

Co-Teaching in the Inclusion Classroom:
Teacher Perspectives and Practices

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Abstract

With the advent of legislation that has incorporated students with disabilities into the general education classroom, schools have strived to accommodate the increased achievement and behavior demands in these inclusion classrooms. The most popular approach is the collaboration of a general education and a special education teacher joined in a co-teaching partnership. The purpose of this study is to explore the variables that directly affect the success of the co-teaching partnership, and as a means to inform future avenues of research. For this study, general and special education teachers in grades K-12 responded to questions regarding teaching methods and strategies, their perceptions and attitudes regarding co-teaching relationships, and other contributing factors, which may influence outcomes. The most challenging issues revealed by this research include continued concerns pertaining to assignment of planning time and/or the ability to utilize this time, multiple partnerships, and the special educator's lack of endorsement in assigned content areas.

Keywords: co-teaching, collaboration, special education, inclusion

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In accordance with the provision outlined by NCLB and IDEA, when appropriate, students with disabilities are accessing the same curriculum of their general education peers (United States Department of Education, 2002). To further address legislative demands that all students receive general curriculum instruction and make adequate yearly progress (AYP), school systems are implementing the co-teaching concept where general education teachers are teamed with special education teachers as instructional partners. This partnership has been likened to a marriage of sorts (Friend & Cook, 2007). But, not all marriages work, and arranged marriages (i.e., administration assigned teams) are at even higher risk of failure. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify best practices and strategies for teaching, and insights into the interpersonal intricacies and nuances of a co-teaching marriage.

Review of the Literature

Background

Prior to 1975, children with disabilities were denied their rights to an education in public schools. Children with moderate to severe disabilities and Down syndrome were often left with few choices except institutionalization or being maintained at home by parents or caregivers (Culverhouse, 1998). According to Singer and Butler (2011) special education services designed to include these children were initiated in response to Public Law 94-142, also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975. The purpose of the law was to provide children with disabilities a free and appropriate public education designed to meet their unique needs (United States Department of Education, 2002).

The evolution of the education system initiated by PL 94-142 entailed appraisals of all handicapped children with individualized and appropriate services outlined in individualized education programs (IEP). In self-contained settings, special education students were taught and assessed according to a modified curriculum that tended to cover fewer skills and was less complex than the general education curriculum. The difference in curriculum content and assessments prompted Audette and Algozzine (1997) to assert that students in special education programs, for the most part, did not receive the same or comparable benefits as those in the general education programs. This approach created gaps in achievement between special education students and their general education peers.

In an attempt to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, 1997, and 2004 placed more emphasis on providing services to students with disabilities among the general population whenever feasible (Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Further revamping of federal guidelines for all students was addressed in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB guidelines require that all students show yearly progress in content areas of reading and math, participate in the general education curriculum, and take part in district and state-wide assessments (United States Department of Education, 2005).

Changes initiated with the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, also known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), called for students with increasingly diverse learning characteristics to have access to, participate in, and be tested in the general education curriculum (Cramer & Nevin, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2007). The number of individuals with disabilities included in general education classrooms increased as the result of legislative changes and evolving cultural standards (Kamens, 2007).

Consequently, expectations are that students with disabilities will achieve comparably to other learners, thereby increasing the emphasis on educating them in general education settings (Gürür & Uzuner, 2010; Kamens, 2007). Audette and Algozzine (1997) suggested that schools have an “opportunity to carefully reinvent special education as an integral part of public education” (p. 378). The aforementioned series of legislative interventions and stipulations, as well as the increased diversity of students in the inclusive classroom, has brought amplified pressure on schools to establish collaborative teaching teams for lesson planning and instruction (Cramer & Nevin, 2006; McHatton & Daniel, 2008). The move to an inclusive classroom resulted in establishing a partnership between a general education teacher and a special education teacher in what is referred to as the co-teaching model.

Co-Teaching

Friend and Cook (2007) framed six co-teaching methods by which the general education and special education teachers delegate responsibility for instruction. The description of the first model is *one teach, one observe*, where usually one teacher delivers the instruction while the other observes and collects data for future analysis. This co-teaching model calls for the partners to take turns teaching and collecting data. Next is *station teaching*, in which learning stations are set up so teachers can circulate among the stations to support instruction and monitor student interactions and progress. The third co-teaching model is *parallel teaching*, wherein the co-teachers deliver the same or similar content instruction in different classroom groupings. The fourth is *alternative teaching* in which one of the co-teaching team works with a small group in a different location for a portion of the instruction time. The fifth model is *teaming*, in which the co-teachers share the planning and instruction responsibilities equally, and the sixth is *one-teach, one assist*, which simply has one teacher as the primary instructor and the second teacher moving

about the classroom giving assistance and redirecting attention. The various models of co-teaching may have been structured to serve a particular purpose, but there is little in the way of empirical research that documents or defines a model that is most effective (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010).

Implementation of co-teaching partnerships addresses the mandates of NCLB and IDEA regarding equitable delivery of curriculum to students with or without disabilities (Austin, 2001; Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Friend & Cook, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Presumably, Austin's (2001) initial definition referred to "multiple teachers collaborating to instruct students with and without disabilities" (p.245). The definition was later expanded to instruction meaningfully delivered in a single specific area, namely a general education classroom (Kamens, 2007). McHatton and Daniel (2008) widened the perspective on co-teaching by stating that, "It consists of multiple approaches requiring the sharing of responsibilities for planning and delivering of instruction" (p. 119). McHatton and Daniel's (2008) research explored co-teaching as a service delivery option, without regard to the interactions among team members.

Co-teaching teams must address the varied levels of cognitive and social emotional development of the students in an inclusion classroom. Typically, the general education teacher is an expert on curriculum content as dictated by the school system's plan of service (Austin, 2001; Scheeler, Congdon & Stansbery, 2010). The special education teacher provides adaptations and modifications of instructional materials to match the learning styles, strengths, and special needs of each student (Mastropieri et al., 2005). The combination of general education and special education skill sets and expertise allows for a positive learning

environment in which students of varied abilities can academically achieve and emotionally thrive (Nichols, Dowdy & Nichols, 2010).

The key element to the inclusive classroom is the differentiation of instruction, teaching methods, and materials. Differentiation presents students with an array of ways to access the curriculum, varied curriculum, methods/approaches to instruction, and regular assessments to gauge student progress. The variations are determined by each student's needs and learning style. According to Tomlinson (1999), differentiated instruction and materials need to be authentic, relevant, and usable. To accomplish this, it takes co-teaching partners who are willing to work together cooperatively and responsively so that all students have the opportunity to interact and participate in a more rewarding way.

The co-teaching partnership benefits students when there are good interpersonal skills between the partners in addition to sound curriculum instruction and effective, research-proven strategies (Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Mastropieri et al., 2005). Implementing co-teaching involves more than just directing two teachers to work together. The process of forming the union requires considering the individuals joined with regard to the attributes they contribute and their perspectives on what their purpose is within the relationship. Isherwood and Barger-Anderson (2007) noted that, up until now, the tradition in teaching has been teachers working independently. Cooperative and responsive co-teaching partnerships go against that long-standing and deeply engrained tradition. Any value or benefit gained from a co-teaching partnership depends on the partners being compatible (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

The importance of interpersonal relationships influenced Murawski and Swanson's (2001) suggestion that more research on both unsuccessful and successful partnerships to gain a better understanding of the dynamics within a co-teaching union. Noonan, McCormick, and

Heck (2003) recognized the importance of compatibility in a co-teaching partnership prompting them to develop the Co-Teaching Relationship Scale (CRS) to evaluate how co-teachers relate to one another.

Friend and Cook (2007) metaphorically compared the uniting of a co-teaching team to marriage. However, there are deeply personal aspects of a marriage that are not applicable in a co-teaching relationship. More on target, Howard and Potts (2007) elaborated, saying that the “nature of the relationship” is in a sense, a “professional marriage” (p.2). This professional union relies on two individuals with different avenues of training and skill sets that, when blended together have the potential to create a learning environment that supports all students under their charge.

Even though utilization of co-teaching is gaining momentum, the concept models and related practices do not always come naturally to all participants (Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, & Blanks, 2010). Friend and Cook (2007) suggest that not all teachers are well suited for co-teaching relationships. A lack of balance in the relationship can foretell the trajectory of the union (Gottman, 1993). The prospects for the stability in a co-teaching union may be even dimmer when the partnership is arranged by administrators rather than being consensual. The state of the relationship has a direct bearing on the classroom performance and outcomes, as well the survival of the collaborative team (Noonan et al., 2003).

Friend and Cook (2007) noted collaboration is not the same thing as co-teaching, but that the former is vital to the success of the latter. Data on specific aspects of co-teaching interrelationship is limited, and yet there is a “growing body of qualitative and anecdotal data suggesting that how co-teachers relate to one another influences what they do in the classroom,” and “whether the collaboration survives” (Noonan et al., 2003, p.13). Due to the differences in

their backgrounds and training, general and special education teachers come to the partnership with different approaches for addressing students' needs. In a truly collaborative co-teaching relationship, "teachers should discuss critical issues such as their philosophies and beliefs, parity signals, classroom routines, discipline, feedback, noise, and pet peeves" (Friend & Cook, 2007, p. 137). The ability to communicate one's ideas and in return listen to a partner's ideas can prove challenging. Co-teaching partners share responsibility for the educational and emotional well-being of their shared students. The partners' objective is a cooperative blending of their professional resources for the good of their students.

Different points of view based on background and experience add to the risk of conflict within the relationship (Bradley & Monda-Amaya, 2005). When one or both members of the team feel that the relationship is not working, conflict will surface (Melamed & Reiman, 2000). Differences do not mean that the partnership is doomed to fail, however. The education profession relies on interactions with others and forming relationships, whether it is with other teachers and staff, students, or parents (Richardson & DeVaney, 2008). Compromise and resolution are possible when each partner is open to the beliefs, viewpoints, values, and behavior traits of the other.

Two of the most important features of the co-teaching relationship are compatibility and the ability to communicate (Wischnowski, Salmon, & Eaton, 2004). To ensure success in planning and implementation of instruction, it is imperative to have on-going communication that is also straightforward and honest (Ploessl et al., 2010). Partners who are dedicated to student needs and outcomes negotiate resolution through mutual respect and meaningful communication. Anything less than open, respectful communication may cause the professional marriage to falter.

At times in relationships, opposites can attract. This can apply to co-teaching partners as well in that opposite personalities do not necessarily make up a dysfunctional team. That is, provided the partners accept the possibility that each individual's unique qualities, perspectives, and abilities can benefit the collaboration (Le et al., 2010). Research has indicated that an individual's personality traits directly affect the success or failure of the relationship (Funder, 2007). Personality typing has been used as a tool for growth and self-development and a means to gauge collaborative styles that facilitate the building of interpersonal relationships (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, & Hartman, 2009).

The concept behind the design of the collaborative style inventories is to give insights into improving problem-solving abilities, building levels of trust, gauging reactions to challenge, adherence to rules, and flexibility. Conderman et al. (2009) maintained that members of a co-teaching marriage function best, and conflict is reduced, when they are aware of their own and their partner's personalities and collaborative learning styles. According to Richardson and Devaney (2008), who researched the usefulness of the Richardson Inventory of Personality Types (RIPT), "barriers such as personality conflicts caused by faulty perceptions of each other can cause conflict (p.122). Their results supported the use of personality assessment for co-teaching partners in that such assessments garner a better understanding of personality traits.

In a 2010 article, Hepner and Newman suggested prior research on co-teaching indicated that teachers involved in collaborative partnership felt they gained both professionally and personally. The studies reviewed for the article indicated the positive-growth might be due in part to the reporting teachers' ability to trust their partners and the sense of being valued in the relationship. Friend and Cook (2007) proposed the sense of feeling included and respected within the team satisfied an element of interpersonal need for achieving professional growth.

Mutual respect and being receptive to a partner's ideas opinions and needs promotes growth. Hepner and Newman (2010) advocate teachers in collaborative co-teaching teams facilitate collaboration when they engaged in candid conversation with their partners regarding their expectations and interpersonal needs support this.

This study surveyed K-12 general education teachers and special education teachers assigned to co-teaching partnerships about: (a) their perceptions and attitudes with regard to their co-teaching relationship with their partner; and (b) which research-based best teaching practices and strategies they implemented in their inclusion classrooms.

Method

Participants

The purpose of this study was to survey teachers to identify best practices and strategies for teaching, and insights into the interpersonal intricacies and nuances of a co-teaching marriage. Survey participants included both general and special education teachers co-teaching in a K-12 classroom. There was no specification as to subject area. The participant recruitment list included graduates of master's degree programs in special education who graduated at least three to four years ago and are now teaching, as well as other local teachers who volunteered to participate via email contact.

The participants were employed within two public school districts at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Both school systems incorporated co-teaching models within their special education program of services for the inclusion of students with special needs students within the general education classrooms.

School system A. The school system designated as School system A is an ethnically diverse, city-funded system with a 2011 student population as nearly 12,000. The student

population of this district is 34% Black, 30.7% Hispanic, and 25% White, and 5% Asian Pacific. This system consists of 19 schools, 13 elementary schools, five middle schools, and one high school. Students receiving special education services make up 13.8% of the of the student population.

School system B. The school system designated as School system B, in 2011 was ranked as the 11th largest public school system in the nation with a student population of more than 170,000. System B's student population consists of 45.3% White, 18.8% Asian American, 18.1% Hispanic, 10.4% African American, 5.9% multicultural, and .3% American Indian. School system B is made up of 196 schools, including 139 elementary, 26 middle/secondary, 21 high schools, two alternative high schools, and eight special education centers. Approximately 14% of the student population receives services based on Individualized Education Programs.

Procedures

An application for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was submitted to George Mason University's Office of Research Subject Protection: Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). Once approved, the survey cover letter was distributed via e-mail to 70 potential participants explaining the purpose of the survey. An informed consent form was provided as an attachment to the cover letter. The informed consent advised the potential participants that the research study involved a survey that would require approximately 30 minutes for completion. It clearly indicated the participation was voluntary and there would be no penalty for declining to participate. Assurances were given that there would be so foreseeable risk to their person and all necessary steps would be taken to maintain confidentiality.

To ensure confidentiality, the addresses were listed as blind carbon copies to conceal the complete list of recipients. Participants were advised that by clicking on the URL web link, they

were agreeing to participate and would access the survey. In addition, the collector setting was configured to disable IP address or e-mail tracking as a means to further protect confidentiality

Instruments. Participants were asked to complete a web-based survey. The survey was made up of three principal components, which included (a) questions regarding the participant's demographic information, (b) 25 Likert scale questions pertaining to three categories of interest, and (c) four open-ended questions (See Tables 1, 2, and 3).

1. Demographics (i.e, age, sex, sex of co-teacher, years of experience, assigned vs. volunteered)
2. Likert scale question categories:
 - Responsibilities (e.g., We mutually agree on classroom management policies.)
 - Instruction Methods and Strategies (e.g., My co-teacher and I have ongoing conversations about grading practices.)
 - Relationship (e.g., I feel confident in my co-teacher's ability to teach *all* students in our shared classroom.)
3. Open-ended questions (e.g., Describe what training you had specific to co-teaching and was it provided prior to your assignment to a team?)

Demographics. The first component of the survey, which covered demographic information, collected background information that established an understanding of the co-teaching experience, how the participants were brought into co-teaching relationships, and the dynamics of that relationship based on issues such as years of experience and the sex of the partners.

Likert scale items. The second component of the survey, the Likert scale questions, covered three areas of interest. The first area explored what types of instructional methods, strategies, and practices were being utilized by the collaborative team with regard to instructional

decision making. The second area of interest addressed the delegation of labor with regard to delivery of instruction, adapting and modifying curriculum, availability and utilization of planning time, and designation of grades. A third area of interest examined the extent to which teachers were prepared for assignment to collaborative teams through in-services and conference support, what, if any, provisions for administrative release time (administrative leave) were provided, and teacher perceptions of administration support.

Open-ended items. The third component of the survey contained four open-ended questions. The participants were asked to express their perspectives and insights into various issues of co-teaching relationships and practices. The open-ended questions explored such aspects as how the team may be perceived by students and parents based on the apparent dynamics of the team. Next, information was requested regarding if and when training in successful co-teaching practices was provided. Additionally, the participants were asked to freely describe what they saw as the pros and cons of the co-teaching model(s). Finally, the participants were allowed to make any final comments regarding their co-teaching experiences.

Results

Requests were sent to 70 potential participants, of which 18 e-mails were returned as undeliverable. From the 52 invitations delivered, 34 participants responded resulting in a 65% response rate.

Data Analysis Procedures

Likert scale questions rated the extent to which a participant agreed or disagreed with a particular question or statement, from one for strongly disagree to four for strongly agree. Three categories of responses were examined, including teaching responsibilities, instructional methods and strategies, and co-teaching relationship.

Section I: Demographics (Q 1-9). The 34 participants responding to the demographic information section were general education and special education teachers in grades K-12 who teach in varied content areas. Demographic details indicated 41% (14) were general education teachers and 59% (20) were special education teachers. Of those, 85% (29) were females and 15% (5) were males. The age demographic of the 32 participants responding consisted of 50% (16) in their 20s and 30s, 41% (13) in their 40s to 50s, and 9% (3) in their 60s. The participants' teaching experience of the 34 responses indicated 41% (14) had between 1-10 years experience, 38% (13) had 11-19 years experience, and 21% (7) had 20 or more years of classroom experience.

In 33 responses to whether the participant volunteered to co-teach, 61% (20) replied yes, whereas 39% (13) replied they were assigned his/her co-teaching partner. Frequently, a teacher can be assigned to multiple partnerships, and this is often true for special education teachers. However, one of the participants indicated she/he was assigned to six co-teaching partnerships.

Section II: Teaching responsibilities (Q 10-16). In response to whether the participants felt there is collaboration in classroom management, 45% (14 of 31) of responses indicated agreement. Fifty-five percent (17 of 31) disagreed, indicating a lack of equality in collaboration in lesson planning. On the topic of shared responsibility in material development, 45% (14 of 31) agreed, whereas 55% (17 of 31) disagreed. In the area of shared responsibilities for adapting and modifying materials, 53% (16 of 30) agreed and 47% (14 of 30) disagreed.

Besides the planning and development of instructional materials, the participants were questioned regarding shared responsibilities related to classroom management procedures and behavior/discipline issues. Eighty-one percent (25 of 31) agreed responsibilities related to

classroom management were shared and 19% (6 of 31) disagreed. Related to behavior/discipline issues, 94% (29 of 31) agreed, whereas only 6% (2 of 31) disagreed responsibilities were shared.

The last portion of Likert questions on responsibilities addresses the availability and utilization of joint planning time (see Table 1). Sixty-one percent (19 of 31) agreed the team had joint planning time and 39% (12 of 31) disagreed. On the point of whether the available time was, in fact, utilized by the team, 45% (14 of 31) agreed that it was. Whereas, 55% (17 of 31) disagreed, and indicated the team did not utilize the allotted time.

Table 1

Teaching Responsibilities

| Responsibilities | Respondents <i>N</i> | Strongly Agree | | Agree | | Disagree | | Strongly Disagree | |
|---|-------------------------|----------------|----|----------|----|----------|----|-------------------|----|
| | | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Q10 There is equal collaboration in lesson planning | 31 | 2 | 6 | 12 | 39 | 14 | 45 | 3 | 10 |
| Q11 There is equal collaboration in materials development | 31 | 2 | 6 | 12 | 39 | 14 | 45 | 3 | 10 |
| Q12 There is equal collaboration in materials adaptation & modification | 30 | 4 | 13 | 12 | 40 | 13 | 43 | 1 | 3 |
| Q 13 There is equal say in classroom management procedures | 31 | 11 | 36 | 14 | 45 | 6 | 19 | 0 | 0 |
| Q14 There is equal say in behavior/discipline issues | 31 | 10 | 32 | 19 | 61 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| Q15 My co-teacher and I have joint co-planning time together | 31 | 6 | 19 | 13 | 42 | 8 | 26 | 4 | 13 |
| Q16 My co-teacher and I utilize the scheduled planning time regularly | 31 | 2 | 6 | 12 | 39 | 12 | 39 | 5 | 16 |

*Due to rounding, percentage may not equal 100%.

Section III: Instructional methods and strategies. Instruction in an inclusion classroom must address the individual needs of the student according to best practices and methods. The combination of the general education and the special education teachers' skill sets should be the logical solution to meeting the instructional needs of students in the inclusion classroom. The section of five Likert questions, Q17-22 inquired as to which strategies and practices were incorporated into the team's instructional design (see Table 2).

When asked if peer tutoring was incorporated into their instruction design, 61% (19 of 31) indicated agreement. Thirty-nine percent (12 of 31) disagreed about the use of peer tutoring. On whether mnemonics (memory aids) were part of the team's instructional design, 77% (24 of 31) agreed. Twenty-three percent (7 of 31) disagreed that mnemonics were part of instructional design. The next strategy of interest was pair sharing (student partners share and compare perspectives). Here, 77% (24 of 31) agreed the strategy was used, while 23 % (7 of 31) disagreed. For the use of graphic organizers (diagram or pictorial device) 94% (29 of 31) agreed, whereas six % (2 of 3) disagreed.

The survey transitioned from strategies and practices into questions about teaching philosophy, student performance expectations, and the coordination of effort with regard to the delivery of instruction (see Table 2). When asked if expectations and support levels were individualized according to learner characteristics, 90% (28 of 31) agreed they were. Ten percent (3 of 31) disagreed. As to whether the team took turns delivering instruction 77% (24 of 31) agreed they did, whereas 23% (7 of 31) disagreed on this point.

Table 2

Instructional Methods and Strategies

| Instruction Methods and Strategies | Respondents | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
|------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|

| | <i>N</i> | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
|---|----------|----------|----|----------|----|----------|----|----------|---|
| Q17 Peer tutoring is utilized as part of our instruction design | 31 | 3 | 10 | 16 | 52 | 10 | 32 | 2 | 6 |
| Q18 Mnemonics are utilized as part of our instruction design | 31 | 5 | 16 | 19 | 61 | 6 | 19 | 1 | 3 |
| Q19 Pair-sharing is utilized as part of our instruction design | 31 | 4 | 13 | 20 | 65 | 7 | 23 | 0 | 0 |
| Q20 Graphic organizers are utilized as part of our instruction design | 31 | 9 | 29 | 20 | 65 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Q21 Performance expectations and support levels are individualized based on learner characteristics | 31 | 9 | 29 | 19 | 61 | 3 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| Q22 You and your co-teaching partner take turns delivering instruction | 31 | 8 | 26 | 16 | 52 | 6 | 19 | 1 | 3 |

*Due to rounding, the percentages may not equal 100%

Section IV: Teaching relationship. The metaphor that compares a co-teaching partnership to a professional marriage implies features such as trust, respect, and open communication are as vital to one as the other. Survey questions 23-29 explored the participants' perspectives related to these factors (see Table 3).

When participants were asked if they had good working relationships with their co-teaching partners, 94% (29 of 31) agreed. Six percent (2 of 31) disagreed. With regard to whether the participants trusted their partners' ability to instruct, 87% agreed that they did. Thirteen percent (4 of 31) disagreed on this issue. When asked if they felt respected by their partners, 97% (30 of 31) agreed. Only three percent (1 of 31) disagreed. Related to their ability to openly communicate with their partners, 90% (28 of 31) agreed. Ten percent (3 of 31) felt they lacked open communication with their partners.

A good relationship can result in both professional and personal benefits. In response to whether the participants felt they benefited professionally from being part of a co-teaching partnership, 87% (27 of 31) felt that they did. Thirteen percent (4 of 31) disagreed that co-teaching benefited them professionally. When asked whether they benefited personally from relationships within the co-teaching partnership, 80% (24 of 30) agreed with this statement. Twenty percent (6 of 30) disagreed that being part of a co-teaching team benefited them personally. When asked if they would volunteer for a co-teaching assignment in the next school year, 81% (25 of 31) of participants agreed, whereas 19% (6 of 31) indicated disagreement.

Finally, the participants were asked if they felt co-teaching contributed to the students' overall educational experience in the inclusion classroom. Ninety-seven percent (30 of 31) agreed, while only 3% (1 of 31) disagreed regarding the benefit of co-teaching to students in the inclusion classroom.

Table 3

Teaching Relationship

| Relationship | Respondents <i>N</i> | Strongly Agree | | Agree | | Disagree | | Strongly Disagree | |
|---|-------------------------|----------------|----|----------|----|----------|----|-------------------|---|
| | | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Q23 I have established a good working relationship with my co-teacher | 31 | 14 | 45 | 15 | 48 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Q24 I trust my co-teacher's instruction | 31 | 14 | 45 | 13 | 42 | 4 | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| Q25 I feel respected by my co-teacher. | 31 | 16 | 52 | 14 | 45 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Q26 I feel that I am able to openly communicate with my co-teacher | 31 | 14 | 45 | 14 | 45 | 3 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| Q27 I feel that co-teaching has benefited me professionally | 31 | 19 | 61 | 8 | 26 | 4 | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| Q28 I feel that co-teaching has benefited me personally | 30 | 15 | 50 | 9 | 30 | 6 | 20 | 0 | 0 |
| Q29 Given the opportunity I would volunteer for a co-teaching | 31 | 16 | 52 | 9 | 29 | 5 | 16 | 1 | 3 |

assignment the next school year.

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|
| Q30 Co-teaching contributes to the students' overall educational experience | 31 | 12 | 39 | 18 | 58 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|

*Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100 %

Section V: Open-ended questions (Q 31-35). Open-ended question Q31 asked the participants if grading was collaborative, and, if not, how they assign grades. Twenty-three participants elected to answer this question. The responses from 14 participants clearly indicated that there was collaboration with her/his partner in grading the students in the inclusion classroom. A participant remarked, "Our team develops rubrics for projects and assessments so that we can be consistent." In another response the participant noted that, "I like having the gen. ed. [*sic*] teacher's perspective . . . [and that] she likes mine with her students as well."

Of the remaining responses to the issue of collaboration in grading, two responses were unclear with regard to whether the team collaborated. The replies indicated that school system guidelines were followed, but gave no indication what those guidelines entailed. Another ambiguous response was that grading was "based on student academic needs." There was no further explanation from which to draw a conclusion on whether or not the grading was the result of team collaboration.

The final five responses disclosed the team rarely, if ever, collaborated on grading. The responses included comments such as, "assignments are graded by the general education teacher," and adding further, "the special education teacher often does not offer to grade." Another participant commented that, "I do the classroom grading; she does the IEP goal progress. I don't really see her reports." Another participant stated, "They [general education partner] grade the work and consult with me if necessary." Additionally, in some cases, once the general education teacher determined grades, "all papers are given to her [special education

teacher] to review for student performance or for alteration,” suggesting that additional adjustments to grades were made after the initial grading by the special education teacher rather than through a collaborative effort. Open-ended question Q32 inquired as to how the respondents felt the students and parents see them in relation to the co-teaching partnership and what aspects may contribute to their perspective. There were 29 responses to this question. The responses seemed to cluster into three categories, including positive, negative, and mixed perceptions.

Eighteen participants replied positively that students/parents recognized the partnership of the co-teaching team. This was supported by the comment, “they see us as equal content providers and educators because we present ourselves that way.” Another replied, “The students see us both as their teacher and respond to instruction and ask for support in the same way for both of us.” In an ironic note, one participant went as far as to comment, “I think they [parents] think that there is more collaboration than there really is.”

There were eight negative responses to the question regarding a recognized partnership between teamed teachers. The responses indicated the general education teacher was perceived as filling a major role in the inclusion classroom, with the special education teacher seen as only support or not recognized at all. This was based on the comments pertaining to instruction being delivered mostly by the general education teacher. Support for this view is noted by the comment, “I believe they see me as an assistant because the gen. ed. [*sic*] teacher does a majority of the teaching.” Another participant replied, “I don’t think students and parents think much about the co-teaching relationship; if anything, they see me as an aide rather than a teacher.” Six of the nine negative responses referred to the respondent’s feeling as if he/she was seen as only supporting or assisting the general education teacher, rather than as an equal partner.

There were three mixed responses in which the participants were unsure of the students'/parents' views of them in relation to the co-teaching partnership. The implication in each mixed response was that some of the student/parents saw the partners as equal and others did not. Comments suggested that the parents deferred communication to the teacher to whom their child was assigned.

Open-ended question Q33 asked the participants to describe what training they had specific to co-teaching and whether that training occurred prior to assignment to a team. The responses to this question clustered into four categories including: no training; training in preparation of assignment; training after assignment; and training through degree coursework. Of the 29 responses, eight participants had no training for their co-teaching assignment. Five participants reported their training delivered in preparation for their assignment to a team. Eight participants said their training occurred after assignment, and finally eight participants described their training as part of their graduate degree work.

Open-ended question Q34 asked the participants to describe what concerns they have related to co-teaching. Twenty-eight participants responded to this question, and the areas of concerns varied. There were several reoccurring themes, including the need for more support from administration in the form of allotting planning time, providing co-teaching training, considering personalities and philosophies when pairing partners, and avoiding assigning multiple partnerships. Additional points were made with regard to issues related to collaboration. Specifically, respondents indicated there should be more balanced sharing of planning and instructional duties, and not utilizing instructional assistants in lieu of a second teacher.

The above noted points were not unexpected; however, two other issues were brought forward that were. One participant expressed concerns that she/he was not certified to teach the subject areas in which she/he was assigned to co-teach, despite the expectation to assist in the delivering of instruction. A second participant conveyed concerns over student placement in inclusion classrooms. The placement issues involved “students reading and writing in the lowest standard deviation” who are placed in team-taught classes. This respondent suggested the lowest-achieving students receive “a year of intense remediation in a small class” before placement in an inclusion classroom, asserting that the lower functioning students are unable to access the instruction despite the team’s best efforts.

Open-ended question Q35 asked for insights into which aspects the participants felt were most beneficial about co-teaching. Twenty-nine participants shared their insights on this question. The responses concentrated on four topics. The first topic, mentioned in 19 out of the 29 responses, pertained to the benefits derived from shared knowledge, ideas, and strategies. The second, mentioned 18 times, concerned the idea that co-teaching provided a means to better support the students in the inclusion classroom. Next, eight participants mentioned the benefits of having a partner with whom to collaborate and plan. The final topic, mentioned by seven participants, indicated that classroom management was enhanced by having “two sets of eyes” and special education teacher expertise.

Discussion

Key Thematic Topics

Emerging from the research was an apparent discrepancy between the more positive responses to the quantitative data of the Likert questions, and the responses to similar topics in the qualitative data of the open-ended question responses. The four main themes were (a)

realities of implementation and collaboration; (b) relationship building; (c) administrative support, and; (d) inclusion and student placement.

Realities of implementation and collaboration. Friend and Cook (2007) contended collaboration is not in itself co-teaching, but an essential part of the model, meaning that co-teaching is the educational model that emphasizes collaboration and communication among all members of a team. In this research project, collaboration in planning and material development prior to instruction (Q10-12) garnered fewer positive responses than responses to collaboration during actual instruction time related to classroom management and behavior and discipline issues (Q13, 14). In the open-ended responses, there were frequent references to the lack of pre-instruction collaboration. One respondent said, “We don’t talk; [*sic*] we just don’t really plan or implement lessons together.” On the topic of collaboration during class time, one participant said that co-teaching provides, “multiple adults to deal with discipline without stopping instruction.” There was an apparent difficulty with regard to collaboration prior to instruction.

This discrepancy was notable in that it correlated to responses related to availability of scheduled planning time and the under-utilization of planning time prior to in-classroom instruction time (Q15, 16). Data from this study indicates 16% of the teams either were unable to, or chose not to take advantage of their scheduled planning time. Future studies must explore factors that impede the teams’ ability to collaborate prior to instruction.

Also prevalent among expressed concerns in the open-ended responses was the lack of contribution by the special education teacher in delivering instruction. A participant commented, “emails [*sic*] had to suffice in lieu of face-to-face planning.” Regarding collaboration during instruction time, a comment was made that, “in many cases the support given to the student in

general ed [*sic*] is given by an IA (instructional assistant) rather than a [special education] teacher.”

Countering that perspective were repeated concerns expressed by special education teachers regarding the inability to fulfill their obligations to multiple partners. A respondent commented, “Finding time to work collaboratively with one co-teacher is hard enough. It is even more difficult (nearly impossible) to find the time to plan collaboratively with four co-teachers (and have time to plan for my own self-contained classes as well).” The issue of multiple co-teaching partnerships will require more research in order to determine the underlying factors that make the practice necessary, and what steps to take to lessen its impact on relationship building, the delivery of instruction, and classroom management in the inclusion classroom.

Also of note and concern were comments by a special education teacher who indicated he/she lacked certification in her assigned co-teaching subject areas and yet was expected to deliver instruction. It is not difficult to imagine that with multiple co-teaching assignments, teachers could face assignment in multiple subject areas in which they do not have certification.

The special educator’s lack of background knowledge in content area creates an imbalance in the co-teaching team’s collaborative roles in an inclusion classroom (Mastropieri et al., 2005). The general education teacher becomes the primary instructor and the special education teacher is delegated to the role of assistant. Mastropieri et al. (2005) further noted special education teachers admitted to having limited knowledge of the content area and that they were comfortable in the secondary role of assistant. Yet in this study, one of the dominant concerns expressed in the open-ended question, as noted previously, was the need for more instructional contributions from the special educator. Additional research is needed in order to

examine the significance of special education training and teacher licensure requirements as it relates to the implementation of effective co-teaching in the inclusion classroom.

Relationship building. Friend and Cook (2007) referred to the co-teaching partnership as a professional marriage. When likened to the close personal relationship of marriage, elements such as cooperation, trust, respect, and open communication (Q23-26) are basic to the co-teaching relationship. The survey responses indicated these factors were present within the respondents' co-teaching relationships. It is important to note more than half of the participants in this survey were assigned to multiple co-teaching partnerships. From the remarks made to the open-end questions, it was unclear if their comments pertained to a specific partner or all of their partnerships in general. Further research directed at exploring the aspects of multiple co-teaching relationships with regard to the efficacy of co-teaching is, therefore, necessary.

There was variation in the positivity of responses on the topic of professional versus personal benefit derived from the co-teaching relationship. When considering the depiction of a co-teaching partnership as a professional marriage, the implication is that, like a marriage, the members should gain from the relationship both professionally and personally (Hepner & Newman, 2010). Results from this study indicated participants felt their professional gain was greater than the personal gain.

This research discovered possible complications due to assignments to multiple co-teaching partners as well as other factors specific to whether the union was by choice, or if it was administratively arranged. The combination of forced and multiple unions further complicated the dynamics of co-teaching and rekindled Murawski's and Swanson's (2001) call for research specific to less successful partnerships to better understand the dynamic of co-teaching relationships.

Prior research by Richardson and DeVaney (2008) suggested that part of the job of a professional educator is to form working relationships with students and their parents (Q32). Participants reported recognition and acceptance of their co-teaching partnership was best established at back-to-school night and in written or phone contact. Conversely, other responders indicated, when instruction was delivered, or correspondence was issued predominantly by one of the team members, parents and students did not perceive them as equal partners. This resulted in comments such as, "I don't think the students and parents think much about the co-teaching relationship; if anything, they see me as an aide rather than a teacher." Without direct inquiries or a survey such as this, student/parent perspectives are unverifiable.

Bradley and Monda-Amaya (2005) determined points of view based on background experience add to the risk of conflict within the collaborative relationship. Collaboration with respect to perspectives on grading can be just such a source of conflict within a co-teaching relationship. In instances in which grading was not collaborative the standard comment was, "I do the classroom grading, [and] she does the IEP goal progress. I don't really see her reports." Other comments indicated the general education teacher did the majority of the grading, and the special education teacher was responsible for alterations of the grades for special education students after the fact.

A positive relationship between partners, shared perspectives, and established common goals in grading is the ideal in a co-teaching partnership. This was reflected in the comment, "I like having the gen Ed [*sic*] teacher's perspective on my students because she has a different perspective. She likes mine with her students for the same reason." As a means to ensure uniformity and reduce conflict, one participant commented, "Our team develops rubrics for projects and assessments so we can be consistent." Dierdorff, Bell, and Belohav (2010)

maintained positive outcomes require newly formed teams to move beyond perceived individual roles to focus on the “commitment to team goals” (p. 3).

Administrative support. Hepner and Newman (2010) contended that for a co-teaching partnership to be successful, the teachers need to agree to work together and feel comfortable with the arrangement. Concerns were expressed in this survey pertaining to a lack of choice in partners. A participant commented, “It is not voluntary, and people are forced to work together.” Another participant voiced the opinion that, “too many people are thrown into situations with another teacher without either enough training or thought given to the dynamics of the team by those who make scheduling decisions.”

Given that respondents in this study reported a 61% volunteer rate (Q9), one might infer administrators recruit staff to co-teach, but default to assigned matches rather than delving into the issue of compatibility of personalities. Difficulties in pairing co-teachers could be due in part to staffing and/or scheduling issues, or other conflicts, which cannot be determined without research that includes the perspectives of administrators.

Beyond an administrator’s part in finding that perfect match, Le et al. (2010) proposed job outcomes involving opposite personalities are likely predicated by the partners’ ability to accept each other’s strengths and perspectives. An awareness of personalities benefits the co-teaching team in that it promotes mutual understanding in the course of interactions and decision-making (Funder, 2007).

Inclusion/student placement. Legislative interventions by IDEA and NCLB were designed to provide students with disabilities access, whenever possible, to general education settings, creating the inclusion classroom (Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Gürür & Uzuner, 2010; Kamens, 2007; United States Department of Education, 2007). On the point of the least

restrictive environment (LRE), one respondent questioned the push for “political correctness,” in student placement with regard to those “far below the mandated curriculum,” and, “who cannot access the curriculum without modification, rather than accommodation.” This respondent offered as possible solution that such students would fare better with extensive small group remediation for a school year, before replacement in teamed inclusion classrooms. The point was made that, “often these days the LRE [least restrictive environment] is the general ed [*sic*] setting, forcing the general ed [*sic*] teachers to put forth most of the accommodations,” thus pointing out how issues of practice and placement can easily overlap. Further exploration is called for to focus on administrative decision-making related to student placement. A comprehensive interview of respondents would have likely revealed more information on this topic.

Countering these concerns is the view that co-teaching in the inclusion classroom is a means to providing students with access to the least restrictive environment. Austin (2001) indicated growing support since the 1975 legislation for collaboration within the co-teaching model, as a means for addressing the inclusion of students with disabilities. Later research by Cramer and Nevin (2006) found continued enthusiasm for co-teaching relationships and student outcomes.

Participants in this research project noted four main areas in which co-teaching is most beneficial. The first is in the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and strategies. The second is in the positive supports offered to all students in the inclusion classroom through differentiated instruction, modified assignments and materials, and small group instruction. The third is the overall benefits of collaboration in shared planning and instruction. Described by one participant as the, “ability to bounce ideas off another person; to borrow from each others [*sic*] strengths; to

make a greater effort at differentiating instruction.” The fourth is improved classroom management, described by a participant as, “2 [*sic*] sets of eyes and ears in the classroom.” These gains mirrored another participant’s comment: “I find that the students enjoy having more than one adult in the room, giving them more than one opportunity to be comfortable with an adult.” That same respondent went on to say, “establishing a rapport with them [students] assists in daily behavior management in and out of the classroom.”

Related to the delivery of instruction, a majority of survey respondents reported evidence-based best practices, methods and strategies, including pair-sharing, mnemonics, peer tutoring, and, most of all, graphic organizers, were being utilized in their inclusion classrooms (Q17-20). Additionally, respondents replied positively that the students in their inclusion classroom were receiving instruction appropriate to their individual needs and learning characteristics (Q21). Triangulation of these responses could be achieved through additional research that includes classroom observation, possibly done over a period of time to ensure sustainable use of the instructional tools and differentiation of instruction.

Limitations

The research was limited because participants were asked to self-report on a web-based survey without a validation measure to verify respondents' answers. An additional limitation is the small sample size of survey responses. Furthermore, the study used only descriptive statistics whereas with a larger sample, analyses of statistical significance would be possible. A more in-depth analysis of the qualitative themes would likely assist in the study’s application to classroom practice.

The ability to obtain well-focused responses may have been limited because more than half the participants were in multiple co-teaching partnerships. It is unclear without a validation

measure to determine whether a particular response may apply to one or several partners and/or classroom experiences. Additionally, due to the anonymity of a web-based survey, I was unable to compare the responses of actual co-teaching partners. A comparison between the two perspectives would have given insights into whether there was true harmony within the professional marriage, or if there was an undercurrent of discontentment in the relationship.

Recommendations

Previous research on co-teaching has focused on the structure and implementation of the practice. This study was able to gain the perspectives and opinions of an equal number of general educators and special educators who were actively participating in co-teaching partnerships. From the findings, the recommendation would be for additional research that focuses on the factors that require special educators to participate in multiple partnerships. Possible topics of exploration addressed to administrators on co-teaching assignments should include staffing and scheduling issues. Examining those issues can possibly provide solutions to concerns expressed by both special and general educators regarding insufficient planning time, and the assignment of special education teachers to subject areas where they have little to no background.

Further research must address the point of underutilization of planning time that has been put into the co-teaching partners' schedule. Information must be obtained that explores how administrators are holding the teams accountable for using the allotted time and how they are assisting in removing any impediments to the successful use of planning time.

An interesting facet of the finding from this study is on how universities are preparing teachers in light of mandates by NCLB regarding highly qualified teachers. This is reflected in comments about whether or not special educators are qualified to deliver instruction as well as

their general educator counterpart. Here research should examine higher education course offerings as well as the scope and sequence of teaching programs as they compare to state and federal legislative demands and the needs of co-teachers in an inclusion classroom.

Conclusion

The success of the co-teaching partnership as it relates to its personal and professional aspects is dependent on various key factors. Those factors include how the team is formed, training specific to co-teaching and relationship-building, the availability and utilization of scheduled planning time, collaboration in grading, and on-going administrative support. Information obtained in this research determined that assignment of special education teachers to multiple co-teaching partners was a predominate feature which complicated the implementation of co-teaching practices, and hindered the ability to establish effective co-teaching relationships.

Despite the complexities of multiple partnerships, it is worth noting that the demographic data showed that 61% ($n = 20$) of the participants volunteered to co-teach. When asked if the respondents would volunteer for a co-teaching assignment for the next school year there was a 20% increase in number of teachers who answered in the affirmative. So, why, in the face of inconsistencies and the added burden of multiple partners, are teachers volunteering for co-teaching? Two main factors stand out from this research in support of their choice to volunteer. The first is that teachers felt they benefited professionally from the co-teaching experience through shared knowledge and ideas. Second and most importantly, is the stated belief by all but one participant, that the learning environment of a co-taught inclusion classroom benefits all the students because it provides them the much-needed added support of differentiation of instruction and a second source of professional guidance and feedback. Given this point of view,

the recommendation is for continued research to examine the issues that limit the potential and undermine the efficacy of the co-teaching model.

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