

## **Building Mentorships: How Administrators Can Support Co-Teachers in Mentoring and Coaching Each Other**

Sharon M. Pratt, Ed.D.  
*Indiana University Northwest*

### **Abstract**

This article discusses how administrators can support co-teachers in building effective partnerships in which they mentor and coach each other. Findings are shared from a grounded theory study of effective co-teaching partnerships in regards to what they desired, appreciated, and sought from their school administrators as they worked collaboratively together. School administrators play a significant role in setting the tone in schools for collegiality by establishing structures that encourage and enable teachers to collaborate for improved instruction and student learning.

*Keywords:* administrative support for collaboration, co-teaching; peer mentoring, peer coaching

### **Introduction**

Current educational pressures dictate a need for school cultures that embrace collaboration in school improvement and instruction. As teachers are held increasingly accountable for student learning, teaming with colleagues across the school building has become a necessity to survive the mounting pressures for high performance from not only federal legislation, but also public expectation (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Paulsen, 2008; Winzer, 2009). Teaching only the students on the listed class roster without consultation or collaboration with other teachers has become less possible. Rather, teachers are reaching across academic disciplines and departments to improve the performance of *all* students, including those with special needs (Friend & Cook, 2010; Leatherman, 2009). In particular, teachers are utilizing co-teaching models that bridge the general education and special education departments. These models benefit not only students, but also provide an opportunity for teachers to mentor and coach one another (Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansbery, 2010).

As teachers build collaborative partnerships, school administrators play a role in setting the tone for collegiality in their buildings through establishing structures that enable teachers to work together (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009; Santoli, Sachs, Romey, & McClurg, 2008). Teachers report how critical administrative support is to successful co-teaching relationships that benefit both students and teachers (Pratt, 2014; Santoli et al., 2008). Teachers want to know that their administrators value collaboration and support it not only in words, but also in actions. Yet, specifically how can administrators set the tone for collaboration in planning and instruction in their buildings? It is often left to chance or the discretion of school administrators as to how to build this culture; however, there are practical ways administrators can ensure collaboration is not only talked about, but implemented in their school buildings.

### **Literature Review**

In order for school administrators to effectively support their teachers, they also need to understand important elements of collaboration and co-teaching (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). These elements include effective instructional models as well as the planning strategies teachers use to incorporate their different backgrounds and expertise (Pratt, 2014; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Instructional models that involve both teachers teaching, rather than one primarily serving as an assistant, provide both higher quality instruction and professional satisfaction from co-teachers. Teachers also need to

plan their units together in order for both to feel confident in the material and instructional strategies. Special education teachers often provide expertise in scaffolding learning, making accommodations, and differentiating assessment. Alternatively, general education teachers can support their colleagues in understanding the content area standards and appropriate instructional techniques for the discipline. Blending these differing expertise together takes a willingness to learn from each other and seek the best practices for their students

The research on administrative support of co-teaching points to several important considerations including: a) arranging quality professional development, b) providing common planning time, and c) navigating conflict resolution with co-teachers (Damore & Murray, 2009; Jang, 2006; Kritikos & Birnbaum, 2003; Leatherman, 2009; Paulsen, 2008; Santoli et al., 2008; Scruggs et al., 2007). One of the hindrances to co-teaching is the lack of preparation for teachers in the roles they will undertake in co-teaching relationships (Paulsen, 2008). Friend et al. (2010) stated “it is not reasonable to expect educators to understand and implement [collaboration/co-teaching] without specific instruction in the pertinent knowledge and skills” (p. 20). Teachers should receive instruction in both effective co-teaching practices and communication skills (Austin, 2001; Carter et al., 2009; Damore & Murray, 2009; Idol, 2006; McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009; Murray, 2004). Murray (2004) explored the impact of training general education teachers ( $N=40$ ) on their individual roles in collaborative teaching partnerships with how teachers’ preconceptions of collaboration were addressed. The findings of this study point to positive benefits in addressing preconceptions that can hinder effective collaboration. Furthermore, Damore & Murray (2009) found communication skills to be one of the most important contributors to successful collaborative teaching in elementary schools ( $N=118$  elementary teachers). Teachers need to be able to approach difficult conversations assertively and respectfully in order to resolve conflicts. Administrators can schedule professional development trainings on these topics, as well as support teachers in implementing these practices into their classrooms (Carpenter & Dyal, 2006).

Administrators also support teachers daily by ensuring they have a common planning time in their schedules (Bouck, 2007; Damore & Murray, 2009; Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, & McGinley, 2011; Jang, 2006; Leatherman, 2009; Santoli et al., 2008; Scruggs et al., 2007). Having a shared planning time helps teachers understand their responsibilities and individual roles for instruction in a co-taught classroom. Jang’s (2006) findings point to the critical nature of administrative support for successful team teaching. Two secondary mathematics teachers in Jang’s quasi-experimental study were able to thoroughly plan how they would structure their classes using a modified station teaching approach, because of support they received from their school administrator. This finding is also substantiated by Bouck (2007) in a case study of an eighth-grade history co-teaching partnership. The teachers believed common planning time allowed them to establish parity in their classroom authority and instruction. Without a shared direction and instructional plan, parity would have been more difficult to achieve. Teachers would have had to defer to each other in making decisions during the moment of instruction.

Because co-teaching is not inherently natural for some teachers, conflicts can arise in differences in learning philosophies and teaching practices (Leatherman, 2009; Scruggs et al., 2007; Timmons, 2006). When these disagreements occur, administrators play an important role in helping teachers navigate discussions of their perspectives to find possible areas of agreement, as well as how to consider alternative perspectives. Most importantly, administrators can help teachers focus on students’ learning as the primary goal of working collaboratively (Carter et al., 2009; McDuffie et al., 2009).

In this article, I present seven key strategies administrators can use in supporting co-teachers as they work to mentor and coach each other in the classroom. These strategies come from a grounded theory study which investigated how effective secondary co-teaching partnerships in an urban school district in Iowa resolved challenges inherently found in collaborative relationships. The objective of this study was to explain both the process and the

strategies co-teachers used as they addressed both external and internal challenges to a successful co-teaching relationship. As reported in an article focusing on special education teachers and teacher educators (Pratt, 2014), participants overcame challenges by using their individual expertise as they became interdependent in their respective co-teaching relationship. This article focuses on the data teachers shared related to administrative support.

### Methods

Five co-teaching partnerships ( $N = 10$ ) participated in this study and were selected based on the following criteria: (a) the partnership was composed of a general education and a special education teacher, (b) the length of their co-teaching relationship was longer than one school year, and (c) parity of instructional roles in the classroom as evidenced by both teachers actively teaching students, rather than one teacher consistently taking an assistant role. The teachers taught at either the middle school or high school level and represented a range of teaching experience and co-teaching experience (see Table 1). Participants co-taught general education classes which integrated students with learning disabilities and those who were considered at-risk for academic failure.

The study took place in three phases to allow for concurrent data collection and analysis. Phase one included focus group interviews with each partnership and administration of an interpersonal behavior theory questionnaire for each co-teacher (Schutz, 1992). Classroom observations were conducted during phase two, including at least two observations per partnership. A third observation was done for one partnership, since the first observation involved primarily independent student work. During phase three, I conducted individual interviews with each co-teacher. Data analysis involved looking for recurring themes throughout each piece of data and conducting member checks to ensure conclusions reflected participants' experiences. Beginning with the first piece of data collected, I looked for themes reflecting the challenges teachers experienced and how they resolved these challenges through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As subsequent pieces of data were collected, I compared and generated new codes and then began to organize the codes into a hierarchy. Finally, the themes were represented in a visual model that portrays the process teachers go through to resolve challenges in co-teaching (Pratt, 2014). Each step of the data analysis process underwent a peer review and member checks were used to confirm the visual model portrayed their individual experiences with their co-teaching partnerships.

Table 1  
*Participants*

<b>Names</b>	<b>Teaching Position</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Co-Teaching Experience</b>
Vicki	Gen Ed – English	6 years	3 years
Angie	Spec Ed	27 years	4 years
Brent	Gen Ed – Science	9 years	8 years
Cindy	Spec Ed	26 years	26 years
Tyler	Gen Ed – English	4 years	2 years
Gordy	Spec Ed	9 years	3 years
Thelma	Gen Ed – Soc Studies	7 years	5 years

Louise	Spec Ed	8 years	5 years
Alex	Gen Ed – English	10 years	5 years
Bianca	Spec Ed	11 years	7 years

### Strategies

Participating teachers shared recommendations for the type of administrator support they found helpful, or would like to receive, from their administrators. Themes that emerged from the data included the following seven strategies: (a) model, model, model; (b) thoughtfully pair teachers; (c) train the teachers; (d) structure schedules to allow for co-planning; (e) set reasonable expectations; (f) demonstrate a hands-on support; and (g) celebrate successes. This section discusses these strategies based on participants' perspectives, and provides connections to the literature on educational leadership and co-teaching.

#### Model, Model, Model

One of the most effective administrative techniques is to model the actions wanted from the members of the team (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Not only do students benefit from teachers modeling, but teachers benefit just as much from seeing collaborative behaviors demonstrated by their administrators. Teachers in this study discussed a disconnect between what administrators said they wanted in their buildings for collaboration, and what they saw them doing in their interactions with other administrators or teachers. If collaboration is a desired trait in a school environment, then administrators should model it by consulting colleagues and teachers when making decisions. Administrators can also model how they mentor each other by having other administrators observe them during faculty meetings or professional development sessions. This shows the value placed on peer mentoring by actually demonstrating it in front of teachers.

#### Thoughtfully Pair Teachers

Teachers in this study emphasized the importance of administrators strategically pairing people together to ensure compatible partnerships. Although co-teaching is a beneficial way to provide peer mentorship, teachers did not believe those in their first year of teaching should be placed in a co-teaching partnership because it would “add additional stress to that very difficult first couple of years” (Alex, Focus Group). Additionally, using first year teachers could create an unbalanced peer mentoring relationship. These situations can leave the veteran teacher doing most of the training, while the new teacher is unable to contribute equally. One teacher stated that pairing teachers who can work well together ultimately benefits students, as well as teachers. Administrators can consider the philosophies teachers hold towards integration of those with special needs into general education classrooms, teaching styles, and personality styles as they choose teachers to work together in collaborative classrooms. The teachers in this study believed administrators could use careful observation of teachers in their building, both in the classroom and in departmental meetings, to make wise pairings.

#### Train the Teachers

One of the most common critiques of co-teaching is that teachers are not prepared for the peer mentoring and interactive relationships found in a co-teaching partnership (Carter et al., 2009; Friend & Cook, 2010). Generally, this lack of preparation is tied to a lack of effective professional development. One teacher in this study stated the importance of training by saying “on a grander scheme I think co-teaching is good, but it’s not intrinsically good . . . and that like we’re going to throw this together and now it’s going to be perfection” (Tyler, Focus Group).

When teachers begin co-teaching relationships, they need initial training in what co-teaching is designed to do, how to co-plan together, and how to implement different co-teaching models.

As teachers continue co-teaching, they also desire ongoing training that is individualized to their unique needs. The teachers in this study believed professional development given at the district level was not effective because it was uniformly given to all co-teaching teams. These co-teachers stated teams encountered different challenges or were in different phases of building their relationship. For example, some teams might need professional development on how to utilize their different strengths during instruction, while other teams might need training on how to more effectively plan together. Specific topics for instruction could include how to differentiate lessons, how to use flexible groupings where both teachers are instructing, or how to provide tiered levels of assessments. Professional development on planning could include how to use technology that enables both teachers to enter ideas in the plan book, such as the use of Google Docs. Ongoing training in interpersonal relationships is also important for building co-teaching partnerships. Interpersonal training could include how teachers mediate conflicts in their relationship or how to handle differences in communication styles.

### **Structure Schedules to Allow for Co-planning**

Another way administrators support effective co-teaching teams is through scheduling common planning times for co-teaching partners (Jang, 2006; Leatherman, 2009; Santoli et al., 2008). Teachers in this study felt the common planning time was critical to their success in co-teaching together. During co-planning time they were able to work together to design lessons that would ensure their students met the learning standards for their content areas. Teachers also mentioned using their individual knowledge and understanding of teaching practices to mentor one another as they worked to improve classroom instruction. For example, some of the general education teachers shared that they learned how to differentiate assessments or writing activities from their special education colleagues. After they had co-taught longer together, teachers used this time for reflection on student learning and modifications that needed to be made to improve student achievement. By the seemingly simple act of providing common planning time for teachers, administrators enable teachers to work collaboratively. Ultimately, this collaboration time provides co-teachers the opportunity to coach each other to higher quality practices.

### **Set Reasonable Expectations**

Teachers in this study experienced challenges with co-teaching when they believed their administrators held unrealistic expectations for the length of time they would need to become effective teams, as well as the number of students with special learning needs integrated in their co-taught classes. Teachers felt teams needed differing lengths of time to move through the process of learning about each other to achieving an interdependent relationship in which both teachers learned from each other. They wanted their administrators to understand the variety that occurs between different teams, and support each team as they move through this process.

Additionally, teachers believed administrators are sometimes supportive of co-teaching by scheduling co-taught classes; however, they do not always support it by creating an environment in which inclusion can effectively occur within the general education classroom. Teachers felt the percentage of students they had with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) was increasing. Class rosters with 50% of students with IEPs made it difficult to differentiate learning and still hold high standards for student performance. Alex stated “I am confident that the kids are learning in this situation, but I am not confident that it is the equal education to a regular ed classroom. And when I can’t say that, then it’s not working” (Focus Group). Administrators can address this challenge by not only looking at the individual needs of students, but also considering the class roster as a whole and ensuring the overall composition of the class includes student role models. Additionally, administrators should have frequent

conversations with co-teachers and school counselors as they determine class enrollments and placement of students with special learning needs.

### **Demonstrate a Hands-on Support**

Co-teachers need to know their administrators not only believe in co-teaching, but also support it in their building through a hands-on approach. One of the teachers in this study said “from my perspective, their management and leadership approach is we put it here, we support it” (Gordy, Focus Group). Gordy felt as though the administrators supported co-teaching only through making the schedule for co-teaching classes and co-planning times, but did not take a genuine interest in ensuring the co-teaching classes were successful. Frustration about a passive approach by their administration was shared by other teachers in this study. They wanted to know their leaders would provide support to teachers through classroom observations or suggestions for improvement. Ideas given by the participating teachers included arranging classroom observations of their peers to see instruction or peer mentoring approaches. Administrators can ask teachers for specific things they want them to observe in the classroom or can note things they observed that the teachers might not be aware are occurring in their classrooms. Observations are most helpful when teachers have interactive, meaningful conversations with their administrator after the observation to discuss future changes to practice (Colasacco, 2011; Danielson, 2011).

Teachers also desire administrators who demonstrate their willingness to take on the sometimes difficult task of mediating conflicts. Thelma shared how her administrators helped her work through a difficult time with her first co-teaching partner by “facilitating meetings and setting us up for observations with other successful co-teachers” (Focus Group). While some teachers may ask for assistance from their administration, school leaders also need to be involved enough with their co-teaching teams to know when administrative support would be beneficial for teachers.

### **Celebrate Success**

Although providing support through observations and suggestions for improvements is important, people also desire to know when their good work is noticed and appreciated (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Administrators can recognize the accomplishments of their co-teachers by leaving positive notes on small note cards for teachers after classroom observations. Additionally, administrators can share experiences of effective co-teaching teams with other teams throughout the building to capitalize on the expertise they have among their staff. Effective approaches could be shared verbally, through encouraging emails or classroom demonstrations. Even recording teams and sharing these videos with other staff can provide opportunities for teachers to mentor each other beyond their own co-teaching partner. Whatever the method administrators choose, what is effective is acknowledging the efforts and accomplishments of their staff as they seek to improve their instructional practices through peer mentoring and coaching.

### **Conclusion**

As is the case for any qualitative study, the uniqueness of the setting and participants can limit generalization of the study’s findings. Furthermore, transferability of the findings are dependent on readers’ judgment of whether the participants and setting are similar to their own educational contexts. Because the study sought to understand the experiences of the participants’ through the author’s interpretation, biases may exist. However, this study provides a more contextualized analysis with a fuller understanding of participants’ experiences and actions than could be explained solely through numerical data (Charmaz, 2006).

Because this study looked at what co-teachers desire from their administrators, it would also be helpful for future research to explore what administrators actually do in practice that

supports co-teachers as they work together. This could include determining the correlation between effective administrative support and effective co-teaching practice. Most importantly, research should consider how administrator action can ultimately result in increased student achievement within co-taught classrooms. Larger sample sizes with more diverse districts would also help generalize these findings to other educational settings.

This study not only confirms previous findings on what is effective for co-teachers in the area of administration support (Carter et al., 2009; Jang, 2006; Leatherman, 2009), but offers practical strategies for administrators that can be immediately implemented. The strategies in this article provided by effective co-teachers can help administrators build environments that set the tone for collaboration. Teachers will not only be motivated but also enabled to collaborate in peer mentoring and coaching for improved instruction and student learning. However, administrators must do their part in supporting teachers as they mentor and coach each other. As Lyndon B. Johnson (1965, June 4) said, "it is not enough just to open the doors of opportunity, all our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates." Thus, the highest calling of school administrators is not just to provide the opportunities for teachers to collaborate, but to also equip them to be able to do so.

### References

- Austin, V.L. (2001). Teachers' beliefs about co-teaching. *Remedial and Special Education, 22*(4), 245-255.
- Bouck, E. (2007). Co-teaching...not just a textbook term: Implications for practice. *Preventing School Failure, 51*(2), 46-51.
- Carpenter, L.B. & Dyal, A. (2006). Secondary inclusion: Strategies for implementing the consultative teacher model. *Education, 127*(3), 344-350.
- Carter, N., Prater, M.A., Jackson, A., & Marchant, M. (2009). Educator's perceptions of collaborative planning processes for students with disabilities. *Preventing School Failure, 54*(1), 60-70.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Colasacco, J. (2011). A week of observations. *Educational Leadership, 68*(4), 59-62.
- Damore, S.J. & Murray, C. (2009). Urban elementary school teachers' perspectives regarding collaborative teaching practices. *Remedial and Special Education, 30*(4), 234-244.
- Danielson, C. (2011). Evaluations that help teachers learn. *Educational Leadership, 68*(4), 35-39.
- Eisenman, L., Pleet, A., Wandry, D., & McGinley V. (2011). Voices of special education teachers in an inclusive high school: Redefining responsibilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 32*(2), 91-104.
- Friend, M. & Cook, L. (2010). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & Shamberger, C. (2010). Co-teaching: An illustration of the complexity of collaboration in special education. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 20*, 9-27.
- Hardman, M. L. & Dawson, S. (2008). The impact of federal public policy on curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities in the general classroom. *Preventing School Failure, 52*(2), 5-11.
- Idol, L. (2006). Toward inclusion of special education students in general education: A program evaluation of eight schools. *Remedial and Special Education, 27*(2), 77-94.
- Jang, S. (2006). Research on the effects of team teaching upon two secondary school teachers. *Educational Research, 48*(2), 177-194.

- Johnson, L. (1965, June 4). To fulfill these rights. [Commencement address at Howard University]. Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Retrieved from <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>
- Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. (2007). *The leadership challenge*. San Francisco, California: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Kritikos, E.P. & Birnbaum, B. (2003). General education and special education teachers' beliefs regarding collaboration. *Learning Disabilities, 12*(3), 93-100.
- Leatherman, J. (2009). Teachers' voices concerning collaborative teams within an inclusive elementary school. *Teaching Education, 20*(2), 189-202.
- McDuffie, K.A., Mastropieri, M.A., & Scruggs, T.E. (2009). Differential effects of peer tutoring in co-taught and non-co-taught classes: Results for content learning and student-teacher interactions. *Exceptional Children, 75*(4), 493-510.
- Murawski, W.M. & Hughes, C.E. (2009). Response to intervention, collaboration, and co-teaching: A logical combination for successful systemic change. *Preventing School Failure, 53*(4), 267-277.
- Murray, C. (2004). Clarifying collaborative roles in urban high schools: General educators' perspectives. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 36*(5), 44-51.
- Paulsen, K.J. (2008). School-based collaboration: An introduction to the collaboration column. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 43*(5), 313-315.
- Pratt, S.M. (2014). Achieving Symbiosis: Working through challenges found in co-teaching to achieve effective co-teaching relationships. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 41*, 1-12.
- Santoli, S.P., Sachs, J., Romey, E.A., & McClurg, S. (2008). A successful formula for middle-school inclusion: collaboration, time, and administrative support. *Research in Middle Level Education Online, 32*(2). Retrieved online from <http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/RMLEOnline/Articles/Vol32No2/tabid/1780/Default.aspx>
- Scheeler, M.C., Congdon, M., & Stansbery, S. (2010). Providing immediate feedback to co-teachers through bug-in-ear technology: An effective method of peer coaching in inclusion classrooms. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 33*(1), 83-96.
- Schutz, W. (1992). Beyond FIRO-B-Three new theory-derived measures – Element B: Behavior, Element F: Feelings, Element S: Self. *Psychological Reports, 70*, 915-937.
- Scruggs, T. E., Mastropieri, M. A., & McDuffie, K. A. (2007). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms: A metasynthesis of qualitative research. *Exceptional Children, 73*(4), 392-416.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Timmons, V. (2006). Impact of a multipronged approach to inclusion: Having all partners on side. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 10*(4-5), 469-480.
- Winzer, M. A. (2009). *From integration to inclusion: A history of special education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.