

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 sharing instructional responsibilities, and collaboratively reflecting on their practices. Effective co-teaching can be compared to partners cooking dinner together—they take on different responsibilities, add their own flourishes, occasionally bump into each other, and finally sit down to share a tasty meal.

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 English Language 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. Many districts hesitate to use the term *co-teaching* when referring to paraeducators, but all agree that para educators can be more fully utilized in inclusive classrooms.

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 take many different forms 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). The simplest of these is “co-teaching is having two teachers in the room.” Of course, effective co-teaching is so much more than just two adults in a class together. You may even know of schools that claim to be doing co-teaching, yet the specialists spend most of their time circulating the room. Perhaps you know of co-teaching initiatives that don’t provide any common planning time for partners, or even a teacher who believes that co-teaching consists solely of pulling a small group of students with individualized education plans (IEPs) to the back of the room and doing a separate activity. These variations on the definition cause confusion and resistance. Effective co-teaching is highly coordinated co-instruction that fully utilizes the skills and talents that both teachers bring to the classroom.

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” (DLDCCEC 2001).

While the body of research is small, it is growing.

- An elementary school study showed that students with disabilities made significantly more progress in co-taught classes than those in separate educational settings, with the difference growing over time (Tremblay 2013).
- A study on teacher competency showed that co-teaching resulted in improved content knowledge for special educators and improved pedagogical knowledge for general educators. Researchers concluded that co-teaching resulted in co-constructed professional development for participants which benefited students in inclusive settings (Shaffer and Thomas-Brown 2015).
- A research review concluded that when co-teachers work closely together and have the time to plan, small positive outcomes are achieved (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, and McCulley 2012, 507). These same researchers found, comparing co-teaching to other forms of consultation, that “when specialists recommend improved instructional practices to teachers, instructional changes are unlikely to be realized in the classroom. However, when the specialists coordinate curriculum changes, significant changes are more likely to occur” (507).
- A middle school study involving students with learning disabilities showed slight growth in grades between the first and third quarters of the year, leading the researcher to conclude that co-teaching had a positive outcome on student achievement (Chilmonik 2016).
- Accelerated outcomes were seen on Maryland state reading and math assessments for students that participated in co-teaching as a systemic, continuous improvement strategy (Walsh 2012).
- In a study involving general and special education teachers, a majority of participants perceived co-teaching to have benefits for their students (Chitiyo 2017).
- An examination of student perspectives on various co-teaching models found that students believed best benefit was acquired when a variety of co-teaching models were utilized (Keeley, Brown, and Knapp 2017).

- 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 a speech/language pathologist [SLP]) than in pull-out or in-class support (Throneburg et al. 2000).
- A study centered on the infusion of language skills (vocabulary, phonemic awareness) in urban kindergarten settings found that students who were English language learners (ELLs) 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, et al. 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 McDuff 2007).
- The Council for Exceptional Children, based on a comprehensive review of what works for students with disabilities, has identified collaboration with general education teachers as one of the most essential practices for special educators to master (CEC and CEDAR Center 2017).

While the available research shows positive results associated with co-teaching, the current database is extremely limited. The most important data we have is found within classrooms, schools, and

districts. Teachers and leaders should be routinely collecting and examining their own data to determine if co-teaching is working as well as they'd like.

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. Misti Werle, the Library Media Systems Innovator in Bismarck Public Schools explained, "When the doors are closed, I am not growing. When the doors are open, I am learning from others and we are growing together" (personal communication 2019).

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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. A typical comment is, "If one teacher was busy, the other could help me." 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 (2010), noted authors and researchers, identified the four major components of engagement as emotion, student interest, an understanding of importance, and a sense of efficacy. 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 Central School District 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. Nicole Avery, an English Language Development specialist at Goddard Middle School in Littleton, Colorado, shared an experience many co-teachers can relate to.

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

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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.

The beauty of the co-taught class is that it is so beneficial for all of the students. When students have questions, one of us is almost always available to help, give hints or expand their thinking. With two of us, we are able to give the students feedback that they need in order to understand where they are in their own learning in a more timely manner. We had a student in a co-taught class that was very unsure of himself and extremely shy. In a regular classroom, he was one of those students that would fall through the cracks because he was quiet, not disruptive and not confident enough to ask questions. When he was in our class, he was able to get the instruction and attention that he needed to gain confidence in himself. He even told me that he felt like he was good at math for the first time in his life. The part that melts my heart is that the confidence continued on with him into his high school math class. He sent me an email his freshman year and told me that his math teacher suggested that he should think about taking an honors math class! (personal communication 2019)

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. As Sir Ken Robinson beautifully expresses, “As humanity becomes more numerous and interwoven, living respectfully with diversity is not just an ethical choice, it is a practical imperative” (Robinson and Aronica 2015, 49).

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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). More recently, John Hattie’s meta-analysis of teaching practices identified high expectations as one of the most impactful things teachers can do to bring about significant growth (Hattie 2012). In effective co-teaching, partners presume competence in all students. This is the least dangerous mind-set—assuming that they can do with the right supports, rather than assuming that they can’t (Rapp, Arndt, and Hildenbrand 2019).



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? How might you research your own efforts?
- What benefits of co-teaching are teachers most likely to experience in the initial stages? In the later stages? Which benefits are you most excited about?