

The Big Question

Co-Teaching as a Special Education Service: Is Classroom Collaboration a Sustainable Practice?

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Abstract

In the current climate of rigorous educational standards, universal accessibility, and teacher accountability for student outcomes, it is not surprising that co-teaching has become a widely implemented service delivery option for students with disabilities. Questions can be raised, however, about its sustainability, at least in part because of concerns about its dependence on sophisticated teacher skills for meaningful collaboration set in a supportive school context. The defining characteristics of collaboration and co-teaching are outlined, and examples of dilemmas related to the collaborative dimension of co-teaching are presented. The elements that can contribute to strong collaborative classroom partnerships, including carefully prepared teachers, knowledgeable administrators, ongoing professional development and coaching, feasible scheduling, and a focus on parity are attainable, but only if carefully integrated into a school's culture. Is co-teaching sustainable as a collaborative endeavor? Yes, but only if its many dimensions are understood and addressed.

Despite the fact that co-teaching is not a specified service on the continuum provided in federal special education law, it has become a relatively common arrangement for educating students with learning and behavior disabilities (Friend, 2014; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013). Its rapid development over the past decade is not particularly surprising, given that it seems to address several key mandates of current education reform initiatives. Specifically, co-teaching provides access to the general curriculum as deemed essential for nearly all students (e.g., Theoharis & Causton, 2014). It also addresses the interpretation of IDEA that the least restrictive environment for most students should be a general education classroom (e.g., Alquraini, 2013). Ultimately, co-teaching is proposed as the most likely

route for closing the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their typical peers (e.g., Walsh, 2012). Thus, co-teaching programs now are established in elementary, middle, and high schools and are implemented across subject areas (Brusca-Vega, Brown, & Yasutake, 2011; Moorehead & Grillo, 2013; Van Hover, Hicks, & Sayeski, 2012). They are common in urban school districts, suburban settings, and in rural areas (Embury & Kroeger, 2012; Isherwood, Barger-Anderson, Merhaut, Badgett, & Katsafanas, 2011).

However, co-teaching's efficacy has not been clearly established. Some researchers find that co-teaching leads to significant academic achievement gains for students with disabilities (Hang & Rabren, 2009; Silverman, Hazelwood, & Cronin, 2009). Others question its feasibility and its

impact on student outcomes (Fuchs, Fuchs, Compton, Wehby, Schumacher, Gersten, & Jordan, 2015). Many reasons undoubtedly can be identified for the seemingly contradictory findings about co-teaching effectiveness, including the quality of the instruction provided, the fidelity with which co-teaching approaches are incorporated into lessons, the amount of time spent planning for co-teaching, and the characteristics of the students enrolled in the co-taught class. Those co-teaching elements should be thoroughly explored, but they are being set aside in this discussion in order to focus on one dimension of co-teaching that most agree can significantly influence its success: the nature of the professional relationship between the teaching partners.

The collaborative aspect of co-teaching has been of interest to researchers for many years (e.g., Walther-Thomas, 1997), but it seems particularly critical at this juncture, as the global community defines contemporary society (Kardes, Ozturk, Cavusgil, & Cavusgil, 2013), as businesses emphasize more and more the centrality of collaborative enterprises (Congdon, Flynn, & Redman, 2014), as educators apply the term *collaboration* to an increasing number of activities (e.g., Ash & D'Auria, 2013; Martin-Beltran & Peercy, 2014), and as working together is promoted as the foundation for effective contemporary schooling (DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Sparks, 2013). The fundamental—the big—question about collaboration as it applies to co-teaching is this: Because co-teaching relies so heavily on the quality of the collaboration between educators, implying that person-specific characteristics are at its root, is co-teaching a sustainable special education service option? A companion question delves deeper into the

matter of collaboration: To be sustainable what factors must be directly and adequately addressed?

The Cornerstone of the Discussion: A Review of Key Concepts

A reasonable starting point for an analysis of the collaborative dimension of co-teaching is a brief review of key concepts. This might at first seem unnecessary...after all, every educator should be familiar with the fundamental knowledge about and critical characteristics of both collaboration and co-teaching. However, given the tendency in education for a single term to be applied to multiple concepts (e.g., co-teaching is a special education service option but also sometimes as the label for a student teaching model) and for several terms with distinct meanings to be used as synonyms (e.g., inclusion, co-teaching, team teaching), a few words for the purpose of ensuring clarity seem justified.

Collaboration in Special Education

Collaboration is widely discussed in contemporary education literature, for example, as the operating process for professional learning communities, as a school reform component, and as a model for professional development. Its popularity grew rapidly in the late 1980s to early 1990s in attempts to change the traditional school culture of professional isolation (Friend & Cook, 1990). However, collaboration in special education has a longer history. It existed informally among special service providers long before the landmark 1975 federal special education legislation, and it emerged as a special education teacher responsibility beginning with the consulting teacher model of the late 1960s (Christie, McKenzie, & Burdett, 1972). That model eventually evolved into

the notion of professional partnerships. For the present discussion, collaboration is considered in its broadest sense, and so it is defined as

a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal.

(Friend & Cook, 2017, p. 6)

This definition applies to general school collaboration as well as collaboration among professionals educating students with disabilities, and it also guides interactions between professionals and parents and those between school personnel and representatives from other agencies.

In addition to this basic definition, collaboration comprises several defining characteristics, including these:

Voluntariness. Professionals may be directed to work together; this is an expected part of working in schools. However, whether they collaborate, once assigned, is an individual decision. For co-teachers, both educators may be excited about the possibilities of combining their educational talents, one may be reluctant or hostile and the other may be eager, or both teachers may believe they have been inappropriately asked to work together. It is the teachers' responses to one another that determines voluntariness. For example, if the two reluctant participants say to each other, "I know neither of us signed up for this, but if we're going to share a classroom, how could we make things work?," collaboration is possible because voluntariness for the shared work has been expressed. If either says, in essence, "I don't want to work together," then collaboration is unlikely.

Parity. The concept of parity implies equal value but not equality. That is, what each person contributes to a collaborative effort is considered an integral part of the shared work, even though those contributions may be significantly different. In co-teaching, parity is demonstrated when each teacher works with a group of students, perhaps using different strategies based on particular instructional needs; no question exists that both professionals are "real" teachers.

Mutual goal. Collaboration only occurs when at least one shared goal is identified. It is this goal that joins the partners and provides a purpose for their efforts. For co-teachers, that goal generally relates to improving outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities.

Shared responsibility for key decisions. Especially in the frenetic pace of teachers' day-to-day professional lives, not all decision-making can occur jointly. There simply is not adequate time, nor is it essential for effective collaboration. What is required is sharing responsibility and ownership for key decisions. Such decisions for co-teachers may involve identifying alternative ways for students to demonstrate mastery of curriculum competencies or selecting appropriate reading materials for specific learners.

Shared accountability for outcomes. Regardless of how collaborators make decisions or divide the labor involved in their shared work, they share accountability for its outcomes. In a co-taught class this generally implies that the teachers share the credit for improved student achievement, or they share the repercussions of failing to reach that goal.

Shared resources. Collaboration is solidified when participants contribute resources. These may be materials,

equipment, or supplies such as electronic tools, software, or hardware. They also may include time and expertise. A third type of shared resource may consist of teaching techniques, innovative projects or instructional approaches.

In addition to the just-outlined defining characteristics, collaboration encompasses several features that are present in at least a minimal amount at the outset of a partnership and are strengthened with extended collaborative experience. These include trust, respect, and a sense of community. These emergent characteristics generally are well-known to co-teachers. They have a small amount of trust and respect as they begin their partnership, but if their collaboration is effective, trust deepens and respect grows until they truly see themselves as a team. Many co-teachers comment that their second shared teaching year is significantly different from the first, largely because they have achieved that sense of being part of a strong professional community.

Co-Teaching as a Special Education Service Option

Co-teaching is a relatively recent development in the provision of special education services. It was not even an option when federal special education law codified the continuum of services in 1975, but a scant decade later it was being proposed as a means of educating students with disabilities in general education settings (e.g., Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989; Garver & Papania, 1982). As co-teaching evolved, so, too, did its meaning until the current definition emerged:

Co-teaching is a service delivery option for providing specialized services to students with disabilities or other special needs while they

remain in their general education classes. Co-teaching occurs when two or more professionals jointly deliver substantive instruction to a diverse, blended group of students, primarily in a single physical space. (Friend & Cook, 2017, p. 163)

This definition communicates the multi-faceted nature of co-teaching. It suggests that co-teaching involves embedding special education service within general education lessons with both teachers actively contributing to the instruction of their shared students. Most importantly, the definition hints at the importance of collaboration for its successful implementation.

The characteristics of co-teaching clarify several of the complexities found in the definition and include these (Friend, 2014):

Different but complementary areas of expertise. Co-teachers are unique in that they have different types of expertise, the general educator with a primary focus on the curricular content and instruction, the special educator with primary expertise in facilitating and scaffolding students' learning, whether that is academic, social, or behavioral. The blending of teachers' expertise leads to greater instructional intensity, which includes differentiation for all students and in addition, the delivery of specially designed instruction for students with disabilities.

Shared physical location. Simply stated, co-teaching instruction takes place in the general education classroom. Exceptions occasionally may be made for a specific purpose (e.g., some students go to the media center to work on computers while the others stay in the classroom; the groups are reversed the next day), but the goal is to create new learning options that

can only occur with shared space and collaboration that results in a responsive and dynamic learning environment.

Simultaneous instruction. It is anticipated that co-teachers spend the majority of their shared time (whether it is a time block, a class period, or an entire school day) working with students in various grouping arrangements. This is one of the primary strategies for increasing instructional intensity.

Student diversity. The co-taught class comprises two groups: (a) a small cluster of students with disabilities whose teams determined that co-teaching was the best educational option for them; and (b) a representative sample of the other students in the school, that is, a diverse set of typical peers. The teachers together address their students' various needs.

Six co-teaching approaches. A number of authors have delineated the structures of teachers and students in co-taught classes (e.g., Beninghof, 2012; Friend, 2014; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). The most commonly mentioned are

- *One teach, one observe*, in which one teacher leads whole-group instruction while the other gathers data on one student, a small group of students, or the entire class.
- *Station teaching*, in which content is divided into three non-sequential segments, two led by teachers and one involving an independent activity, and students, distributed among the stations, rotate to complete all of them.
- *Parallel teaching*, in which students are divided into two groups, each led by one of the teachers, in order to increase student participation related to the curriculum being addressed or to present academic material in two ways or at two levels.

- *Alternative teaching*, in which one teacher pulls a small group of students in order to re-teach, pre-teach, assess, enrich, or address another instructional purpose.
- *Teaming*, in which both teachers actively participate in whole group instruction, sometimes referred to as "one brain in two bodies."
- *One teach, one assist*, in which one teacher leads instruction while the other quietly interacts with students who have questions or who do not understand the lesson.

Generally, co-teachers with less experience or those in less-than-ideal situations use fewer of the approaches while co-teaching veterans may use all of them. The approaches that should dominate are station, parallel, and alternative teaching.

Collaboration in Co-Teaching: The Concepts versus the Practice

Professionals who currently co-teach or who study co-teaching respond to the type of information just presented by commenting on the sometimes significant discrepancies between collaboration and co-teaching *concepts* versus the day-to-day *realities* of schools. Some report that when all the factors mentioned precisely align, co-teaching is highly collaborative and student outcomes serve as a testament to its potential. And yet, dilemmas like these—too common and definitely real-world—are often reported:

1. One teacher or the other (or both) is dissatisfied with the co-teaching assignment. The result varies but may include a general educator dominating all core instruction, relegating the special educator to the role of a classroom assistant who takes attendance, records homework

- completion, and whispers support to individual students. Alternatively, the special education teacher may plead lack of content knowledge and decline co-teaching approaches except for one teach, one observe and one teach, one assist.
2. Two first-year teachers are assigned as co-teaching partners. The special educator is grateful for her collaboration course that included an entire unit and a detailed assignment on co-teaching. The general educator greets the special educator by asking, "Do you know what we're supposed to be doing with this co-teaching thing?"
 3. The classroom has one desk, one teacher's chair, and one small file cabinet, all owned by the general educator. A prominent display of student work highlights the general educator's name (i.e., Ackerman's All-Stars, Tucker's Top Dogs). No indicators suggest the ongoing presence of a second teacher.
 4. A set of co-teachers has an unstated agreement. When one teacher or the other is behind on completing paperwork or otherwise is seeking time to make a phone call or enter grades or touch base with a colleague, the partner agrees to lead instruction to release the other teacher to carry out the chores. Their logic is that one benefit of co-teaching should be flexibility to managed all the responsibilities of being teachers.
 5. When a special educator is observed for the purpose of teacher evaluation, that professional is expected to lead the general education class, delivering academic content "just like" a general educator, even if the specialist does not have formal background in it. When

either teacher is observed, the expectation is that the other educator will play a passive role so the observed teacher demonstrates required teaching skills.

6. The special educator expresses concern about not being able to be effective in the class (especially at the intermediate level and above) because of a lack of background in a particular content area.
7. A set of co-teachers does not have, even occasionally, shared planning time that can be devoted to their co-teaching preparation. Because of their other scheduled obligations, they find it difficult to meet before or after school. The result is that the special educator often enters the classroom saying, "What are we doing today?"

Such challenging situations do not represent the totality of co-teaching; certainly there are many strong, productive co-teaching partnerships. However, most school professionals can point at one or more of these vignettes as having happened or currently happening in their schools. The point is this: If such situations still exist, what is the likelihood that co-teaching will exist regardless of the specific staff members at a particular school? That it can be sustained across time? That it can be relied upon to be available as appropriate?

Classroom Collaboration: Necessary Ingredients

The definitions and characteristics of collaboration and co-teaching, juxtaposed with the quandaries that occur in co-taught classes, demonstrate that specific actions are required to ensure positive outcomes. The extent to which such actions are embraced is likely to directly affect the realistic future of co-teaching as a special education service option.

Teacher preparation. It may seem a bit naïve to begin an analysis of actions required to foster collaborative classroom practice with a discussion of teacher preparation, but if teachers entering the profession are not already oriented to co-teaching, schools and districts are left with the immense task of building not only their knowledge and skills but also their dispositions to participate in co-teaching. As Hudson and Glomb (1997) asked, “If it takes two to tango, then why not teach both partners to dance?” (p. 442). Evidence suggests that this disconnect between teacher preparation and expectations in schools exists and is recognized by teachers (Brinkmann & Twiford, 2012).

Colleges and universities should have in the curriculum for general education teacher candidates, pre-kindergarten through high school, more than a basic introduction to students with disabilities. Candidates should be prepared to work with special education colleagues, in the classroom as well as on teams and in other situations, so that an overall understanding of collaboration is instilled. School district representatives can encourage the inclusion of topics such as co-teaching by directly requesting that teacher programs incorporate them, by creating detailed questions used during employment interviews to ensure teachers have the knowledge and skills to participate in co-teaching, and by giving preference to applicants who have had some type of experience with classroom partnerships.

Administrative understanding and action. Principals and other administrators are so often mentioned as the most key figures in implementing school change that discussing their responsibilities can seem trite. However, so many systemic and personnel factors contribute to strong co-

teaching partnerships that leadership is essential (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). First, site administrators can nurture a school culture of collaboration and ensure that all personnel receive appropriate professional development so that they help to create or deepen the culture. This action is likely to be necessary even in a school that already professes to be highly collaborative because the more intimate nature of classroom partnerships usually calls for additional skills, including ways to communicate during awkward or challenging situations and techniques for conflict resolution.

A companion to addressing overall school culture is to set an expectation that co-teaching is part of the school’s services and that all teachers in the school either are co-teachers or are likely candidates to become co-teachers. Although it may be understandable to begin a co-teaching program with volunteers, over time this practice can lead to a divided school culture in which some teachers exempt themselves from working with students with special needs, resulting in others assuming a disproportionate responsibility for them. A common result is teacher dissatisfaction.

A third co-teaching responsibility for administrators concerns articulating professionals’ differences and applying this to teacher evaluation. That is, principals and other leaders must understand that co-teachers are not interchangeable and that expecting them to “look the same” during instruction can be detrimental to the partnership. Such comments lead special educators to attempt to serve as general educators (and, sometimes, for administrators to expect them to do so), even though that is not their purpose in being in the co-taught class. They are there to ensure that students’ IEP goals are being

addressed. This complex topic cannot be explored without strong leadership.

Yet another administrator role related to the collaborative dimension of co-teaching is proactive problem-solving. When teachers disagree (e.g., behavior expectations, changes in work for struggling learners, classroom management strategies), they often need input from a third party, either an administrator or his/her designee. Teachers note that when they seek assistance, it is because they have not been able to reach resolution on their own; they may resent being told to work out the issue themselves. If a problem continues and supportive strategies have not been effective, administrators may find it necessary to function in a supervisory role so that the partnership can be preserved and student needs met.

Administrators also can engender classroom partnerships by managing details that matter. For example, they can ensure that both professionals have teacher editions of basal textbooks, that classroom furniture reflects the presence of two teachers, and that classrooms have two white boards or media projectors so that multiple groups can be effectively taught. Many creative solutions have been identified when equipping co-taught classrooms. What is important is to realize that such small items can strengthen or undermine parity.

Professional development, including coaching. Even when teachers have received preservice preparation for collaboration and co-teaching, they likely will also benefit from job-embedded professional development and coaching (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013). For example, co-teachers often find it valuable to periodically meet with colleagues in their

schools or districts to share ideas about co-teaching approaches and instruction, analyze their data, and discuss dilemmas encountered in their classrooms. Another type of professional development may include visiting each other's classrooms with a set of guiding questions, a strategy that helps teachers to identify effective practices and reflect on their own functioning as co-teachers.

Coaching of co-teachers is an essential part of professional development. For example, a coach can assist teachers to set goals regarding their co-teaching practice, whether the priority is effectively using the six co-teaching approaches or embedding specially designed instruction into the lessons. They also can encourage teachers to examine critical issues, such as the extent to which parity has been established in the co-taught class (e.g., by recording the relative amount of talk contributed by each professional). If teachers are facing problems related to collaboration, a coach can function as the neutral agent to facilitate their discussion of the matter and provide the support they need to resolve them and learn from them.

Logistics. Collaboration requires meaningful interactions and, thus, typically is more time-consuming than working alone. Not surprisingly, the importance of common planning time for co-teaching planning has repeatedly noted in the professional literature (e.g., Nierengarten, 2013). However, care must be taken to establish efficient and realistic planning options. Daily shared planning often is not feasible, nor is it necessarily recommended because of its drain on time available for the professionals to complete other responsibilities. Even weekly planning time may not be easily scheduled. Instead, if administrators and teachers arrange to

have occasional planning sessions to sketch upcoming curricular goals and to articulate student's specific needs, they often can use electronic planning options such as a shared calendar or a dedicated electronic teacher plan book as a companion to face-to-face meetings for the purpose of daily lesson planning (Friend, 2014).

A procedure for co-teaching planning can significantly increase teacher collaboration (Embury & Dinnesen, 2012). For example, it can help general educators to understand the specific goals for students with disabilities and how those goals can be addressed during lessons. It can help special educators to understand curricular expectations and afford them the time needed to create supplemental or alternative materials and plan specially designed instruction. The result is that parity is more likely to be established.

Parity. Although parity has already been mentioned in several of the above items, it is called out as a specific necessary ingredient because it is a cornerstone of effective co-teaching and a common source of partnership problems (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2013). When co-teachers clearly communicate, respectfully operate a classroom that draws on each of their skills, and learn from each other so that both contribute meaningful to the education of all students, co-teaching becomes a powerful teaching and learning structure (Sileo, 2011). But when either partner perceives an imbalance in power, results usually are poor. For example, when the special educator is expected to complete all the clerical chores and remain passive during large segments of instruction, frustration is likely. Worse is when the issue is noted by students, as when they make remarks such as these: "Are they ever going to let you have your own

classroom?" or "I don't have to listen to you-you're not my real teacher." Parity is the responsibility of everyone involved in co-teaching, the teachers, the principal, other administrators, and coaches. Without parity, classroom collaboration cannot flourish.

Conclusion

And so there is an answer to the question: Is classroom collaboration in the form of co-teaching a sustainable practice? And that answer is "yes...if." But the "ifs" are many:

- If it is understood that co-teaching cannot be based on individual teachers and compatible personalities; that is, it cannot be person-centric.
- If co-teaching is situated in an overall school culture of collaboration.
- If teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively co-teach or are taught them and coached as they develop their practice.
- If the collaborative dimension of co-teaching is recognized through appropriate scheduling and creation of shared planning opportunities.

Co-teaching is intuitively appealing. What could possibly be complicated about placing students with disabilities in a general education setting with access to the same learning experiences as peers, partnering a general and special teacher to delivery instruction? Surely the results should be impressive. But co-teaching has many moving parts, and if those parts, beginning with collaboration, are not carefully aligned and lubricated, disappointment and discord often follow.

Collaboration by itself is not sufficient for effective co-teaching. Matters related to the quality of the overall instruction, the teachers' skill in embedding

specially designed instruction into lessons, and logistics such as the scheduling of students and teachers also must be tackled. However, even if all those areas are addressed, co-teaching still will need a high level of teacher collaboration in order to be sustainable, and so it merits continued, intensive attention that currently is too seldom undertaken. Perhaps the marriage metaphor that is so frequently associated with co-teaching is over-applied. It may be that co-teaching should instead be conceptualized as a negotiated relationship, more like a business partnership than a professional romance. Doing so would create the scaffold on which exemplary co-teaching can be based.

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