (Pittsford, 2006). Speech and occupational therapists, literacy specialists—so many educators who used to work with just identified students—embrace the opportunity to help all kids. Reading specialist Emily Kendig’s enthusiasm is evident as she affirms, “It’s about reaching the students who don’t necessarily struggle enough to need pullout, but still need a little something extra” (personal communication, 2010).
- **Time on Task:** Pull-out models of service delivery in elementary schools usually involve students leaving their classroom in the midst of instruction to receive support in another space. If you have ever watched a young child walk through a school hallway, you know that the journey is not always quick or direct. Distractions abound, from peering into other classrooms and perusing the artwork hanging on the walls to chatting with friends and waving to teachers. All of this is lost instructional time—something struggling students cannot afford. Then, when they finally return to their classrooms, these students find that they have no idea what is going on. Instruction has proceeded without them. Teachers or peers have to try to catch them up to the rest—something struggling students do not do quickly. Co-teaching solves this problem.

“Students’ time on task is maximized because they do not leave the classroom.”

Students' time on task is maximized because they do not leave the classroom.

- **Sense of Belonging:** An inclusion advocate once linked the rising tide of teen suicide to the rising rates of students in special education. He voiced concern that students with disabilities, as well as other students, were receiving the message that people who were different didn't belong. Though this connection may seem a far stretch, we do know that students often admit feelings of embarrassment and isolation when they are removed from the classroom for services. The stigma associated with removal can leave a lasting impact. Co-teaching avoids these negative feelings by communicating the message that all students comprise the learning community, all students have strengths and weaknesses, and all students are worthwhile.
- **Acceptance of Diversity:** Take a look inside a truly inclusive classroom and you will see a kaleidoscope—students of different colors, sizes, talents—all blending together into one masterpiece of learning. Children who grow up in spaces where diversity is cherished are able to easily embrace diversity in the world around them. As global collaboration increases, graduates who are comfortable with diversity will be more successful.
- **High Expectations:** “I didn't know she could do that!” This exclamation is often heard when schools transition from pull-out services to inclusive education. Classroom teachers and specialists are frequently amazed by students who rise to the higher expectations of a general education setting. As far back as 1987, researchers were documenting that IEPs written for students in inclusive settings were of a higher quality on several dimensions considered to be best practices (Hunt, Goetz, and Anderson, 1986). This may be because a specialist working in isolation with atypical learners is likely to have a skewed sense of what students can do. Through co-teaching specialists broaden their sense of what students need to do, and more important, are capable of doing.

Children who grow up in spaces where diversity is cherished are able to easily embrace diversity in the world around them.



TO SUM UP

- Co-teaching is a coordinated instructional practice in which two or more educators simultaneously work with a heterogeneous group of students in a general education classroom.
- Research on co-teaching is limited, but professional educators report numerous benefits. The benefits that partners experience will depend on which co-teaching models they use and how effectively they work together.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Many definitions of co-teaching exist. What do you see as the key components of a definition that a school might choose to adopt?
- What does emerging research about co-teaching suggest?
- What benefits of co-teaching are teachers most likely to experience in the initial stages? In the later stages?